

Relentless
By Karen Lynch

Preface

He put his mouth to my ear, and his words sent waves of fresh terror through me. “I am going to savor you, little Sara. I had planned to have you now, but why rush when we can take all the time we want later.”

“No...”

“But I think a taste first to whet the appetite.” His face lowered as he forced my head to one side, baring my throat. His lips touched my skin, and his tongue lapped at the spot where my pulse beat. Blackness swam before my eyes.

“What is this?” he murmured and sniffed as if he was trying a new wine. His tongue touched my skin again. “You taste like – ” His head whipped up, and his eyes glittered like he had just been served his favorite dessert. “You’re a – ”

Chapter 1

“YOU’RE LATE.”

Malloy huffed as he slid into the booth across from me. “Don’t get your panties in a knot. I got other business to tend to besides yours, you know.”

I scowled and tapped my watch, and he threw up his hands. “I’m sorry, alright? Jesus, you’re an impatient one.”

“You’re not the only one with places to be.”

He harrumphed as if he could not imagine what someone my age had to do that was so important – if he only knew. I schooled my expression to hide the anxiety gnawing at me.

“Alright then. Where is it?” he asked.

I patted my chest where the small lump lay inside my coat and lowered my voice so no one outside our booth could hear it above Lynyrd Skynyrd blaring from the jukebox. “Half an ounce, as promised.”

Malloy’s brown eyes widened, and he leaned forward to rest his forearms on the table. Shorter than me by a few inches with a small pinched face and dull brown hair, he reminded me of a little brown field mouse. Not that I was fool enough to be taken in by his harmless appearance. You didn’t survive in this business by being nice.

“Well, let’s have it then.” His eyes swept the dimly lit bar before settling back on me. I could have told him not to worry; the patrons at Jed’s were good at minding their own business, which was why I’d suggested the biker bar in the first place. That, and the fact that Jed kept a wooden bat and a .44 behind the bar in case of trouble. No one was stupid enough to start something at Jed’s.

I reached inside my coat and pulled out a rolled up paper bag. Malloy grabbed for it, but I pulled it out of his reach and put on my business face. “Payment first.”

“Ah, yes.” He made a sour face as he put a hand inside his jacket. His hand stilled. “This wasn’t easy to come by, you know. Maybe – ”

“We had a deal, Malloy.” Damn it, I should have known he would try to pull this again, and on the one day I didn’t have time for games. My cell phone was lying face down on the table. I picked it up.

“What are you doing?”

“What do you think?” I didn’t look at him as I scrolled through my short contact list. “Half an ounce is worth ten of what you’re paying for it, and you know it. But if you don’t want to do business, I’ll have to go through someone else.” I bit my lip. I really didn’t want to go elsewhere, and I was running out of time. If I had to wait even one more day to get what I came for, it wouldn’t matter anymore. A day? Hell, hours was more like it.

“Excuse me. I need to make a call.” I moved toward the edge of my seat, hoping he didn’t see through my bluff.

“Wait.” He sighed and pulled out a small square package wrapped in dirty gray cloth. Laying the package on the table, he covered it with his hand and slid it toward me. I did the same with the paper bag, and we made the exchange at the halfway point. I stifled a sigh of relief when my fingers closed around the package.

I lifted the cloth-wrapped package to my ear and shook it before I sniffed it to confirm its contents. Satisfied, I tucked it into an inside pocket and picked up my soda, taking a long sip to hide my eagerness to get out of there. It was never wise to appear desperate or hurried to people like Malloy; you might as well paint a big red target on your back.

Malloy tipped the paper bag and spilled a small glass vial onto his palm. His eyes glittered as he rolled the vial of yellowish-brown liquid between his fingers.

“Kid, I’d give my left gonad to know how you managed to get your hands on this stuff... and lived to tell about it.”

I let out a short laugh to hide my nervousness. “Who said I’m telling?” I set my glass back on the table and inclined my head toward the vial. “I wouldn’t show that off too much in public.” What I really wanted to say was, “Put that goddamn stuff away before you get us both killed,” but I refrained because it would not do to lose my cool.

“You don’t need to tell me how to handle my affairs,” he retorted, but at the same time he made the vial disappear with a sleight of hand that would do a magician proud.

“There is no way anyone can trace that back to me, right?” Malloy had a wide network and a reputation for discretion. But the contents of that vial could bring a lot of unwanted attention.

He sat up straighter. “Like I told you last time, I wouldn’t be in business very long if I gave away my suppliers. And I got to protect my own head, too. I move my stuff through some middlemen who’d take the names of their business contacts to the grave. Ain’t no profit in talking. And those guys have no idea where I obtain my merchandise. You can be sure I ain’t telling anyone.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” I slid out of the booth. I’d stayed here too long already.

“Wait! I have some other items you might be interested in – if you can get more of this stuff, that is.”

I stood and put my hand over the small bulge inside my coat. “I got what I came for. If I need anything else, I’ll be in touch.”

He shook his head. “You know, you are way too serious for a girl your age. You ought to loosen up, have fun every now and then.”

I turned toward the exit. “Yeah, I get that a lot.”

The sun’s glare blinded me after the bar’s gloomy interior, and I blinked a few times, sagging against the heavy wooden door. *God I hate this.* My hands trembled as I pulled up my sleeve to glance at my watch. “Damn it.” I pushed away from the door, cursing Malloy for running late. My business with him would all have been for nothing if I stayed here much longer.

I pulled my short coat together and set out to meet Remy, making it to the bus stop two streets away just in time to catch the next bus. Sinking gratefully into a seat in the back, I leaned against the window and watched the streets and buildings flash by. We passed a football field where a practice game was in progress, and I watched a group of cheerleaders waving red and white pompoms. My hand went to the lump in my pocket and the weight of the responsibility I carried made me feel years older than the girls on the field.

The bus line ended near an old brewery that had gone out of business two years ago, and I jumped off in front of the padlocked gates. *No Trespassing* signs hung along the wire fence, and the whole place had a sad, deserted look about it. My nose twitched as it always did at the smell of sour barley that lingered there as I hurried past it.

Behind the brewery was an older subdivision of duplexes and two-story houses, most of them needing a fresh coat of paint. Five years ago this was a thriving neighborhood, before the brewery shut down along with the automotive parts plant that had employed half this area. Now, the lawns were overgrown and the cars in many of the driveways were badly in need of maintenance. A country song blared from someone's stereo, and in another house a young couple argued until a baby started to bawl loudly. I passed a group of younger kids playing road hockey, but they largely ignored me. I did stop for a moment to rub the head of a familiar lab-shepherd mix that trotted up to greet me, but when he started to follow me I shooed him back. He stared after me forlornly, but I was too busy to play today.

At the last stop sign, I turned right and jogged down an empty street lined with tired looking, boarded-up old houses and yards that backed up to the woods. I slipped between the last two houses and ducked under a broken board in the fence of the last house. Grass and weeds had taken over the backyard, while ivy strangled the ancient swing set and covered the back of the house. I followed a narrow path through the grass to the back door where I gave a quick look around and then slipped inside.

"Remy, you here?" I called softly.

It was dark in the house, except for the dusty bands of light that spilled in between the boards over the windows. Thankfully, I knew the house pretty well and I didn't need much light to find my way around. I left the kitchen and walked down a short hallway. On my right was the empty shell that used to be a living room, and on my left was the closed door to the den. I pushed the door, and it swung inward on creaky hinges.

"Remy?" I whispered loudly, trying to see through the dense shadows of the room. Silence greeted me. *Where the hell is he?* I spun around to go back the way I'd come.

"Argh!" I found myself face-to-face with a thin, pale gray face with large, round violet eyes and a mop of shaggy gray-brown hair. I stumbled back, and he reached for me, grabbing my shoulders in a strong grip that belied his slender build.

"Jesus, Remy!" I slapped a hand to my chest as he steadied me. "Are you *trying* to give me a heart attack?"

The troll gave me a lopsided grin, revealing a row of short sharp teeth. "You too young for heart attack," he said with a fierce little smirk that would send a chill through anyone who did not know him.

"You late," he chastised me.

"I'm sorry. Malloy was twenty minutes late, and I got here as fast as I could. How are they doing?"

"Not so bad. Fren worried, but I tell him if Sara say she get medicine, she will." He gave me an expectant look.

I smiled and pulled the package from inside my coat to lay it in his eager hands. "Have I ever let you down?"

Remy immediately turned and headed to the kitchen with me close on his heels. Curious about the contents of the package that had come at such a high price, I watched as he removed the cloth to reveal a small, rectangular wooden box. He lifted the lid and poured the contents out into a large, shallow stone bowl, then picked up a smooth rounded stone and began to grind whatever was in the bowl. I moved closer and saw pale golden crystals the texture and color of coarse cane sugar. As Remy ground the crystals into powder, the smell of rotten eggs and

ammonia I'd gotten earlier grew stronger. I waved a hand in front of my nose. Definitely not sugar. Remy had called it *Baktu* when he asked me to find it, but he hadn't been too clear on exactly what it was, just that it came from some place in Africa.

He quickly reduced the crystals to powder; then he spat in the bowl several times and stirred the mixture with a smooth wooden stick to make a thick paste. "Come," he said at last, taking up the heavy bowl and heading for the stairs. I followed him quietly. My part was done, and the rest was up to my friend now.

In the first room at the top of the stairs, a pallet of rags had been laid on the bare wooden floor, and a small dark shape lay curled up on the rags, whimpering. The upstairs windows were not boarded up so I could make out the creature's rounded body and long spindly limbs. Kneeling by the pallet was a second creature, and his ugly squashed face looked at us hopefully when we entered the room. I gave him a smile and pointed at the bowl in Remy's hands, and he grunted softly to his mate, who replied in kind. I had no idea what they were saying because I didn't speak Boggie, but it didn't take much imagination to guess that he was reassuring her.

Remy knelt beside the pallet, and I stood behind him where I could observe but not get in the way. He laid the stone bowl on the floor and grunted at the boggies in their own language. Then he gently repositioned the female boggie until she lay on her back with her swollen belly bared to us. Boggies lived in bogs – as their name implied – and they were usually covered in mud. The female was unusually clean, and I wondered if Remy had done it in preparation for the procedure.

Fren, the male boggie, moved closer and took one of his mate's small hands in both of his. His large eyes brimmed with love, but it could not hide the fear I saw on his face. I wanted to tell him it would be okay, but he could not understand me and I wasn't sure if everything *would* be alright. According to Remy, boggies normally have easy births, but Mol's pregnancy had been very difficult. After being ill for months, she was very frail and her baby refused to come. Boggie pregnancies were not like human pregnancies where the baby came after nine months. If the mother was sick or weak, the body would not go into labor. If the baby was not delivered, both mother and child would die.

I watched as Remy began to smooth the paste over Mol's extended belly with gentle hands. She stiffened and made a weak mewling sound. This close to her, I could sense her pain and fear, and a familiar urge awoke in me – the need to go to her and try to take away the pain. But I trusted Remy, and right now he was Mol's best chance of getting through this. I just clenched my hands and observed.

He finished applying the thick paste and laid the bowl aside. Then he spread his long hands across Mol's belly and applied the slightest pressure against the bulge that was her unborn child. He started to chant in troll tongue, and I only recognized a handful of words, but they were enough to tell me that he was praying. Trolls were deeply faithful to their god, and they mixed prayer with their magic in whatever they do. I had seen enough of Remy's abilities to have great respect for his faith and his magic.

The paste soon dried to a brittle shell, and I noticed that Mol seemed to be in less pain now and able to bear the weight of Remy's hands. Was it working?

Mol's scream made the hair lift on the back of my neck. I fell to my knees beside Remy as Mol's stomach began to contract so violently that her whole body shook from it. "What's wrong?"

"This normal," he replied, lifting his hands from the boggie. "Baby coming."

“It’s coming?” I asked dumbly. Mol looked like she was being ripped apart from the inside, not about to deliver a baby. But then I had no idea what was normal for a boggie birth. Like most of the People, boggies were secretive and shy of humans. It was a sign of their gratitude and respect that I was permitted to stay and witness this event. Tears filled my eyes as I watched nature take over and Mol’s body find the strength it needed to bring her baby into the world.

Fren was there to take the infant when it arrived. The little brown body was incredibly small and doll-like and made no sound when its father cradled it in his arms. Fren stared at his newborn and ran his fingers over the infant’s face as if he could not believe it was real.

“Shouldn’t the baby be crying?” I whispered to Remy, trying not to disturb the boggies. Fren cooed at the baby, and Mol lay there with her eyes closed, too exhausted to even look at her child.

Remy nodded, his face grim.

That’s when I felt it, the familiar pulling sensation drawing me toward the baby like steel to a magnet. I gasped softly. “He’s sick, so sick…” The first icy tendrils of death brushed my skin, and I knew we were too late. If I’d only gotten here earlier.

I yanked off my coat. “Give him to me! Hurry, there’s not much time.” Already I could feel the new life draining away.

Remy reached for the baby, but Fren shook his head, holding the little body to his chest. Grunting forcefully, Remy leaned forward again. Whatever he said to the boggie worked because Fren relinquished the infant to him. I held out my hands, and Remy placed the naked, wrinkled little body in them. It was no bigger than a week-old kitten, and as soon as I touched it, I felt the weak fluttering heartbeat and the coldness already settling into the tiny limbs. “Try to hold on, little one,” I murmured as I pulled him to my own chest and covered him with my hands. Then I reached inside of myself and opened the wall holding back my power.

It was like opening a furnace door. Heat flared in my chest and roared through my veins like a spark following a fuse. I didn’t have to tell my power where to go; it always knew. My body buzzed like a live wire as currents of energy raced along my nerve endings toward my hands and chest, any part of me touching the dying creature.

Normally I released the power in a controlled stream, letting it flow gently to find the source of injury or illness. It was so strong, so forceful that I worried it would shock my patients and kill them outright. But when a body was shutting down and preparing to die, a jolt to the system was sometimes the only thing that could help it. It was kind of like those defibrillator paddles they used in emergency rooms, only mine worked on the whole body instead of just the heart. That was the only way I knew how to describe it; my power didn’t exactly come with an operations manual.

The heat pooled in my hands until they gave off a pale white glow. Hotter and hotter, the fire burned until it felt like I was grasping a hot metal pipe, but I didn’t stop. I bit my lip to keep from crying out and held on, waiting for the power to grow to the right intensity before I released it.

Power exploded from my hands, pouring into the little body. I felt it race through veins and bones and weave through tissue, saturating every cell like a spring storm soaking the earth. My power was an extension of me, so I felt it coiling around the failing heart, pulsing and surging. With each push it sent a spike of energy through the heart, causing the creature to jerk and spasm before it went still again. I sent wave after wave of power into the body, praying that each would

be the one to fix the damaged heart.

I lost track of the minutes but at least ten passed before I was forced to accept that I could not save the boggie. My power was the only thing making his heart pump, and I could not keep it up much longer. One of the earliest and cruelest lessons I had learned about my power was that sometimes I couldn't save someone, no matter how much of myself I poured into them. I held the baby away from me and felt a painful tug at my chest when I looked at its lifeless face. *I'm so sorry, little one.*

A broken sob rent the air. I opened my eyes to meet Mol's stricken stare as she grieved for the baby she had never held in her own arms. My heart ached for her. No one should watch the one they loved die.

It's not fair! We had done everything right. Mol's baby deserved to live.

I pulled the power back to me until my hands grew hot again. The pain lanced through me, but I barely felt it buried beneath the anger building inside me. I sent power shooting back through the baby with the force of a lightning strike. That much energy could stop a heart completely, but there was nothing to lose now.

The power drained away. I was used up and vaguely aware of Remy and Fren breathing and Mol sobbing as the little heart pressed against mine gave a long irregular flutter and stopped.

There was only silence.

Then... lub-lub, lub-lub, lub-lub.

Then the slightest of movements as tiny lungs expanded with their first breath of air.

Then the tickle of a tiny foot moving against my chest.

I lifted the infant cupped in my hands and watched in wonder as the squashed little face quivered and the tiny mouth opened. It started as a faint wheezing sound that quickly became a mewling wail, and suddenly my hands were full of a squirming, crying, healthy baby boggie.

I laughed and cried at the same time as shouts filled the room. Mol grunted anxiously and held out her arms, and I lay her baby boy on her chest. I watched as mother and father touched their child with awe, exploring the baby they both thought they had lost.

I sat back heavily and then lay down on the dusty floor. Healings always drained me, some more than others, and normally I just needed a few minutes of rest to put me right again. But bringing back a life from so close to death was very hard, and my body felt like I had run half a marathon. No matter how many times I used my power, it did not get easier.

I was six when I discovered what I could do. In the beginning, I often overdid it, until I learned not to drain myself too much. It was easy to overlook your own welfare when you were trying to save a life. I had to learn how to lock my power away unless I needed to call on it. Otherwise, every time I came within a few feet of a sick or injured creature, the energy got sucked right out of me. Now when I healed, I let out just enough to do the job. Releasing a torrent of power like I'd just done for the boggie was almost like overloading a circuit, except there was no breaker to reset my energy. My power always replenished itself; it just took a little while.

A cool hand touched my arm. "You okay, Sara?" I heard the worry in Remy's voice, and I gave him a weary smile.

"I'll be fine. You know how I am. Just need to rest a bit."

"Yes, you rest." He gently lifted my head and stuffed my folded jacket beneath it. I heard

him talking to Fren and Mol and sounds of movement, but it all became muffled as I drifted off.

Somewhere between wakefulness and sleep I felt a familiar stirring in the back of my mind. After expending so much power, I was not surprised it was on the move. It was always active after a healing when my power was low. Not that it would get far. Even exhausted, I had enough left in me to push it back down.

I called it the beast. It used to scare me having this dark thing inside my head, even though I knew it came with my power. I read a quote once that said, “When you light a candle, you also cast a shadow,” and I wondered if the same was true for me. My power was the candle – bright and warm – and the beast was its shadow – sullen and dark. Remy said that most power was a balance of good and bad, and I should not be afraid of something that was a part of me. I did not embrace the beast, but I had no choice but to learn to live with it.

The room was quiet when I woke up, and the long shadows told me it was late afternoon. Turning my head to the side, I saw I was alone. The boggies had most likely gone home, but I knew Remy was still here. He would never leave me alone while I recovered.

I groaned as I got to my feet. My body ached, partly from the intense healing and partly from lying on the hard floor, and I stretched several times to get the kinks out. Then I picked up my coat and went downstairs where I found Remy looking out through the cracks in one of the boarded-up living room windows. I walked over and leaned against the wall, ignoring the peeling wallpaper that snagged my hair.

He smiled down at me. “You sleep deep this time. Feel better?”

“That was a hard one,” I admitted. “But worth it.” I heard laughter outside, and I peered through the crack at a group of teenage boys hanging out down the street. Remy had been watching them in case any of them decided to venture this way while I slept. I wondered what they’d do if they came in and found a troll waiting for them. Probably wet their pants. If I didn’t know my fierce friend, I’d probably do the exact same thing.

“Mol and the baby are okay?” I asked.

“Yes. Fren and Mol take baby home to show family. They say you have big magic. Ask if you are sorceress.”

“Hardly.” If any magic had happened here today, it had come from Remy, the way he’d helped Mol deliver her baby. Though he didn’t have my power, he was as much a healer as I was, and his knowledge of medicines never failed to amaze me. In troll years he was still a teenager like me, but he already knew more than I could hope to learn in a lifetime.

He looked at the street again. “It get dark soon.”

“Not for another hour. And I’m not afraid of the dark.”

“Uncle will not be happy if you stay out late.”

“Nate’s not happy about most things I do,” I quipped. Remy shot me a disapproving look, and I said, “You know it’s true. I love Nate, but we’re just so...different. He wants me to be someone I’m not. He wants a normal niece who has girlfriends and joins the band or the cheerleading squad or whatever. That’s not me, and it never will be.”

“That not true. He just want you to be happy.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Since when are you an expert on human parents?”

“All good parents want children to be happy.” He pushed away from the window. “Come. Boys leave.”

I poked him in the back as I followed him to the back door. “You know, you’re getting kind of bossy these days.”

He let out a gravelly laugh. “Not even trolls boss you.”

“That’s right! I’m a strong, independent woman, and don’t you forget it.”

We crossed the yard and slipped through the fence. Remy turned to me. “You do good today.”

“*We* did good,” I said. “By the way, you never did tell me what Baktu is.”

“Baktu is winged serpent from desert lands.”

My brows drew together. “Huh? How does a serpent turn to crystals?”

“Crystals not serpent. It dried Baktu droppings.”

“Droppings? You mean poop?” I wrinkled my nose. “Ugh! That’s disgusting, Remy!”

Remy laughed and started for the woods. “Baktu is poisonous serpent. Droppings make strong medicine.”

Before I could reply he disappeared. I envied the way trolls could melt into their surroundings like vanishing into thin air. It’d be a handy skill to have at times.

The streets were empty when I walked back to the bus stop. Even though it was a Saturday evening, not a lot of people were headed into town, so there were plenty of seats to choose from on the bus. The same driver always drove this route on weekends, and he nodded at me when I dropped my change in the farebox.

At least I could relax on the return trip, because Remy and I had done what we’d set out to do. I’d helped save two lives today – how many girls my age got to say that? Not that I enjoyed hanging out in smoky bars, doing illicit business with people who were the underworld equivalent of drug dealers. Just because I had enough wits to keep a cool façade and act like I knew what I was doing did not change the fact that I was in way over my head. But I couldn’t stop now, not when lives depended on me.

When Remy asked me two years ago to help him find powdered chimera horn to help a dying kelpie, I had no idea there was an actual black market for that, and practically anything else you can think of – if you could pay. Since then I’d found half a dozen other items for him, and I also got pretty good at negotiating since none of them were cheap or easy to find. It’s not like you could buy hydra scales or hansling teeth on Amazon or eBay. Well, not yet anyway.

We were lucky Remy could afford to buy pretty much anything. Of course there were some things more valuable than even money, like the contents of the vial I’d given Malloy, rare and nearly impossible to obtain. He’d sell his own mother to know how I’d gotten my hands on it, but I’d never tell him – or anyone else. It was dangerous enough just letting someone like Malloy know that I had some to trade. People killed for a hell of a lot less. And if Remy’s people ever found out what we were up to... I shuddered at the thought.

Troll bile was a potent drug and priceless, not just because of what it could do but also because there were few brave enough to try to get it. Trolls were not only secretive and elusive; their vicious reputation kept humans and nonhumans alike from seeking them out, let alone trying to take something from them.

It disgusted me when Remy first told me about it. But if you could get past the ungodly smell and not think about where it came from, it had incredible regenerative properties. It could slow aging and degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s, and it could reverse

balding. I heard it could even fight certain types of cancer. I knew from experience that it couldn't fix *every* injury, but half an ounce, like what I'd given Malloy, could stop someone from aging for up to five years if used properly. It was basically the fountain of youth, and there were people who would pay almost anything to get their hands on it.

The younger the troll, the more potent the bile, but trolls were so protective of their young that it was nearly impossible to get close to them without meeting a horrible end. Remy gave me his own bile to barter with on his behalf, but his people would be furious if they ever got wind of what we were peddling. Trolls didn't like humans, though for some reason the elders tolerated Remy's friendship with me. But I didn't kid myself about where I stood with them. I was still just a human.

The bus pulled up to my downtown stop in front of the post office, and I waved to the driver as I exited by the rear door. Market Street, the financial and commercial hub of New Hastings during the week, was quiet now except for the people heading to Subway or Antonio's. I crossed at the light and cut through the small parking lot between two buildings to come out on the end of the waterfront near the wharves. South of me were the pier and the shops and restaurants that lined the waterfront. Almost home. After the day I'd had, all I wanted was to curl up in bed with a book for the rest of the night.

When two boys emerged from between the buildings ahead of me and ran across the waterfront to disappear down the bank by one of the fishing wharves, I recognized them right away. I knew they were probably up to no good, but I was too tired and hungry to care. *Let someone else deal with them.*

Out of sight, one of the boys let out a familiar laugh and yelled, "Don't let it get away."

I stopped walking.

"Look at it, Scott. It's half-dead."

"Ah hell!" I swore and turned toward the wharf.

Chapter 2

I LOOKED DOWN at Scott Foley and Ryan Walsh on the beach below me. Tall and good looking with straight dark hair, Scott stood with his back slightly toward me. Ryan, who was a few inches shorter than Scott, stood several feet behind him, looking like he would rather be somewhere else.

“Leave it alone.” Ryan ran a hand through his blond curls. “This is not cool, man.”

“Dude, when did you turn into such a pussy?” Scott scoffed. “I’m only having some fun, and like you said, it’s half-dead already.”

My fists clenched, and I scoured the beach for whatever animal they were talking about. Seeing nothing, I moved closer to the edge of the bank to get a wider view.

I let out a yelp as my foot slipped out from under me, sending me tumbling down the four-foot embankment to land in an undignified heap at the feet of the two startled boys. Not exactly the entrance I would have chosen.

For a moment neither of them moved. Then Ryan crouched and peered at my face through the curtain of dark hair that had come loose from my ponytail. “Whoa. You okay?”

“I’m fine.” I pushed my hair back out of my face and got to my feet, wincing at the pain in my left ankle. I put my weight on it to test it. A light sprain maybe. Great.

I faced the boys and found Scott’s wide-eyed gaze fixed on me. He narrowed his eyes when he realized who he was staring at. “What do you want?”

My eyes left his to scan the beach. What the hell were they after? “You guys look like you’re searching for something. Anything I can help you find?”

“No,” Scott retorted. His eyes went to a spot behind me, and I followed his gaze but saw nothing but a pile of old fishing nets.

“Are you sure, because – ?” I broke off when the nets made a plaintive mewling sound. In the fading light I saw them move as a scrawny gray tabby emerged. The cat was a sorry sight. Its ribs stuck out painfully, and it walked unsteadily for a few seconds before sinking down on its hind legs.

I whirled on Scott and Ryan, my eyes blazing. “You were going to hurt that cat!”

“No.” Ryan could not meet my eyes. “I wouldn’t...”

Scott shifted from one foot to the other. “Yeah right. Like we’d waste our time with that flea bag.”

I stepped between them and the cat. Scott and I had known each other since elementary school, and if I knew one thing about him, it was how to tell when he was lying. “This is low, even for you, Scott.”

A flush crept across his cheeks. “I told you I couldn’t care less about a stupid cat. And what’s it to you anyway?”

“You think I’ll let you hurt a defenseless animal?” My voice rose. Scott always managed to irritate me, but for some reason I was having trouble keeping my anger in check this time. “Is this how you get your kicks on a Saturday night? Does this make you feel big and manly?”

“Shut up!” Scott glared at me, and for a second I thought I saw something else in his eyes

that looked like regret, but it was gone as soon as it appeared.

Scott and I had been friends for a time way back in elementary school. He was the first person to approach me when I moved here, even though his buddies teased him about making friends with a girl. Our friendship was short-lived, ending the day I caught him and some other boys throwing rocks at an injured crow outside the school. I'd yelled at him, pushed him to the ground, and told him I could never be friends with someone like him. Any feelings of friendship he had for me quickly changed to animosity after I embarrassed him in front of the whole school like that.

"Make me shut up." Even as I said the words, I wondered what the hell I was doing. Why was I goading someone who had six inches and at least forty pounds on me – and who already couldn't stand me?

Scott's face darkened. "If you know what's good for you, Grey, you'll get out of my face."

"Or what?" I took a step toward him. "You going to beat me up, too?"

"Whoa! No one's beating anyone up." Ryan laid a hand on Scott's arm. "Come on, Scott, let's go. This is not worth it, man."

Scott shook off Ryan's hand. "No one talks to me like that."

Try to stop me. The thought flitted maliciously across my mind. Another voice told me to calm down and step back, but I ignored it. Instead, I let out a mocking laugh. "Come on then, and shut me up if you can. If you're man enough, that is."

Scott's eyes glittered dangerously as he took a step toward me.

"Dude, you can't fight a girl." Ryan sounded scared now.

"Shut up, Ryan," Scott and I said at the same time. I gave Scott a cheeky grin, and his nostrils flared.

I glanced down at my coat and let out a sigh. "Just try not to bleed too much, okay. It's a bitch to get blood out of this thing."

Scott made a choked sound, and Ryan yelled something as Scott raised his right arm. I didn't know if he intended to strike me. I wasn't even sure Scott knew what he was going to do.

Roaring filled my ears and a strange prickling heat spread through my body. It felt nothing like the fiery power I'd released a few hours ago. This fire held no healing, just rage and wild exhilaration like a lion set free from its cage. In the back of my mind the beast stretched and swelled with joy. I blinked, and it was like a veil lifted from my eyes, bringing the world into startling focus.

My right fist connected with Scott's cheek before he even realized I had swung. I barely registered the pain in my knuckles as I watched him stagger back several feet from the force of my blow. *Again*, cried the beast, and my other hand curled into a fist.

Scott recovered faster than I expected, and I ducked just in time to avoid the brunt of the powerful fist that would surely have knocked me senseless. I felt a sharp pain in my lower lip as his fist clipped it, and a coppery taste filled my mouth.

"Scott!" Ryan yelled, his voice muffled in my ears. "What the hell are you doing?"

Moving faster than I could have believed possible, my left fist plowed into Scott's chin and spun him off balance. I pivoted on the foot I was sure I'd sprained just a few minutes ago and delivered a well-aimed kick to his midsection, a move I had never even attempted before. He doubled over with an agonized moan that made my lips curl into a wicked little smile. The beast

crowed with glee.

Scott roared and came at me like an enraged bull, but I sidestepped his charge and he stumbled past me. Behind me, I heard Ryan smother a laugh, but that only seemed to anger Scott more. He turned and came at me with both arms raised.

My hand moved so fast it seemed to blur as my fist met Scott's nose with a sickening crunch. He fell to his knees with both hands over his face. "You bitch!" he wailed. "You broke my nose!"

Standing over him with my hands on my hips, I savored the delicious triumph at seeing my opponent brought low. I reveled in how easy it had been to take down a boy who was bigger and stronger than me. Heady with power, I spat, "You're lucky that's all I broke, you asshole."

"Jesus, Sara!"

I felt Ryan's eyes on me, and I took in his stunned expression as his gaze moved from me to his moaning friend. It was like a bucket of cold water in my face. The rage drained out of me along with the bizarre heat that had enveloped me a few minutes ago. *What am I doing?* I thought as the world around me returned to normal and I stared aghast at Scott's bloody face. His nose was swelling grotesquely, and bruises were already beginning to show around his eyes. I was no angel, but I had never inflicted this kind of beating on another person. The knowledge of what I'd done made my stomach churn.

"Scott, I – "

"Stay away from me, you fucking lunatic!" he growled, throwing a hand up to keep me from coming near him. As he spoke, a spray of blood dotted the rocks in front of him.

I backed away, sick with remorse as he staggered to his feet. What the hell had come over me and made me go all berserker on him? I was mad about the cat, yes, but Scott would have gone on his way if I had left well enough alone. I'd baited him and deliberately made him angry, and I had struck first. The memory of my fist hitting his face filled me with disgust. It was as if I'd been possessed, and if Ryan hadn't spoken and woken me up, there was no telling what I might have done.

"We were just messing around. You know he wouldn't have hurt the cat, right?" Ryan asked, forcing me to look up and meet his gaze, to see the truth on his face.

He turned away to help Scott climb the embankment. As soon as I was alone I sank down to sit on the ground, pulling my knees up and wrapping my arms around them. It was the beast. I always kept a tight grip on it, but whenever I used up some of my power for a healing, I felt it stirring, pressing against the walls that imprisoned it. Today I'd depleted my power so much that I lost control of it – and look what had happened.

I hadn't fought since I was ten and never with such intent to hurt someone. Hell, I'd never *moved* like that before. No wonder Ryan had looked at me like I was some kind of circus freak.

A weak meow intruded upon my unhappy thoughts, and I lifted my head to see the scrawny little cat sitting beside me. Up close he looked even more pitiful with half a tail, one ear in tatters, and his whole body wavering like a breeze would blow him over.

"Hey there, kitty." I reached out to stroke the back of his head. He hissed but didn't try to run away, which told me how sick he was. Animals were drawn to me, especially the sick ones. I think they could sense my power even when it was locked away. Even so, the feral ones needed a little encouragement to get past their natural fear of humans.

I opened my power to let a wave of soothing calm sweep over him, and within thirty seconds he stopped hissing and leaned against my leg. As soon as my fingers made contact, I sent a stream of healing energy into his frail body and he immediately laid down. My hand moved down his back, feeling the bones almost poking through his skin as I sought out his injuries. He had mange and his fur was full of fleas, but there were no broken bones. I got rid of the fleas and mange, took care of a few cuts and scrapes and knocked a respiratory infection out of his lungs before I pulled back my hand, satisfied he would be okay.

“There. You’re still one of the sorriest looking things I’ve ever seen, but I think you’ll make it.” I stood slowly, a little drained from my second healing today. “Stay away from those mean boys from now on, you hear me.”

The cat’s amber eyes met mine, and he let out a sad yowl.

“None of that,” I warned him as my heart felt a little tug. “I can’t take you with me. I’m not supposed to bring home any more strays.”

He got up and walked unsteadily over to rub his thin body against my calves. Even through my jeans I could feel the outline of his ribs.

“No fair.” I sighed and bent down to scoop him up. He began to purr as soon as I cradled him in my arms. “Okay, you can come home with me for now, but I can’t guarantee anything. My uncle’s not exactly a cat person, and he still hasn’t forgiven me for the last houseguest I brought home.”

* * *

The steel door swung open noiselessly on well-oiled hinges, and I slipped inside, easing it shut behind me. Silence greeted me. I started to smile, but it turned into a wince when the split in my lip stung. Eyes watering, I crossed the storeroom to the far wall and set the cat on the floor. I climbed one of the sturdy shelving units to the ceiling where I stuck my hand under one of the tiles and pulled out a small, black metal box. Inside the box were a few hundred dollars and a tiny vial of troll bile half the size of the one I’d given Malloy. The bile was my own personal stash that Remy insisted I keep on hand for emergencies. I usually healed very fast and hardly ever got sick – a benefit of having healing power – but it wouldn’t do for Nate to see me with a fat lip.

I uncorked the bottle, tipped it to wet my finger and dabbed the pungent liquid to my swollen lip and bruised knuckles. There was an instant burning sensation, then blessed numbness as the sting faded away. I didn’t need a mirror to know that my lip was already mending and in no time it would be healed completely. The bile didn’t heal broken bones, but it made cuts and bruises disappear in minutes. I dabbed a bit on my knuckles and watched the redness fade from them, trying not to think of Scott who was probably having his nose reset right now. I corked the vial and put the box back in the ceiling, thinking that if anyone should have the bile right now it was him.

“Come on, cat.” I picked him up again and headed for the stairs.

Nate and I had a whole building to ourselves, which was actually pretty cool. Years ago the first floor used to house a bookstore, but it went out of business when the large chain stores came to town. After that, Nate decided that being a landlord was too much hassle. He didn’t really need the rent, so he decided not to lease the space again. We lived in the two-story apartment upstairs, and the bottom floor was mostly used for storage now and Nate’s home gym.

I dragged my tired body up the stairs and slipped quietly into the apartment. Sounds from the den told me Nate was at work on his computer. I crept past the open door, hoping he was too involved in his work to notice my entrance.

“You missed dinner again.”

I backtracked and stood in the doorway wearing an apologetic smile. “Sorry, I lost track of time.”

Nate looked at me over the top of his monitor, and I met his green eyes that were so like my own. With the same chestnut hair and golden skin we resembled each other so much that people often mistook us for father and daughter. Nate’s hair was already streaked with gray, making him look a little older than his thirty-nine years, but I thought the gray suited him. Or maybe I told myself that to feel better about being guilty of putting some of that gray there.

His hair was mussed, and the shadows under his eyes told me he wasn’t getting enough sleep again. He had been working night and day on his latest book, barely coming out to eat and sleep; he always got like that when he was near the end of the first draft. Nate wrote military suspense novels, and he was on the fourth book in his series. His work was very good. He didn’t know it, but I read all his books.

“What on earth have you been up to? You look like you’ve been in a fight.” There was no accusation in his voice, just disappointment. I opened my mouth in denial, but he said, “You have blood on your coat.”

“Oh.” I frowned at the spots of dried blood on the front of my tan coat. “This is my favorite one, too. I’d better put it in cold water.”

“Sara,” he said in warning tone. I stopped, and he sighed heavily. “What happened?”

I made a face. “You say that like I’m out there brawling every other day.”

“So you were in a fight.”

Busted. “I had a perfectly good reason.” I held up the cat so he could see it over his monitor.

Nate stared at the scrawny bundle of fur in my arms. “Is that thing alive?”

“Of course it’s alive!” I stroked the cat’s head, and he purred loudly. “Do you think I’d be walking around with a dead cat?”

“Do you want me to answer that?”

I made a face. “Didn’t I tell you? I’m into voodoo now, and I thought I’d start with zombie cats.” I wondered what he’d think if he knew there were people out there who really could reanimate corpses.

He stared at me like he was trying to decide if that was a joke. I used the opportunity to try to slip away.

“Not so fast. You still didn’t tell me what happened. Sit.”

I took the chair in front of the desk and laid the cat on my lap as Nate maneuvered his motorized chair around the desk. He parked it two feet from me and said, “Spill it.”

I told him about seeing Scott and Ryan chasing the cat and how I followed them to the beach. With as little detail as possible, I related the altercation between me and Scott, making the fight sound more like a shoving match than a fight. I still felt so ashamed and afraid of what I’d done that I really didn’t want to relive it.

“So where did the blood come from?”

“Um... this poor little guy is all scratched up. It must have come from him.”

He cast a suspicious look at the cat. “Speaking of your new friend – what do you plan to do with him?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “Clean him up and feed him for now.”

Nate was silent for a long moment. I waited for the double scolding – one for fighting and the other for bring home yet another stray. My uncle wasn’t an animal hater. He just liked order in his home, and animals weren’t exactly the tidiest roommates.

As if on cue, Daisy, our three-legged Beagle, limped into the room. I don’t know how she lost her leg. I used to see her around the waterfront, and it amazed me how well she moved on three legs. One day, six months ago, she didn’t move fast enough and got hit by a car. Healing her took a lot out of me, but I saved her. Nate was not happy when I came home with a dog, but who could put a three-legged dog out on the street? Now Daisy was his almost constant companion, and though Nate would never admit it, I knew he liked her company.

Daisy came over to me and sniffed, and the cat let out a warning hiss. Chastised, the dog sat back on her haunches to watch the newcomer from a safe distance.

“Sara, you’re seventeen, too old to be fighting with boys down at the wharf no matter what the reason.” I tried to speak up, but he held up a hand. “You spend too much time alone when you should be going out with your friends, having fun. And you should be dating boys – not fighting with them.”

I squirmed on my chair. I was pretty sure no other teenage girl had a parent telling them to go out to parties and date. “I have friends,” I argued weakly. Okay, maybe I had never dated and I wasn’t a social butterfly, but I did have friends. As for girls, well they didn’t seem to warm up to me much. I didn’t know why. It wasn’t that they hated me; they just didn’t seem comfortable around me.

Nate scoffed. “Friends like Greg, you mean? There’s a model of good behavior. I suppose that’s where you learned to fight.”

“Greg is not a bad guy – and no, he didn’t teach me to fight. Just because he’s a biker doesn’t make him a criminal.” There was that *one* thing, but I didn’t think juvenile records counted once you reached eighteen. And I wasn’t about to bring that up to Nate.

“He might not be a criminal, but he’s no angel either.”

I had to suppress a smile because Nate was right about that. Greg was definitely no angel. A year older than me, Greg was already the school badass when I started high school and met him for the first time. He grew up working in his uncle’s bike shop, and he was tougher and brawnier than half the senior boys and not afraid to show it. There was something about the roguish tilt of his head and the gleam in his green eyes when he smiled – or scowled at you – that either drew you in or scared the heck out of you. I wasn’t sure if it was the way he did his own thing without a care for anyone’s opinion or the fact that he could have bullied anyone in school and chose not to, but I liked him immediately. He didn’t really associate with the other students, so I wasn’t sure why he’d decided to befriend me. One day he just started sitting with me at lunch, and when he got his first bike he gave me rides and took me to Jed’s with him and his friends. I’d even had a crush on him for a short while until his friend Mike told me I reminded them of Greg’s younger cousin, which put a damper on any romantic notions I had for him.

I missed Greg. He and Mike had moved to Philadelphia right after graduation to work for Mike’s uncle who owned an automotive parts plant. It wasn’t the best job in the world, but as

long as it paid the rent and kept his bike running, Greg was happy. We kept in touch through email, but it had been over a week since I'd last heard from him.

"Greg moved to Philly, remember? I haven't seen him since June."

"Well, I won't pretend to be sad about that." He tapped the arm of his chair. "What about Roland? I remember when you two used to be inseparable. And Peter, too."

"We still hang out. We just like to do some different things now; that's all." It wasn't that Roland didn't try to include me, and I *did* go to an occasional party with him. I just wasn't into partying as much as my best friend. Roland understood that even if no one else did.

"It seems like you've become more closed off the last few years. It's not healthy to shut everyone out." He ran a hand through his hair. "It's my fault. I left you alone too much when you were younger. I know I'm not your father... I just wish I knew how to get through to you." He gave me a pleading look. "You spend so much time alone or off doing God knows what. I have no idea where you are or what you're doing."

"Nate, I – " I faltered, because we always seemed to end up here. I mean, what was I supposed to say? *"Hey, Nate, guess what? I saved a life today. I have this amazing power that lets me heal things. But I can't fix your spine because it doesn't work on humans. By the way, can I invite my troll friend over for dinner?"*

He pressed a button on his chair, and it began to back around the desk again. "Go get some dinner. I left lasagna in the oven for you."

I carried the cat to the kitchen and found a can of tuna for him, making a mental note to pick up some food for him tomorrow. Daisy followed us, and I poured some food into her dish before I popped my own dinner in the microwave.

Nate's lasagna was one of my favorite foods, but I could have been eating cardboard and not noticed it with the myriad of emotions swirling through me. What had happened to me on the beach? In the span of a few hours I went from saving a life to hurting someone. Seeing what I was capable of freaked me out more than a little.

To top it all off I had lied to Nate again. I sat quietly at our small kitchen table, pushing my food around with my fork. I hated deceiving Nate, but there were too many things in my life that I couldn't tell him about. It was easier to let him be disappointed in me than to try to tell him the truth.

I wished there was a way to bridge the distance between us. He was all the family I had, and I knew my dad would have wanted us to be close. It wasn't Nate's fault; he had been a good parent to me after my dad's death. I was pretty messed up when I came here, and I never opened up to him as much as I could have. And then I discovered Remy and the real world, and suddenly I had all these secrets I couldn't share with anyone.

It's not that I didn't care, because I loved Nate more than anything in the world. We just had so little in common. Nate was one of those people who didn't believe in the paranormal or supernatural or anything that did not have a solid scientific explanation. He never read fantasy fiction or watched supernatural movies or TV shows. It drove him nuts when I watched *Buffy* reruns, so I usually watched them in my room. In some ways, he was more closed off than I was, and I wasn't sure he could handle learning about my power and the real world around him.

I rinsed my plate and retreated upstairs with the cat in my arms. The top floor of our building was split into an attic and an open space that served as my bedroom, kind of like a loft apartment without the kitchen. On one side stood my bed, dresser, and desk. Beneath the large

window on the other side was a faded green couch that was barely visible under the clothes and books strewn across it, and beside the couch were two tall overflowing bookcases. My dad had been an English teacher, and he had loved books, especially the classics. He used to say “No man can be called friendless who has God and the companionship of good books.” I looked it up a few years ago and found that it came from Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Sometimes I’m not too sure about God, but I agree with my dad and Browning about books. I’ve read all of his books and added my own to the collection. I think he’d be pleased to know I grew up to share his passion for reading.

The walls of my room were bare except for a few pictures of my dad and some of me, Roland, and Peter. Roland called the room depressingly empty and lamented the fact that I refused to replace my dad’s old stereo with a newer one. But I liked my space. It was private and I had my own bathroom, even if it was the size of a closet. The best part was that the room had lots of windows with a wide view of the bay. What more could a girl want?

“Alright cat, let’s get you cleaned up before you go anywhere near my furniture.” I grabbed Daisy’s shampoo and a towel and proceeded to wash the filthy animal from head to toe. He was too lethargic from his meal and the healing to put up much of a fight, and he purred like a little engine when I towed him dry. I set him down on an old blanket on the couch, and he stretched happily and curled into a ball, completely at home.

After I set up the litter box used by our last feline guest, I left the cat to his nap and jumped in the shower, hoping the hot water would wash away more than the grime from today’s events. But nothing could cleanse me of the memories of what had happened with Scott. I had always thought of myself as a good person, but only a monster would relish hurting a person the way I had. I shivered despite the hot water flowing over me.

My thoughts went to the little boggie family as I dried myself, and I wondered how they were doing. Instead of grieving the loss of a child tonight, Fren and Mol were at home with their new baby. I had saved a life today – that had to count for something. Was that enough to redeem me for the awful thing I’d done after?

Dressed in a cami and my favorite pajama bottoms, I popped in a Fleetwood Mac CD and carried my sketchbook over to the bed. I’d inherited my dad’s CD collection, along with his love for seventies rock. It was one of the few things Nate and I had in common – our taste in music – and he even borrowed CDs on occasion. I shook off my regret as I flipped open the sketchbook to a clean page. If it wasn’t for this whole secret life thing I had going on, my uncle and I might have been a lot closer than we were.

I thought about the boggies, summoning an image of the tiny boggie infant I’d held in my arms. My pencil flew over the paper as I tried to capture his likeness. I drew him in my hands because that was my clearest picture of him, the moment he opened his mouth and bawled for the first time. When I was finished, I smiled at the drawing of the little creature, his squashed face scrunched up unhappily and his tiny mouth open in a silent cry. I was no da Vinci, but my sketches weren’t half bad. It wasn’t like I shared them with anyone anyway.

A tapping at one of the windows drew my attention away from my sketch, and I ran over to open the window to admit a large black crow. He cawed and flapped around the room a few times before landing on my outstretched hand.

“Harper, it’s about time you came home,” I scolded him, stroking the soft feathers at the back of his neck. He’d been gone for two days, and I was worried he’d gotten into trouble. Technically, he didn’t live with us, but he liked to hang out here, especially on the roof. He had

kind of adopted me after I saved him from Scott, but he still liked to go off and do his own thing.

“If you’re hungry, there’s food in your dish,” I told him when he shifted restlessly, a cue that he wanted a treat. I wasn’t surprised when he left my hand, flew out the window, and headed for the roof. More than once I’d suspected he understood me when I talked to him. I read that crows were very intelligent, and Harper had gotten a good dose of my power when I’d healed him. Who knew what other affects my power had on animals?

I left the window open for him and sat down at my laptop to check out the online activity. Today was the second time I’d used troll bile to purchase medicine for Remy, and I was paranoid as hell that someone would trace it back to me, and especially to Remy. It was the main reason I dealt only with Malloy. For all his crafty ways, Malloy was very discreet about his business. In his line of work he had to be if he didn’t want to end up gutted in an alley.

The message boards were busy. There was no mention of troll bile, but another thread caught my eye – one about vampire activity in Portland. Vampires were the most common topic discussed on the boards, and there were always tons of posts about vampire sightings, though it was pretty easy to distinguish the real deal from the hype. I’d never seen a vampire, but I knew plenty about them, mostly learned from Remy, and my education had taught me that Hollywood and fiction writers had absolutely no clue.

Vampires usually kept to large cities where their hunting could be camouflaged by the higher crime rate. They lived in covens and liked to hunt in small packs, and while they were mostly active at night, mature vamps could handle exposure to daylight as long as it wasn’t direct sunlight and not for long periods. Younger vamps, those less than a hundred years old, were not strong enough to withstand even a minute of daylight. Most vamps, young and old, wouldn’t risk the chance of meeting the sun, so they stayed hidden during the day.

And there were no solitary vamps wandering the earth with tortured souls waiting to be saved by true love. Vampires were pure evil, and their only redeeming quality was that they could be killed with the right weapons. Unfortunately, if a human got close enough to see a vampire in the flesh, chances were they would not survive to talk about it.

The posting about Portland caught my attention because Portland was a little over an hour from New Hastings, and I used to live there with my dad. There usually wasn’t that much talk about the Portland area because its population was not big enough to hide unusual activity. So when I read that four teenage girls, all seventeen and eighteen, had disappeared in the last two weeks, a chill went through me. All the girls were reported as suspected runaways, though they had taken nothing with them and none of their friends believed they would run away. None of the girls knew each other, and the police had no leads. The poster said it looked like a vampire was at work in the area.

Bile rose in my throat. Vampires took great pleasure in torturing their victims before they drain them. And what they left behind... A shudder passed through me as an image came unbidden to my mind. I closed my eyes, but the scene had been seared into my brain.

I gritted my teeth and waited for the old fear and pain to pass. At times like this I wanted nothing more than to climb into bed and hide under my covers. But I didn’t. If there were vampires in Maine, I had to know.

The rest of the thread did not offer any more information other than the girls had all disappeared at night. The user who had started the thread was a regular on the site, and we talked often. He really knew his stuff, so I pinged him and asked for a private chat. Within minutes, he popped up in a separate window.

Wulfman: Sup, PG? Been a while.

PixieGirl: Yeah, been busy. Reading your post. Vamps in Portland?

Wulfman: According to my sources. Weird though. Not their usual scene.

PixieGirl: Wonder what brings them back to Portland.

Wulfman: Back? What do you know?

Pause.

PixieGirl: Knew someone killed by vamps ten years ago.

Wulfman: Wow. I never knew. Sorry.

PixieGirl: You remember any activity back then?

Wulfman: I wasn't on the scene then. I can check my sources and get back to you.

PixieGirl: Thanks.

Wulfman: It would help if I had the name of your friend who died.

Long pause.

Wulfman: Still there?

PixieGirl: Yeah. His name was Daniel Grey.

Chapter 3

THE SPARROW TWITCHED restlessly in my hands, so I opened them and watched him take flight, his newly healed wing moving like it had never been broken. I giggled as he circled my head happily a few times then flew up to perch on a branch above me.

"I hope you're more careful next you see that old tom cat," I told him as I stood and brushed dirt off my jeans. I pulled on my mittens and set off across the small park at the end of our street. The sky was heavy with gray clouds, and I could smell snow in the air. If we got enough snow this time, Daddy promised to take me sledding. My pace picked up, and I hurried home.

I could hear our neighbor's basset hound, Charlie, baying from halfway down the street, and I wondered what had upset him. Charlie was old, and he didn't even bark at squirrels or cats anymore. When I reached our neighbor's house I walked around to their backyard to see what Charlie was making so much noise about. It surprised me to find him straining at his wire run, barking and howling at my backyard. Something about the way his hackles were raised made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

I ran back out to the street and up the walkway to our front door. "Daddy, I think there's something wrong with Charlie," I called, opening the door. I tossed my mittens and cap on the bench in the hallway. "Daddy?" I called again.

No answer.

Where is he? The house was filled with the aroma of pot roast, so he had to be here. He would never leave with the stove on.

Something did not feel right. Then I felt the cold draft coming down the hallway. He must have gone out back to see why Charlie was barking and left the door open. I shook my head. He was always scolding me for doing that.

I smelled it just before I reached the kitchen, a warm coppery scent that made my stomach lurch and my pulse quicken. A cry burst from me when I stepped inside and saw the spray of red across the white cupboards and the trail of blood that disappeared out through the open door.

Fear exploded in my chest. "Daddy!" I cried, running for the door. My boots skidded on the slick blood, and I flailed as I fell through the doorway, landing hard on my hands and knees on the back step. My head came up, and I saw the bloody steps, the broken railing, and...

"No!" I crawled frantically toward the figure lying at the bottom of the steps, his favorite blue shirt shredded and bloody. I felt it then, the horrible pulling sensation of a life draining away. "No, Daddy, no!" I threw myself on him, begging him to stay with me as I poured my power into him until there was nothing left to give. It was not enough. His green eyes stared sightlessly at the gray sky as the first snowflakes touched his ravaged face.

"No!" I came awake with a cry and stared blindly in the dark with my heart thudding against my ribs. Reaching up a trembling hand, I swiped at the tears on my cheeks and pushed damp strands of hair out of my face. I lay there for several minutes as my heart rate returned to normal and the last vestiges of the dream left me.

The curtain fluttered, drawing my eyes to the pale light coming through the window. Far out in the bay a buoy clanged, and closer to shore a sea otter whistled. Soothed by the familiar noises, I threw off my covers and went to push the window open wider, letting cold morning air

fill the room. I took a deep calming breath of ocean air as I listened to the muted sounds of the bay and let myself think about the dream.

In the beginning the nightmare came every night, the same paralyzing dream that ripped me from sleep, screaming in terror. Time after time Nate tried to get me to tell him about the dream, to talk about what I'd been through, but to speak of the horror out loud and relive those moments was more than I could bear.

I'd seen the police reports. Our neighbor called in the disturbance, and when the police responded they found me lying on top of my father's body, both of us covered in snow. At first they thought I was dead too, until one of the policemen checked and found a pulse. I was rushed to the hospital, suffering from shock. The child psychologist who examined me later said I suffered from "severe psychological trauma from witnessing her father's brutal murder." She recommended a few weeks in a child psych ward.

Nate's response was "Absolutely not." My uncle knew something about post traumatic stress. He was twenty-three when he was hit by shrapnel in Bosnia that left him in a wheelchair. He said I needed to be with family, and since my grandmother was too ill to care for a child, he brought me here to live with him. I knew it wasn't easy for him, a single man in a wheelchair suddenly faced with raising a traumatized kid. But he did it anyway, and I loved him for it, though I could not find the words to tell him what it meant to me. Sometimes I thought of us as a pair of damaged bookends. We both had our flaws, but we belonged together even if there was always something between us, keeping us apart.

My alarm clock said six o'clock, so I knew it was useless trying to go back to sleep. Instead, I drew the covers up over my bed and headed for the bathroom to get ready for school. I splashed cold water over my face and studied my pale complexion and my eyes that were still haunted by the lingering effects of the dream. I released a shuddering breath and started the shower. *What a way to start the week.*

* * *

"I heard her bike gang did it. He's lucky he's alive."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, I think Greg McCoy just got out of prison or something."

"I had no idea she ran with such a hard crowd."

"You guys are all way off base. I say she did it herself, and knowing him, he deserved it."

I glanced up from my book, and the whispers died as the students at the surrounding tables suddenly found their lunch trays interesting. Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I dabbed a french fry in ketchup and popped it in my mouth. I should have been used to it by now. When you keep to yourself, people will fill in the details about your life themselves. But a bike gang? Really?

I looked at the end of my table where Jeffrey Crumb sat eating his hamburger and fries. He gave me a lopsided smile, sharing in my amusement over the gossip before he bent over his own book again. Blond and painfully thin, Jeffrey was two years younger than me, and he lived with his grandparents, one street over from me. I heard his mother was a serious drug addict who had gotten pregnant at eighteen and Jeffrey was born with a bunch of health issues. He was pretty smart but small for his age, and he found it hard to talk to other kids. We started sharing a table a few years ago because we both liked to read at lunch, even when Greg chose to sit with us. No one dared mess with Jeffrey after that, most likely because they were afraid I'd sic Greg on them.

Greg might be gone now, but it looked like some of his reputation had rubbed off on me. I didn't mind if it kept people from bothering us.

I wondered how word got out about the fight because I knew Scott and Ryan would not tell anyone. I'd gotten a glimpse of Scott in Chemistry second period, and I'd had to suppress a gasp at his black eyes and swollen nose. Apparently no one was buying his story about swerving his car to avoid hitting a deer, but how on earth had they connected his bruises to me?

I gave a mental shrug and went back to my well-worn copy of *Jane Eyre*. As long as they left me alone, they could think whatever they wanted.

The chair across from me scraped over the floor as someone pulled it out and sat down. I didn't bother to look up. "Go away. I'm busy."

A hand snaked out to grab one of my fries. When I didn't object, it reached for another one. I pushed the plate toward the hand. "Help yourself."

"Hmm, I don't see any bruised knuckles. What did you do, take a baseball bat to him?"

I lifted my gaze to Roland Greene's laughing blue eyes. He leaned toward me, and his dark bangs fell over his forehead. "So?" he asked, pushing his hair back. It was a useless gesture. I kept telling him he needed to cut it, but he said the girls liked it that way. Based on the number of girls making cow eyes at him right now, he was probably right.

"So what?"

Roland snorted. "Don't even go there. What happened?"

I picked up my Coke can and took a long swallow, debating whether or not to tell Roland the truth. He wouldn't repeat it if I asked him not to, but there was no way he'd be able to hide his gloating and that would just confirm everyone's suspicions. Scott wasn't on his favorites list either.

"Hey, did you guys see Scott Foley's face? I heard some gang beat him up." Peter Kelly took the chair next to Roland, his cheeks flushed and his rusty hair sticking out at all angles as usual. His green eyes flashed as he leaned in and lowered his voice. "Of course that's not half as interesting as the other story I heard." He gave me a meaningful look.

I shook my head. "Sorry to disappoint –"

"Sara almost made him cry."

My mouth fell open as I swung my head to stare at Jeffrey.

Roland smirked at me and slid his chair over next to Jeffrey. "Is that so? Why don't you tell us about it?"

I shook my head. "You weren't there, Jeffrey."

"Ha! So you did do it," Roland crowed.

Peter's eyes widened. "You really beat up Scott Foley? How is that possible?"

"Hey!"

"No offense, Sara, but Scott is way bigger than you and... well, you're a girl."

"Gee, thanks for pointing that out."

"She's the best fighter I ever saw," Jeffrey declared. "I was on the wharf, and I saw it all. She was super fast, too."

Roland grinned wickedly and moved back across from me. "So now are you gonna tell us what happened?"

“I hit him. He hit me. We went our separate ways.”

“Nice try. We want details,” Peter said.

I took another sip of Coke, wondering how much I could tell them. “Scott was tormenting a cat,” I said in a low voice, not wanting to share with the whole cafeteria. “I overreacted a bit and hit him. There’s really not much to tell.”

“She kicked him in the privates, too,” Jeffrey piped in loudly, making Roland and Peter wince. I heard snickers from the table closest to us.

Peter looked at my hands. “How is it you hit him hard enough to break his nose and your knuckles aren’t even red? And I don’t see any bruises on your face either.”

“You know I hardly ever bruise. Besides Scott barely touched me.” *And I have the world’s best first aid kit at home.*

Roland shook his head. “I don’t know what it is with you and Scott. He always gets weird around you.” He chewed another fry. “He’s never going to live down getting his butt kicked by a girl. Sorry, Sara, but it’s true. I’d feel bad for him if he wasn’t such an ass.”

I could only shrug because I wasn’t proud of what I’d done. It was true that I didn’t like Scott, but I’d attacked him, not the other way around. And I knew, even if Scott didn’t, that it wasn’t exactly a fair fight.

I glanced at my watch. I still had about twenty minutes left before English, but I had no desire to sit there and relive the whole Scott thing again. “Well, boys, it’s been fun, but I gotta run.”

“Wait.” Roland laid a hand over my book before I could take it. “Friday night Pete and me are going to hear Dylan’s new band play at the Attic. You want to come?”

I made a face. “Is he still doing that rap thing?”

“Nah, his new band is more rock... kind of like Pearl Jam. They’re pretty good.”

“I don’t know.”

Roland tilted his head to one side and gave me a dimpled smile. “Come on. We haven’t hung out in ages.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “You know that doesn’t work on me, right? Besides, don’t you guys have camping or something this weekend?” For the last few years, Roland and Peter had been going on weekend outdoor trips with their cousins once a month. Their families were close, and they did a lot of things together. Roland complained about having family always up in his business, but I envied him. My dad and I were close like that before he died.

“We just got back.” Peter shook his head at Roland. “I can’t believe we were gone a whole weekend and she didn’t even notice.”

Roland put on a wounded expression. “That hurts.”

I grinned at their lame antics. “After a weekend in the woods, I’m surprised you don’t have a date lined up for Friday night already, Roland.”

“Sara, you know you’re the only girl for me.” He laid a hand over his heart. “I’m just passing time until you realize that.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw two girls at a nearby table watching his display with equal expressions of jealousy and dismay. “Yeah, okay. Cool it, Romeo,” I said, laughing. “Before you break every heart in here and start a lynch mob after me.”

“What?” he asked innocently.

I shook my head because I knew Roland was not as clueless about his effect on the opposite sex as he let on. Girls had started chasing him around long before he began to notice them. Then he went through a growth spurt in eighth grade and bam – instant heartthrob. His casual disregard for rules added just enough bad boy to his image to make the entire female student body lust after him. I couldn't fault a guy for having good genes, but I often thought Roland was a little insensitive where girls were concerned. He dated a girl a few times, and as soon as she started to get serious, he ended it. He was always nice about it, which probably made it even worse for them. Whenever I said anything about it, he argued that no one's heart gets broken after two dates. But I'd seen the pining faces more than once. I loved my friend, but he was an idiot when it came to matters of the heart.

“I'll cool it if you say you'll go to the Attic with us. Come on, we'll have a blast.”

“I'll think about it,” I said, taking my book from him and stuffing it in my bag.

I left the two of them finishing my plate of fries. No one else spoke to me as I made my way to the door, but I heard the whispers. Already, Jeffrey's comments were circulating the cafeteria.

The door swung open just as I reached it, and I had to step back to avoid getting whacked in the face. The malicious smile on the face of the pretty blond standing in front of me told me she had been aiming for me. I wasn't surprised. Faith Perry and I weren't friendly on a good day, and I didn't expect her to be happy after what had happened to her boyfriend.

“Excuse me.” I started to walk past Faith, but she moved to block my way. I groaned inwardly as the cafeteria fell silent behind me. It was only the second week of my senior year, and already I was wishing for graduation.

“Are you happy?” she hissed, her venomous green eyes glittering.

I pasted an innocent expression on my face. “About what?”

Faith tossed her long, straight hair back over her shoulder. “I'm talking about Scott.”

At that moment, I spotted Scott and Ryan coming down the hallway toward us. They stopped walking when they saw me and Faith. Scott's eyes flashed angrily then looked away as if he couldn't face me.

I shrugged. “Seriously, Faith? You honestly think I could have done *that*?” I spoke loud enough for my voice to carry to the people behind me. “Do I look like I was in a fight?”

That brought her up short, and she stared at me as if she noticed my lack of bruises for the first time. I felt Scott's gaze on me, and I knew he must be wondering how I didn't have a fat lip today.

“How the hell do I know?” Faith scoffed. “For all I know you had those loser biker friends mess him up. I wouldn't put it past you.”

I bristled. If anyone here liked to hurt other people it was Faith. She'd been a bully ever since we were little kids, and she'd only grown worse as we got older. When I started school here, Faith was not happy that Scott wanted to be my friend and did everything she could to make my life miserable. I was already devastated from losing my dad, and she might have broken me if it wasn't for Roland. His friendship had filled some of the aching void inside me and gave me the strength to stand up to Faith. I'm not sure what made her dislike me more – not being able to hurt me anymore or the fact that Scott had liked me first – but she'd hated me ever since. I usually kept my distance from her because it was just not worth the hassle.

“You know what, Faith?” I took a step toward her, and she stumbled back. I leaned toward her, and I could sense everyone in the cafeteria craning forward in their seats. “If I were you,” I whispered in her ear, “I’d be less worried about whether or not a girl beat up my boyfriend and more concerned about why my boyfriend wasn’t with me.”

Faith’s mouth fell open. It probably wasn’t wise to stir her up like that. After years of crushing on Scott, Faith had finally gotten him, but she was very jealous where he was concerned. If she weren’t such a bitch, I would have told her not to worry because she and Scott were made for each other.

I pushed past her, leaving behind a room full of curious onlookers. More people had stopped in the hallway to hear our exchange, and I ignored their stares as I walked past them. Scott stepped aside when I reached him and Ryan, and our eyes met briefly. I could see the confusion and suspicion on his face, and I knew he was wondering why I’d denied hitting him when I could have totally humiliated him in front of half the school. I just walked by because I had no desire to explain my actions to him or anyone else. Let him think what he wanted.

The rest of the afternoon was quiet. There were no more run-ins with Faith, and Scott kept his distance as well. Neither of them was going to forgive or forget any time soon, but I had a feeling Scott would keep a wide berth from me for a while. I hoped they both did because I didn’t like the person I became around them.

I was on Market Street on my way home after school when I started to feel like someone was watching me. It was an eerie sensation, but I shook it off and cut through the small parking lot between the pub and the antique store, emerging on the waterfront. Our place was the seventh one down at the end of the row.

Just as I passed the pub, the feeling of being watched came over me again, stronger this time. Was someone following me? I stopped and listened for footsteps, but this close to the beach the gulls and waves drowned out a lot of noises. It was the middle of the afternoon so I was not afraid, but I was growing annoyed.

“Scott or Faith, if that’s you, you’d better turn around and go home right now if you know what’s good for you,” I called, not really expecting an answer.

After a few seconds I resumed walking. It was a warm afternoon, and there was barely any wind, save for the light breeze on my ankles. I watched absently as leaves from the lonely maple tree in front of the coffee shop swirled around my feet then tumbled ahead of me like a playful puppy all the way home.

“What the – ?” I came up short when I rounded the corner of our building and came face-to-face with a mini whirlwind of leaves and dirt hovering directly in my path. I stood and watched the leaves spinning faster and faster as the little cyclone picked up more of them and began to form a blurry outline about three feet high. My mouth fell open, and I snapped it shut as a creature I had only heard about took shape before me. I knew about elementals of course, but I had never dreamed I’d see one up close in my lifetime. I didn’t know whether to be scared or excited by the rare appearance.

“Um, hello,” I said hesitantly.

The sylph made a movement that looked like a bow, and not knowing the proper etiquette for elementals, I bowed in return. That seemed to please her because she moved closer until I could hear a soft whispery sound, almost like the wind in the fireplace flue during a storm. When I listened closely I could pick out words. “Hello, Sara Grey,” she said in a breezy voice. “I am

Aine.”

I swallowed and sat down hard on the bottom of the stairs to our apartment. She knew my name. Why would an air elemental know my name? A lot of the People in these parts knew me for my healing, but I doubted a sylph needed my help in that area. I wouldn't even know where to start anyway.

“Do you need my help, Aine?” I asked, and I heard a whispery laugh.

“I have watched you and seen your power and how good you are to the People. You are a kind child.”

“I'm almost eighteen.”

The sylph laughed again, and I could not help but smile. She had lived countless lifetimes, and compared to her I was an infant.

I didn't know a whole lot about elementals except that they were super powerful and they pulled their power from the earth. They were highly revered by the People, including the trolls. Remy talked about elementals sometimes, but even he had never met one.

“Aine, do you know where my power comes from?” If anyone could answer that question, it was an elemental. Maybe she was here to give me the answers I desperately wanted.

Aine moved closer until I could feel her brush against my legs. I wanted so much to lean down and touch the distorted shape, but I was afraid she might vanish.

“All power comes from the earth,” she answered cryptically. She moved away again. “Why do you heal the People, little sister?”

The question caught me off guard; no one had ever asked me that before. “I don't understand. Why *wouldn't* I heal them?”

“Humans fear the People. You do not.”

“No. Some of them are my friends.”

“And what of the ones who don't wish to be your friend? Do you help them?”

I wished I could see the sylph's face clearly to understand the reason for her questions. “I've never had to make that decision, so I honestly can't say what I'd do. I guess I would help most creatures.”

Aine seemed to hang in the air in front of my eyes. “Most – but not all?”

“Well, I'm not going to heal something that will turn around and kill humans, if that's what you mean. I know there are some who aren't nice, but they aren't evil either. I'd help them if they asked for it.”

“And you decide who is evil and who is not?”

I let out a short laugh. “I think the evil ones are easy enough to identify.”

A long moment passed before the sylph nodded. “You are wise for one so young. I am glad I came to meet you.”

“I'm glad, too.” This was one of the strangest conversations I'd ever had, and I half expected to wake up in my bed and find out it was all a dream.

“I think we will meet again, little sister.” The swirling mass of air began to move away until it suddenly dissipated, leaving a loose pile of dirt and leaves on the ground.

An elemental. I just met an elemental!

I sat on the steps for a good ten minutes after she disappeared because it took me that long to recover from the shock of my encounter. Elementals were extremely elusive beings, and I could not fathom why Aine would come here just to talk to me. I had a little power, yes, but it was nothing compared to her immense magic. And she said she had been watching me? For how long and why?

Nate was in his office when I finally schooled my face into a somewhat normal expression and went inside. I grabbed a blueberry muffin from the kitchen to tide me over until dinner and went upstairs, calling hello to Nate as I passed his door. Throwing my backpack on my bed, I changed my clothes, put on some Carly Simon, and sat at my laptop. I was dying to know if Wulfman had found out anything for me. It was probably too soon to hope for something, but I felt like anything was possible after my encounter with Aine.

To my surprise there was an email from Wulfman in the mailbox I used for the message board. I opened his message, curious about what he'd found out already.

It looks like you were right. There were several suspicious deaths in Portland about ten years ago. Your friend was one of them. I'm still waiting to hear from all my resources. Hope to get back to you in a few hours.

I stared at the screen. In a few hours I could be closer than I'd ever been to getting answers about my dad's murder. All these years the biggest question tormenting me was why him? He was a good person, and we had lived a very quiet life. What drew them to that neighborhood, to our little house that looked like every other house on the street? That question was a fire inside me, and it would never stop burning until it was answered. The truth would not help me get over what happened to him, but maybe it could bring me some kind of closure.

Grabbing the muffin, I nibbled it as I paced the room, my eyes going to the laptop with every turn on the floor. The cat lay across the back of the couch watching me as I walked back and forth, his head following me around the room. I tossed him a small piece of muffin and he watched it bounce off the couch in front of him, but he made no move to catch it before it fell to the floor.

"Two days ago you would have been glad to get that," I scolded softly as I bent to pick up the crumb.

A tiny shuffling sound behind the attic wall caught my ear, and I smiled behind my hand. Breaking off a large piece of muffin, I unlatched the small attic door and set the food on the floor in front of it. Then I retreated to the couch to watch. It took a few minutes, but I was rewarded when the door squeaked and a tiny pale arm reached out from the shadows to snatch away the piece of muffin. I heard a gleeful snicker as the little fiend retreated with its prize.

"You're welcome, you ungrateful little wretch," I called after him.

The only response I got was a muffled burp from inside the wall. Little buggers never said thank you.

I shook my head and finished my muffin. Some houses had mice – mine had imps. Imps were the vermin of the supe world, notorious thieves and the devil to catch. For a while I couldn't leave anything of value lying around or it would disappear – until last fall when one of the little beasts got caught in an old mousetrap in the storeroom. I freed him and fixed him up even though he tried to bite me in the process. Remy said I was nuts, but I couldn't stand to see a

creature in pain. I guess one good turn did deserve another because nothing had gone missing since that day. Of course, the imps weren't any friendlier, but what could you expect from six-inch tall kleptomaniac demons with sharp teeth?

I forced myself to do homework for an hour before I finally gave in and went to my laptop to check my email. Nervous excitement twisted my stomach when I saw a message requesting a chat. I clicked *okay*, and Wulfman responded immediately.

Wulfman: Have something. Not sure it's what you want.

PixieGirl: What is it?

Wulfman: One of my sources lost a friend when you lost yours. Same M.O.

PixieGirl: And he thinks it was vampires?

Wulfman: He's sure of it. He knows a lot.

PixieGirl: So what now?

Wulfman: He wants to talk to you. But it has to be in person. You up for that?

PixieGirl: You trust him?

Wulfman: 100%

PixieGirl: Ok but it has to be very public.

My cell phone vibrated where it lay on the desk. The corner of my mouth lifted when I saw the text message from Roland. **Fri night?**

PixieGirl: I think I know of a place. Have him ping me and we'll talk.

Wulfman: Will do. Let me know how it goes.

PixieGirl: Thanks, I will.

I leaned back in my chair. Was I insane to agree to meet a total stranger even if he might know something about my dad? I'd heard enough stories about girls disappearing after going to meet someone they met online. But then this wouldn't be the first time I'd made contact with someone this way. It was how I met Malloy the first time, and there were several others I'd dealt with before him. I was always careful, and it wasn't like I'd be alone with the guy.

And it might be my only chance to learn the truth about what had happened to my dad. After all these years, there was no way I could pass up this opportunity. I was willing to take a few risks to finally get the answers I sought.

My mind made up, I picked up my phone. **I'm in.**