



# Feathered Web

## (Moonshadow Bay #13)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** I owe a favor to the Crow Man, the messenger of the Gods. Little do I realize realize that it will take me deep into the territory of Kerris, the spirit shaman of Whisper Hollow. Kerris comes to me for help.

Penelope, the Gatekeeper of Whisper Hollows Graveyard, has been kidnapped by the Covenant of Chaos and is being held in Moonshadow Bay. Now its up to my grandmother and me to free her, and to return her to Whisper Hollow before the dead start wandering.

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

# Page 1

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## CHAPTER ONE

I was floating in the middle of the sky, under a dark night where the stars blazed overhead.

Autumn leaves whirled all around me, spinning off of the trees to dance around me.

I tried to turn and found myself spinning like the leaves, buoyed up by the wind.

Autumn was here, and she had come to play hard.

As I looked overhead, I caught sight of black forms winging over my head—a murder of crows, their long shrieks filling the air.

I listened, trying to understand them. As I listened, trying to decipher their calls, their message became clear. He has been summoned...he has been summoned...

My blood chilled. I looked around me, still twirling like a leaf in the wind. Who were the crows talking about? But then, as I started to get dizzy from the constant spinning, a low, sonorous drumming reverberated around me as a familiar voice echoed through the blustery night.

“I am the Messenger of She Who Watches Over Death, I am the Father of Crows. I am the Crow Man, and I bring messages in the night. Once you have met me, you’ll never forget me.

Once you have kissed me, you’ll never fully walk without me in your thoughts.

I am part of every crow and raven that wings its way across this world.

I am found in the depths of the darkness, and the brilliance of the lights that create the path of the Ancestors.

You have sealed the deal, and I will help you.

Listen for my call—and do not think that you can renege on our deal.

You are bound by the gods—by Druantia, and by the Morrígan. ”

Right then, I knew that voice, and I knew who was calling me. I turned to run, not wanting to stay, but there was nowhere to go. A dark figure loomed in the night sky, towering over me, and as he turned his gaze to me, I tumbled, falling head over heels, plunging toward the earth below.

As I neared the ground, I tried to stall myself...but there was nothing to break my fall...

\* \* \*

I jerked out of the dream, shivering. My heart was racing and I felt a vague sense of panic.

Looking around, I realized I was in the bedroom, with Killian by my side.

The echoing voice faded, as did the endless night sky that I had been floating in.

The stars—so brilliant in my mind—faded, and I scooted up to lean against the headboard.

It had been over a year since I had met the Crow Man, and though I remembered my promise, as the days and months went by, the experience had receded, with all the other things that had been happening in my life.

Now it came flooding back...the Crow Man had elicited a promise from me. When he called, I would answer and pay the price for his favor. I didn't give promises easily to beings from other realms, but this had been a life-threatening situation, and his help was one of our only ways out.

I sat on the edge of the bed, wondering what had triggered the dream. Was it a portent, or a deep memory coming to the surface?

"Are you all right? Do you have a migraine?" Killian rolled over and lightly caressed my back. "What time is it?"

I glanced at the clock. "It's six. And yes, I'm all right. I just had a bad dream." I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. Part of me lingered in the dream, and part of me clung to the bedroom, which felt safe, a security net in a world fraught with danger.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Killian asked, pulling me back into bed. I rolled into his arms, and he held me, kissing my forehead.

"No," I said, after thinking about it. "I'll get up and make us an early breakfast."

I kissed him on the nose, then stared into his emerald eyes.

They sparkled, a deep forest green, and as he reached up to press his lips against mine, I melted into the kiss.

Killian was my safety net, my partner in life and in love.

I stroked his hair back out of his face, and the wavy wheaten tangle spread over his bare shoulders.

Once again, I caught my breath at the sight of him.

I kissed him again, pressing my breasts against his chest.

“Maybe we can get up in a little while,” he whispered.

Nodding, I pushed thoughts of the Crow Man out of my mind, concentrating on the man in front of me, and on how much I loved him. He pulled me back under the comforter, and we settled in as the fog rolled through the town outside, promising that autumn had truly arrived.

\* \* \*

Killian left for the office. His clinic opened earlier than my workplace.

I stood in the kitchen, packing my lunch.

My migraines were under control. Over the past few months, I’d been practicing my magic daily, and it had slowly helped my energy to flow correctly.

I’d always have to keep active magically to prevent a flareup of my ERS—energy reflux syndrome—but a few minutes of channeling the magic every day worked wonders for me.

I checked myself in the mirror. Black corduroy skirt, green V-neck sweater, silver belt, black knee-high suede boots, hair back in a ponytail, makeup—good.

I’d been going to the gym and while I wasn’t there to lose weight, I had toned up a

lot.

I was a size sixteen, and in good shape.

My doctor had told me that, other than the ERS, my health was better than it had ever been.

I slipped on my sweater-coat and tied the belt, then slung my purse over my shoulder.

Keys in hand, I headed to the door. I was in my car and waiting for it to warm up when my phone rang.

I didn't recognize the number. Usually, I let unknown callers go to voice mail but my instincts urged me to pick up.

"Hello?" I never led with my name. Scammers were rife and they often recorded names and words that could be used against their victims. Of course, now AI had become the scammer's best friend, and added a whole new level of hell to the practice.

"Is this January Jaxson?" The woman's voice was steady, and I could feel magic seeping through her words. "I'm Kerris Fellwater, and I was hoping to talk to her."

I took a deep breath. Kerris Fellwater ? She was the spirit shaman over in Whisper Hollow, another shadow town like Moonshadow Bay. Except Whisper Hollow was darker— a lot darker. I knew Kerris by reputation, and I'd met her best friend, Peggin Sanderson.

"Well, hello. Yes, I'm January. What can I do for you?" Now I was curious.

"I need your help. I can't explain over the phone, but it has to do with the Covenant

of Chaos.

If you can see me, I'll drive over from the peninsula.

My husband Bryan and I can rent a hotel room in town for a couple of days.

"There was something in her voice that told me whatever she had to say was urgent.

"Of course. Other than work, I don't have any plans. When will you be coming over?"

"Thank you, thank you so much. We can be there by this afternoon. Can we buy you dinner after you get off work?" The relief in her words was tangible.

"Do you mind if my husband joins us? And you don't have to pay." Whisper Hollow was full of dark magic and feuds that went back for over a century. If I was going to dip my toe in those waters, I wanted Killian with me.

"I don't mind. Can you recommend a hotel? We'll start out in about half an hour, so you can text the information to me, if you like."

"I'll text you once I get to work," I said, then signed off. I made sure to save her number in my contacts, and then—mind racing with what Kerris could possibly want with me—pulled out of the driveway and headed to the office.

\* \* \*

Tad and Caitlin were busy looking over a report when I got in. I'd stopped to buy coffee and doughnuts for everyone, and Hank took the coffee tray from me and put it on the table.

“What’s up?” I said, setting the box of doughnuts down beside the coffee.

I leaned over Caitlin’s shoulder. She and Tad were looking through a series of recent reports of some creature that had been spotted around the area recently.

Described by various people as a bipedal dinosaur, to a Yoda-lookalike, to a goblin, all the reports had three things in common: the creature was spotted only at night, it had been spotted near trash bins in every report, and in each case, someone had tried to take a picture of it, but the creature vanished in every photo.

“Are we going looking for it?” I asked.

“Maybe. So far, there haven’t been any problems reported, except for the trash cans being knocked over. We’ll keep an eye on it, but I don’t want to waste resources unless there’s more evidence and more activity,” Tad said.

“Well, I’ve got news. Kind of,” I said. I returned to my desk, got my notepad and tablet, then headed toward our group round table where we held meetings every morning.

Conjure Ink was a passion project. Tad Gelphart was a precocious genius.

He had started not only Conjure Ink before he was twenty-four, but also the umbrella group that brought together paranormal investigations groups around Washington state—Urban Legends, Inc.

He was born into wealth, but he used it for the betterment of others.

Those of us he employed could count on our jobs, were paid a good wage, and we’d become a family of sorts.



As we gathered around the table, the others looked at me expectantly. “Well?” Caitlin asked. A bobcat shifter, she and Tad had finally admitted their attraction for each other and were now engaged.

“I got a call this morning,” I said. “Kerris Fellwater’s coming over to talk to me. She said she needs my help. If she really needs my help, do you mind if I take a little time off?”

Tad’s eyes widened. “Kerris?” His parents had left Whisper Hollow before he’d been born because they knew how dangerous the town could be. But Tad was fascinated with the shadow town and kept an eye on what was happening there.

“Yeah. I don’t know what she wants yet, but if we need Conjure Ink’s resources, can I?—”

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“Of course,” Tad said, before I could even finish my sentence. “If you have time, bring her in. I’d like to meet her.”

“Will do,” I said. “We’re meeting for dinner.” I let out a sigh. “Okay, so what’s on the agenda today? Is Wren coming in?”

Tad shook his head. “Walter had a really bad spell this weekend. She called me last night and said she might not—” He stopped as his phone rang. “Speak of the devil...” He answered. “Hey Wren, how are things?—”

Seconds later, Tad’s face drained of color and he let out a soft sigh. “Of course. I’ll tell the others. If there’s anything we can do—anything at all... Right. I’m so sorry, Wren. I’m here, and so are the others... All right. If you need anything, I’m here.”

My stomach knotted. I’d heard that speech before, from other people, when my mother and father were killed in a car crash. As Tad set his phone on the table and looked up, I caught his gaze. I knew immediately what had happened.

“Walter’s gone?”

Tad nodded. “He died this morning.”

I hung my head, and so did the others. Wren’s husband Walter had developed multiple sclerosis, and the disease had advanced far too quickly.

He’d tried experimental therapy and everything they could dig up that might help, but it ran through him, rampant.

There had been a couple periods where he'd gone into a slight remission, but each time it came back with a vengeance, and now, he was gone.

Just like that...a flame fighting for life, fighting for air, snuffed out all too soon.

I realized that tears were creeping down my cheeks. I looked up to see the others crying as well. We were a family, and one of our own had suffered a great loss.

"What can we do?" I asked, trying to find something that might help. "What can we do to help her through this?"

"I'll hire an assistant for her for a month or two," Tad said. "Wren's going to need all the help she can get with making arrangements, dealing with all the medical gear at her house, cleaning, sorting through Walter's things. That sort of thing."

"That's a good idea," I said. "One of us should go over there now, though. She'll need immediate support."

"I'll go," Caitlin said. "Wren and I were going to meet for lunch tomorrow. If you don't mind, I'll take off now. I'll stop for flowers and a casserole so she won't have to cook."

"Let us know if there's anything we can do from here," Tad said, giving her a quick kiss. "We don't want to overwhelm her and I'm sure relatives from both her side and Walter's side will be on the way. Give her our love."

Caitlin shrugged on her jacket and headed out. I watched her go, thinking that I should have volunteered, but I had to meet Kerris after work. Caitlin had more leeway to help today, and there were a thousand things to do after a death. Wren wouldn't be in much shape to do anything.

I sighed. “So, what do we do today? It’s going to be hard to focus.”

“Given we’re not really working on any cases right now, let’s take some time to organize files, check all the equipment, and sort out the office.

January, can you organize the supply closet and make a note if we’re low on anything?

Hank, start with the equipment. I’ll start scanning in photos.

” Tad motioned for us to get busy. “Take it easy, do what you can. We’re all in shock.”

\* \* \*

By late afternoon, we’d cleaned up the office in more ways than one. I grabbed the cleaner and sprayed down all the surfaces, wiping them thoroughly. Tad finished scanning in documents and organizing them, and Hank finished cleaning and checking all our equipment.

As we finished, Caitlin called. Tad put her on speaker phone.

“Wren’s asleep, finally. She’s in rough shape.

She’s trying so hard to be brave, but her heart’s broken.

I’m helping her by calling Walter’s friends and relatives.

I also closed down a bunch of accounts he had that she won’t need—subscriptions and the like.

” She paused, then said, “It’s so silent here.

Walter’s going to be cremated and then his ashes scattered back into the garden, where he loved to putter.

I’m going to make the arrangements for his funeral.

Wren showed me the will, with what they discussed, and I’ll make sure it happens. ”

Tad sighed. “That will help her a lot. This has been a rough day. Is there anybody else there with her?”

“Walter’s sister is due to arrive tomorrow from Massachusetts, and his parents are flying in from Florida on Wednesday.

Wren’s friend Sheila was here, but she kept breaking down and I suggested she go home.

The home health care worker who watched after Walter told me she’ll stay tonight, to make sure Wren’s okay.

I’ll be home in a couple hours, but I thought I’d come back tomorrow morning until Sheila gets here.

” Caitlin sounded tired. “I’d really like it if you had takeout waiting when I get home,” she added.

“Text me what you want,” Tad said. He turned to the rest of us. “Let’s knock off for the day. We won’t get anything else done this afternoon. See you tomorrow, and January, feel free to bring Kerris in with you, if you feel we could help. I’d like to meet her, anyway.”

As I gathered my things and prepared to leave, it occurred to me that each day was an adventure, for good or for bad, and when we woke in the morning, we never quite knew what was waiting in store for us.

### CHAPTER TWO

I remembered that I hadn't let Killian know about dinner tonight, or about Walter.

He had gone over with me several times to visit Wren and Walter, and he had done what he could to fix things around the house.

The minute I arrived home, I gave him a call.

Luckily, he was between patients. My husband—a wolf shifter—was a veterinarian with a soft spot for cats.

“Hey, what's up, love?”

I worried my lip. “Two things. I got a call this morning from Kerris Fellwater of Whisper Hollow. She needs my help with something. She and her husband Bryan are meeting us for dinner tonight—they drove over from the peninsula today.”

“Hmm, really? Well, dinner sounds fine. Do you know what she wants?”

“No, not really. We'll find out tonight. They're staying at a hotel. I didn't feel comfortable inviting her to stay here unless we've actually met. But something else happened today,” I said.

“You sound like you've been crying,” Killian said. “Are you all right?”

“I have been, and no...well, yes, I'm all right. But at work today we got a call from

Wren. Walter's dead. He died this morning." The words hurt coming out of my mouth. I hadn't realized just how much I liked Wren and Walter.

Killian was silent for a few seconds, then he said, "Oh no. That sucks. I liked Walt. He was a good man."

"He was. And the disease progressed so fast. I guess some forms of it do. Obviously, Wren's devastated. Caitlin stayed with her today and will go back there tomorrow. Tad's going to hire an assistant to help Wren through the first month or so." I shook my head. "I feel so helpless."

"Yeah, there's not much you can do for her right now. You can help out, but nothing is going to take away the pain," Killian said. "I'll go over later and take a look around. Tarvish and I can fix up anything that needs repaired on the house, as long as it's not plumbing or electrical."

"Thank you," I murmured, wishing he was home. I wanted to lean into his arms, to curl up with him against the harshness of the world. "You're so good. I wish you were home right now."

He sighed. "I wish I was too, but I've got two more appointments this afternoon, and they need me. It's okay to cry," he added.

"I know," I said. "I think I'll take a shower and chill with the cats until you get home. You're sure you don't mind dinner with Kerris and Bryan?"

"I don't mind," Killian said. "I'll see you as soon as I can."

As I set my phone down, it occurred to me how much other people affected our lives.

Walter, in his death, had touched us almost more than he had in life.



And that seemed sad. I resolved to spend more time with my friends from now on, and my loved ones.

Whenever my time came, I wanted people to remember what I'd brought into their lives.

\* \* \*

Killian and I arrived at the restaurant first. We were meeting at the Moonshadow Steakhouse, an upscale eatery with reasonably priced good food. As the waitress showed us to the booth, I scooted in next to Killian and he slid his arm around my shoulder.

"We're waiting for friends," I told the waitress. "Can you bring me a mug of spiced apple cider, hot?"

"That sounds good. I'll have the same," Killian said.

We settled back, and for the first time that day I relaxed. "It's been a long, rough day."

"It has," Killian said. "I lost a patient today. There was nothing anybody could do, and he was in pain, so I had to put him down." He grimaced. It always hurt him when he had to let go of a patient.

"Who?" I asked. I knew the animals of this town better than most of the people, thanks to Killian.

"Friskabout," he said.

I bit my lip. Friskabout had been the Gull Catcher's dog. The two had come together

only in the past year—a stray who had three legs, and a man who lived in a world all his own. The dog had given the Gull Catcher an anchor, and the Gull Catcher had given the dog a second chance at a happy life.

“So much sorrow,” I said. “The day feels so heavy.”

“It’s always hard to lose friends.” Killian straightened as the waitress returned, removing his arm so he could accept his drink.

“Your other party is here,” she said. “Should I show them back?”

“Yes, please,” I said, pulling out my compact for one last check. It was amazing my mascara hadn’t run during the various points through the afternoon, especially during the bouts of crying. But it was waterproof, and it worked great.

“Are you nervous?” Killian asked.

“Kind of. I’ve never met a spirit shaman before. They’re unique in the Otherkin world. They’re not witchblood, though they have magic when it comes to the dead. They’re few and far between—born only to nine families through the centuries.”

Killian frowned. “Yeah, and their guardians are a unique type of wolf shifter, set apart from the rest of us.”

The hostess appeared, a couple behind her.

The woman was around five-six, smaller than I was but not stick thin, and she had jet black hair and eyes that shimmered like honey.

But as I watched, their color flowed into chocolate.

The man was around Killian's height, and their hair color almost matched—a wheaten color, though Killian's had hints of gold and was shoulder length and curly, while Bryan's was ashen, short, and wavy.

Where Killian was stocky and muscled, Bryan was muscled and trim.

I slipped out of the booth and so did Killian. We stood. "Kerris?" I asked. "I'm January Jaxson. And this is my husband, Killian O'Connell."

Kerris gave me a hint of a smile, and she shook my hand. "I'm Kerris Fellwater, and this is my husband, Bryan Tierney. Thank you for seeing us."

I slipped back in the booth and scooted toward the center—it was one of those rounded semi-circle booths—and Killian sat on the other side of me. Kerris sat to my right, and Bryan sat to Killian's left.

The waitress waited for us to be seated, then asked, "Would you like drinks?"

Kerris nodded. "Hot cocoa, please."

Bryan ordered a cup of coffee.

The waitress handed us menus and left to get their drinks.

"So...welcome to Moonshadow Bay. Have you ever been here before?"

Kerris leaned back against the booth. "No, I haven't.

I lived in Seattle until Whisper Hollow called me back.

" She felt like death, to me. But death dancing, death singing, death smiling—not

grim and unyielding.

It was an odd juxtaposition, and it threw me a little, but then I decided to accept it, rather than analyze it.

“I lived in Seattle too, until things went south with my ex,” I said. “My parents died, so I came home to Moonshadow Bay.”

“The shadow towns, they call us back when they need us,” Kerris said. “Peggin told me she met you, and about the Woodlings. She’s been able to connect with a few that we didn’t know were around Whisper Hollow.”

“Yes, and I have to tell you—I met the Crow Man a year ago. And he came to me in my dreams last night. I made a promise to him, and I think he’s calling it in with your visit.”

Kerris was about to say something when the waitress returned with the cocoa and coffee, and she prepared to take our orders.

I glanced over the menu. “I’d like a bowl of clam chowder, and for my entrée, I want the halibut and chips.” I folded my menu and handed it to the waitress.

Kerris ordered a filet mignon, steak fries, and salad. Bryan ordered the same, and Killian asked for the Chilean sea bass, rice pilaf, and a garden salad.

After the waitress left, Kerris let out a long sigh.

“The Crow Man gets around,” she said, her eyes gleaming. “I remember when he called me back to Whisper Hollow. But yes, I think this is his call to pay your debt. The gods and their messengers never forget favors. They’re almost worse than the Fae.”

“Well, he did us a good deed. In fact, he saved my boss’s life—and my boss is also a good friend.

So I’m willing to pay the price, as long as it doesn’t conflict with my oath to Druantia.

” I knew that some people wouldn’t see it that way, but without the Crow Man’s help, we wouldn’t have been able to locate Bigfoot.

At her look, I shrugged. “Long story. I’ll tell you sometime if you like. But please, you sounded so worried this morning. What’s going on? How can I help you?”

Kerris sighed, glancing at Bryan. “Okay, there’s a problem in Whisper Hollow and it connects to Moonshadow Bay. Have you heard of Penelope, the Gatekeeper?”

Puzzled, I shook my head. “Not that I know of.”

“This is also a long story, but I’ll make it as simple as I can.

In Whisper Hollow, the Hounds of Cú Chulainn work against the spirit shamans.

They’re enemies of the Morrígan, and the spirit shamans serve the Morrígan.

A woman—an old witch named Magda Volkov—works with the Hounds. Magda had two daughters.”

As Kerris wove the story, I found myself mesmerized.

“One of her daughters, Ellia, was the younger and she became a lament singer. She works with me, and she plays her violin for the dead to calm them. Ellia’s sister, who was much older, was named Penelope.

From the beginning, Penelope refused to follow Magda's path and turned her back on the Hounds and Baba Volkov.

So Magda killed her. She... I can't even begin to describe the horrendous spell she cast on her own daughter, but think of it as if a nail gun appeared inside you and shot hundreds of nails from the inside out.

I tell you this so you won't be surprised when you see her. ”

“ See her ?” I snapped to attention. “How am I included in this?”

“I'll explain, but you need to know the background first. Anyway, so Magda killed her older daughter.

What she didn't expect is that the Morrígan decided to make Penelope a Gatekeeper in the Whisper Hollow cemetery.

She guards the Veil and watches over the dead, though the dead in Whisper Hollow don't always heed her. ”

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I'd never even heard about the Gatekeepers, though I knew about the different forms of the dead. "All right, so I assume Magda was pissed about that."

"That's an understatement. Anyway, so the Hounds would love to take out the Gatekeeper, because that would help them spread their mayhem. I don't know why they haven't struck before, but something has changed."

"What do you think changed?" Killian asked.

Kerris narrowed her eyes. "I heard through the grapevine that they're working with the Covenant of Chaos here in Moonshadow Bay.

Somehow, between the two groups, they've managed to kidnap Penelope and from what I understand, they're holding her here.

I have no idea why, but I need your help to rescue her.

Also, if this means the two groups are merging, we all have a new problem to deal with.

Between the Covenant and the Hounds, they wield a lot of power. "

I caught my breath. "What if there are other groups like them? What if they decide to all band together?"

"Then we're all screwed," Bryan said. He leaned forward. "We have a council—the Crescent Moon Society. They suggested we come to you."

I nodded. “They’re similar to our Crystal Cauldron, though I think things work a little differently in Whisper Hollow. But the Crescent Moon Society is still part of the Order of the Moon, correct?”

Kerris nodded. “We don’t talk about it much, but yes.

There are specific towns among the shadow towns that are run differently than most of the others.

Whisper Hollow is one. Usually, shadow towns like Whisper Hollow have darker spirits in them.

Some of the spirit beings are practically alien in nature.

Whisper Hollow is far less inviting than Moonshadow Bay. ”

I thought about it. There wasn’t even a question as to whether I’d help Kerris, but I didn’t know if I could do it by myself. As I was sitting there, a voice echoed in my ear and I looked up to see Esmara standing beside me.

You need Rowan’s help in this, she said.

I was thinking that, I projected back. Esmara was one of the Ladies, the women of my family line who watched over us, and who gave us advice. She’d first come to me when I returned to Moonshadow Bay, and she was always nearby. Can I trust Kerris? What do you think?

She and her guardian are safe, but be cautious, January. Spirit shamans are laden with a lot of baggage and they always walk in the shadow of death. Kerris can’t escape her destiny, any more than you can escape yours. Esmara glanced over at her and said, Hello. I know you can see me.



Wait, she can hear you? I didn't want Kerris to think we'd been talking behind her back.

Only what I choose to let her hear, Esmara said. No worries.

But Kerris laughed. "I wondered who was hanging around," she said aloud. "Introduce me?"

I sucked in a deep breath. Both Killian and Bryan were looking confused. "Esmara is my guardian. In my family, we call them the Ladies . They come to guide those of us who need their help. She was my mother's aunt."

"How do you do?" Kerris said, smiling. "It's not often I have pleasant dealings with the dead."

It's not often I choose to allow the living to hear me, Esmara countered, winking. She turned to me. Call Rowan. You'll need her help on this. And then, without even a goodbye, she vanished.

"Let me call my grandmother," I said. "She's the high priestess of the Crystal Cauldron, the local coven. She's been around a lot longer and she's much more knowledgeable about these things than I am. She'll help us." I knew, in my heart, that Rowan would come through.

"What's her name? I may have heard of her," Kerris asked.

"Rowan Firesong."

Kerris nodded. "Right. I know that name. My grandmother, who was the spirit shaman before me, mentioned her once or twice."

“Can they destroy Penelope?” Killian asked.

Kerris thought about it. “I don’t know. I doubt it—she’s already dead. But without her presence, the ghosts walk too easily. And I don’t have the time to be running after every spirit that decides to step out of the grave. We already have a host of the Unliving over in Whisper Hollow.”

“I always wondered,” Killian said. “What’s the difference between the Unliving and a vampire? We have a lot of vampires here, but I’ve almost never heard of the Unliving.”

Kerris smiled. “It all depends on where you live, which you’ll find the most. I don’t know if we have any vampires in Whisper Hollow.

I never really thought about them.” She picked up her mug and took a sip.

“So,” she said, wiping her lips with her napkin.

“The main difference is that the Unliving are still dead, but they create form out of the spirit’s will to live. ”

“Like a zombie?” I asked.

“No, zombies are empty vessels with a primal hunger drive. The Unliving are so driven to keep their connection with the physical world that their spirit creates their bodies. The queens of the Unliving are actually fallen spirit shamans who have displeased the Morrígan. Vampires are turned by blood, so they’re a different creation altogether, and nobody knows exactly how they came to be.

They’re trapped in their bodies, rather than creating their bodies. ”

Kerris stopped as the waitress returned, carrying a huge tray with our dinners on it. As she handed around our plates, the waitress seemed to sense our mood and she kept a silent smile on her face. Then, with a soft “Just ask if you need anything else,” she left.

We took a few minutes to eat in silence. I was deep in my thoughts about both Walter and the Gatekeeper. Kerris seemed like a nice woman, but intense, and I realized that the job she had—spirit shaman—probably kept her cloaked in shadows constantly.

“What do you do ? I’ve never been quite clear on what the function of a spirit shaman is,” I asked, after that first mad dash at the food. We all seemed hungry, from what I could tell.

Kerris cleared her throat and set her fork down. “Spirit shamans keep the dead from wandering. We’re more than what you’d call a ghost buster. We literally guard the cemeteries and watch for the dead who do not want to go through the Veil.”

“And are there a lot of them in Whisper Hollow?” Killian asked.

“Too many. Given some of the spirit beings we have there, including the Lady of the Lake, we lose more people on an annual average than just about anywhere else in the United States,” she said. “And a number of them don’t want to go. So they fight to stay once they’re in spirit form.”

“You said your grandmother was a spirit shaman?” I asked.

“She was. My mother should have been, but she was murdered when I was young and she never had the chance to take up her post. It’s a complicated and tangled story, and I only found out who killed her and why when I returned to Whisper Hollow.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “My parents are both dead, and it was hard enough as an adult

to lose them.”

“Yeah, it’s never easy,” Kerris said with a shrug.

“If Bryan and I have a daughter, she’ll become a spirit shaman.

If not, then when I pass on, they’ll have to bring in someone new from a different place.

We’ve been trying to get pregnant—I’m not getting any younger—but so far no luck.

The doctor said there’s no physical reason for me not getting pregnant, so I’ll have to trust him and hope that nature takes its course.”

Nodding, I pulled out my phone and texted Rowan. we need to talk to you. can you see us tonight? i’m with kerris, the spirit shaman of whisper hollow, and she needs our help. it’s urgent.

I started to tell them that I had texted my grandmother when my phone alerted me to an incoming text. “Hold on,” I said.

come over as soon as you can, Rowan texted back.

“Okay, my grandmother wants to see us tonight. I’ll tell her we’ll be there after dinner.” I replied to Rowan, then set my phone down. “My grandmother’s pretty incredible, though she can be more than a little intimidating.” I added, “Just so you aren’t too surprised, she lives with a demon.”

“A demon?” Kerris coughed on her salad. She took a sip of water, then added, “Your grandmother is involved with a demon? Do I understand that correctly?”

I laughed. “Yeah, but he’s not evil.” I told them about Tarvish and how he had come to be here.

“So, you see, if he went back into the computer system, he’d vanish—cease to exist. And he’s just too nice to do that to.

Then he and my grandmother hit it off and...

Well, I don’t expect to be calling him ‘Grandpa’ any time soon, but I could do worse.”

“Yeah, you could,” Kerris said. “My grandfather—the man I thought was my grandfather—was an absolute monster. I’m grateful I met my real grandpa, but I’d rather have a demon for a grandfather than the one I grew up with.”

Kerris sounded like she’d had a rough life, but I didn’t want to pry.

Instead, I shifted the subject to my work, which brought Walter back to mind, but I sidestepped his death and focused on explaining Conjure Ink and the work we were doing, until we were finished with dinner and ready to head over to Rowan’s.

### CHAPTER THREE

My grandmother had told me not to eat dessert, so we had left after our entrees were finished. As we walked through the trellised gate, covered with ivy and climbing roses still barren from the winter, the front porch light was on.

My paternal grandmother was both the oldest witch in Moonshadow Bay and also the most powerful.

Her house, like Killian's and mine, backed up against the Mystic Wood, a thicket that wove through Moonshadow Bay with a magical force almost unmatched in the area.

The woodland surrounded the town, shrouding it in a web of magic and mystery.

Filled with odd beings—some of whom were dangerous, others not so much—the Mystic Wood kept its secrets tight to its chest.

Rowan's house was one-story, and it was one of the oldest houses in the town, but she kept it up. Its weathered look was from time, rather than disrepair, and it hearkened from before the town was properly founded. Lights flickered from within the mullioned windows.

The land it was on was a haven for trees: cedar and fir mostly, but also maple, and a weeping sequoia that looked like some tree creature that had stepped out of a fairytale. Three steps led up to the porch, and a gargoyle knocker was flush on the door.

I knocked and she answered immediately.

“Come in. It’s cold out there.” Rowan gave me a brief hug as Killian and I slipped through the door. She was not a demonstrative person, but her feelings were real and I never felt slighted by her.

Rowan nodded for the others to follow, then closed the door and led us into the living room.

Tarvish was sitting there, his massive frame comfortably draped in the oversized recliner.

He looked like Hellboy, only with his massive horns curved back around like those of a ram.

He was wearing a pair of blue jeans and an AC/DC T-shirt.

He was barefoot, his massive feet sporting enough hair for a hobbit.

Two young cats sat on his lap. Tarvish and Rowan had recently discovered a litter of kittens and, thanks to Tarvish, my grandmother now had four cats.

They were barely a year old, two silver tabbies, a gray tuxedo, and one that had a black and white cow pattern, and they ruled the house by now.

Tarvish gently placed the kittens on the floor and stood. He towered over the rest of us, and it was a good thing that Rowan’s house had tall ceilings.

“Welcome,” he said, giving me a hug. “Introduce us to your friends.”

I motioned for Kerris and Bryan to have a seat on the sofa. Killian sat in an armchair

and I moved over to the rocker. “Kerris Fellwater and Bryan Tierney, meet my grandmother, Rowan Firesong and her beau, Tarvish.”

Rowan was lean but not gaunt, with long silver hair gathered back in a braid. She was sharp-witted and even sharper tongued, but she wasn’t mean. She was just blunt. When she cared about you, you knew it. If she thought you were being stupid, you knew it.

Tonight, Rowan was wearing a long plaid skirt and a turtleneck.

She took her seat and pointed to the coffee table, where a tray sat, piled high with cookies—oatmeal cranberry, chocolate chip, and molasses raisin.

Next to the tray of cookies was a bowl of strawberries and grapes, and a cheese plate, along with a stack of dessert plates.

“Please, help yourselves. I can make tea or coffee,” Rowan said.

“Thanks.” I glanced over at Kerris and Bryan, both of whom shook their heads. But they both leaned forward and filled plates with cookies and fruit.

“Thank you, but this is fine,” Kerris said.

Rowan waited till we all served ourselves, then she settled back in her chair and said, “Well, I’d love to just chitchat, but I think we need to get right to the point since there seems to be a problem. Tell me what’s going on.”

I took a deep breath. “Kerris has come to ask our help. It seems that the— What’s the group called?”

Kerris cleared her throat. “Cú Chulainn’s Hounds.”



“Right. Cú Chulainn’s Hounds have aligned with the Covenant of Chaos and they kidnapped Whisper Hollow’s Gatekeeper.” I wondered if my grandmother knew what I was talking about.

Rowan’s eyes widened. “They’ve kidnapped Penelope?”

Well, that answered that question. “And apparently, they brought her to Moonshadow Bay,” I said. “Kerris is asking us to help rescue her.”

Rowan exchanged glances with Tarvish. “Of course we’ll help. No question about this. Have you run this past the Court Magika?”

Kerris shook her head. “No. I’m not a witch. Perhaps one of the Crescent Moon Society has—maybe Starlight Williams. She’s a star witch. But this is for me to deal with, if I can.”

“Why you?” Tarvish asked.

Kerris nodded. “Penelope is my other half. She works on the other side of the Veil, while I work on the side of the living. We’re very much alike in what we do.

We’re also connected through the blood of the chalice.

I can’t really explain it, but we’re bonded through a ritual.

To some extent, we can sense one another.

And Starlight wants to keep this as quiet as possible. ”

“I understand why,” Rowan said. “Tell me about the cemetery Penelope guards.”

“Part of the graveyard is contemporary. But to the back, a gate cordons off an older section. That section belonged to a Pest House. And the Pest House cemetery contains more dangerous members of the dead. Penelope’s tomb straddles the line that divides them.

” Kerris bit into an oatmeal raisin cookie.

“These are good. Will you give me the recipe?”

“Of course,” Rowan said.

“What’s a Pest House?” I asked.

Kerris let out a long sigh. “Back in the late 1800s, a number of towns had a house marked for those with TB, cholera, typhus, and other contagious, deadly diseases. The doctors would quarantine patients to the Pest House until they either recovered or died. They were locked away, prevented from escaping, and left to tend to themselves for the most part. Recoveries were rare, and thousands of people died inside these places. Most Pest Houses had cemeteries connected to them, where patients were buried as soon as they died.”

“Cripes. That’s horrible,” I said, my imagination playing way too fast and loose. I could too easily imagine what went on.

“Right. The prisoners—and they were prisoners—were kept locked away and treated as though they were already dead. They were often abused, both by guards and by other inmates. The ghosts and spirits who inhabit those cemeteries and the Pest Houses are angry. They can be volatile. There are a lot of Haunts there, and other, even more dangerous creatures that form from fusions of creatures off the astral and the angry spirits.” Kerris looked over at Rowan.

“Can you think of any place that seems perfect for the Covenant of Chaos to hide Penelope?”

Rowan considered the question, then nodded.

“I can, actually. Not far from Moonshadow Bay there’s a state park—Larrabee.

I happen to know that, a decade or two before it became a state park, there was a Pest House there.

And the house still stands. The owners occasionally offer tours.

There was a cemetery there, too, and that still stands.

I would bet you anything that’s where they’re hiding her. ”

“How do you kidnap a Gatekeeper?” Tarvish asked. “She’s not fully corporeal, is she?”

“No, she phases in and out. As far as kidnapping her goes, they stole her sarcophagus while she was in it,” Kerris said.

“The thing is huge and heavy, so there had to be more than a couple men in on it. My guess is that Magda is behind this—that she engineered the connection between the Hounds and the Covenant of Chaos.”

Rowan asked, “Where does Magda get her power?”

“From Baba Volkov. Magda’s one of her disciples, so to speak. That’s how Magda got her last name. All those who follow the Wolf Hag take her name as part of their own.”

Rowan grimaced. “Oh dear gods. Baba Volkov is...bad news, at the best.”

“I’ve never heard of Baba Volkov. Who is she...or what ?” Baba Yaga came to mind, but I didn’t think they were the same.

Kerris frowned. “Baba Volkov, or Mother Wolf Witch, is—essentially—an evil necromancer. She hates everything to do with spirit shamans, because she enslaves the dead rather than tries to help them move on. Magda follows her. She killed her daughter because they refused to follow the family tradition. She killed Penelope and cursed Ellia with hands that impart madness on touch.”

“Way to love your kids,” Killian muttered.

“I know, right?” Bryan shook his head. “Magda is the epitome of the evil wicked witch out in the forest.”

“When did she join the Hounds?” I asked.

“Many years ago. Magda’s well over a hundred years old.

She’s not technically witchblood, but her lifespan is far longer than normal, and her magic is incredibly intense.

She’s deadly and cunning. And she has it out for me,” Kerris said.

“Her goal—the Hounds’ goal—is to destroy me, given the feud between the Morrígan and Cú Chulainn, and the hunger of Baba Volkov. ”

I thought about it. “Do you think any of Cú Chulainn’s Hounds live in Moonshadow Bay?”

“I doubt it,” Rowan said. “The Covenant of Chaos would have gobbled them up. While the two groups are working together now, the moment any of the Hounds tries to take control, the Covenant of Chaos will force them into obedience. So I can tell you, the Hounds may have come to the Covenant for help, but the Covenant of Chaos is the one running the show.”

She stood, pacing. “We need to check out the Wildcat Cove Pest House. That seems like the most obvious place they’d keep her.”

“Will they be expecting us to look there?” Killian asked.

Rowan shook her head. “I don’t think so. For one thing, I doubt they think you’ve noticed Penelope’s gone. How often do you contact the Gatekeeper?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:08 am*

Kerris was quiet for a few seconds. “Every month or two, maybe ? It’s not all that often. So, you’re probably right. In fact, the only reason I knew about this is that Veronica, the Queen of the Unliving, found out and contacted me. And I definitely don’t hang out with her.”

I picked up my plate and carried it into the kitchen, thinking.

The Covenant of Chaos had one flaw that would help us.

They were arrogant, and that arrogance led them into trouble more often than not.

They were built on male ego. Though women belonged to the group as well, men were the backbone of it.

So if they insisted on running the show, they were most likely operating with at least a few false assumptions.

And those would probably give us an edge.

I stood at the sink, staring out into the night. A moment later, Rowan joined me.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Just thinking. Kerris’s job seems incredibly difficult.”

“It is,” Rowan said. “I knew her grandmother. It’s not at all like how you work with the dead.

Spirit shamans live in two worlds at once—the world of the living and the world of the dead.

It can be a dark and lonely existence, which is why they rely so much on their guardians.

” She leaned against the counter and, together, we stared out the window at the blustery night.

“Do you think we can help her?” I asked, as the first big windstorm of autumn started to play out.

“I think we can. But this won’t be comfortable.

Penelope...I saw her once. When you think that her mother did that to her...

Well, there’s a special place in hell for people like Magda.

” Rowan shook her head, then wiped her hands on a tea towel and motioned for me to follow her.

“Let’s get back to the others before they think we’ve deserted them.”

More curious than ever, I followed my grandmother back into the living room.

“I found that Pest House online,” Tarvish said. “It’s open during weekday afternoons, from October through the end of November, and then again in February and March, and June and July. From one-thirty until six.”

“We can go out there tomorrow afternoon, then,” Rowan said. “Can you get the afternoon off?” she asked me.

I nodded. “Kerris, I was wondering if you’d come into the office with me. My boss’s parents used to live in Whisper Hollow. They left before he was born, because they didn’t want to bring him up in the town. But he’d like to meet you.”

“I can do that,” Kerris said. “Is that all right with you?” she asked Bryan.

He gave her a smile. “Whatever you like. You know I’ll always have your back.”

“I’d be happy to,” Kerris said to me. “Just give me the address and we’ll meet you there. What time do you want us?”

“How long will it take us to reach the Pest House?”

Rowan opened her phone. “About fifteen minutes’ drive from Moonshadow Bay, so we should leave around one. Where do we want to meet?”

“My office,” I said. “Kerris, why don’t you come over around noon. We can eat lunch, you can meet Tad, and then we can head out when Rowan gets there. Rowan, did you want to come for lunch?”

“No, I have an appointment at noon for about thirty-five minutes. I’ll be there around quarter to one.

We can talk about what to look for at the Pest House when I get there.

” Rowan glanced out the window. “It’s supposed to rain nonstop the next few days.

We’re looking at the first freeze next week.

I’m harvesting the last of my tomatoes tomorrow. ”



“I wish I could garden,” Kerris said. “Bryan takes care of that. He’s got a real green thumb.”

“I have a greenhouse, for winter veg. Would you like to see it?” Rowan asked.

Bryan nodded. “I’d love to get some ideas for building one of my own.” He followed Rowan toward the kitchen.

I turned to Kerris. “My grandmother taught me to garden, but it’s not my biggest passion.

” I paused, then said, “I’d love to pick your brain.

I’ve dealt with a number of hauntings and ghosts, and I feel like there’s more I could learn about the dead in order to effectively work with them.

I’ve had to exorcise too many spirits who were causing havoc. ”

Kerris leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees.

“The truth is, there are far more Haunts than I ever thought. And then there are the dead that get twisted up with astral creatures and become something entirely new. I’m still learning, even though I’ve been in Whisper Hollow for quite a while now. ”

“Did you ever think about giving up the post?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Oh, I’ve fantasized about it, but I’ve always known I can’t escape what I was born to be.

My mother only escaped because she was murdered.

But the lineage of my family...there's no choice.

One way or another, I would have ended up back in Whisper Hollow.

Which is why, when the Crow Man summoned me home, I knew there was no escape. So I answered."

"You've been there awhile now, haven't you?"

"Nine years. I was thirty-three when I arrived there. I'm forty-one now.

I suppose I've just accepted my part in life.

"She met my gaze, and I could see a certain weariness in her eyes.

"But it would have been nice to have a choice. I live in a world of bone and ash, of shadows and death, January. I wouldn't wish that on anybody.

I'm supposed to produce an heir—a daughter, so she can pass on the lineage. "

There wasn't much I could say to that, but it seemed so unfair to me. "You said you're trying?"

"Yes." She nodded. "We are. I'll do my duty if I can. Don't get me wrong, I'm not against having children, but if I have a daughter, she'll be brought up to take my place. And I'll feel so conflicted about raising her to the same fate with which I'm bound."

I started to ask her what would happen if she just let her daughter run off to do whatever she wanted, but at that moment my grandmother and Bryan returned. I glanced at Killian, who was fiddling with his phone. He caught my gaze and gave me

a subtle shake of the head.

“We’d better go,” I said. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Rowan.”

I gave her a hug and then she paused, and gave Kerris one, too. “I’ll meet you at your work,” she said, her voice unusually soft.

As we left, Kerris and I said goodbye, and I thought about her position all the way home. She was trapped in a world of death. I shuddered, grateful that I was “just” a witch, and not born into the spirit shaman families.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Next morning, I ordered from the nearest chicken place for lunch.

Caitlin was over with Wren again, and Tad had let Wren know that we would cover any funeral expenses so at least that was one less worry for her.

I had sent flowers, and I texted Wren that I was here if she needed to talk, but I didn't want to push too hard at this point.

I'd see her soon, but right now she would be too overloaded.

"Kerris will be in around noon," I told Tad. "Then I'll be taking off this afternoon to help her."

"What happened?" Tad asked.

I frowned. "The Gatekeeper—you know who that is?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I do keep up with things in Whisper Hollow. Penelope's the Gatekeeper, right?"

"Right. The Covenant of Chaos is working with Cú Chulainn's Hounds, and they've managed to kidnap Penelope. She's being held here in Moonshadow Bay. Kerris needs my help to rescue her." I told them where we were going and why.

"The Wildcat Cove Pest House?" Tad asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Yeah, why?”

“It’s dangerous, January. I’ve got half a dozen reports of cryptids being seen down in that area recently.

We haven’t looked at them yet because we’re going through in the order we receive them.

But I remember seeing at least five reports that something’s lurking around the Pest House. Let me dig them out.”

Tad crossed to his desk and brought up the folder we kept reports in. We had an online form people could fill out, and the reports were filed in order received, but Tad printed out a summary of them.

“Here we go. There have been five reports over the past month of people being stalked near the Pest House. It’s inside the park, though on private property, and some of the park trails lead past it.

One woman says something was following her.

She said it looked like something between a coyote and a wolf, but she saw it stand on two legs at one point.

She managed to get away when she ran into a big group of hikers. ” He flipped through the pages.

“What else have you got?” I asked.

“Someone thought they saw what they called a zombie. They said it looked like a walking corpse.”

“That could be one of the Unliving,” I said. “Or maybe some kid in a costume?”

“I don’t think so. Her dog freaked out and she ran off.

Whatever it was, was slow, so she got away.

Two people claim they saw ghosts, which would make total sense.

And yet two more women report seeing a creature they could only describe as a demon.

I’m not sure what that means, at least to them, but they report a bipedal being with reddish orange skin, scales, and glowing eyes.

It jumped out at them from behind a tree. ”

“That sounds scary.”

“It went after one of the women but she had a stun gun. She shocked it, strongly enough that it let go of her and she and her friend were able to get away. All these reports have been within the past month or so. Something’s going on out there.”

“It sounds exactly like something we should investigate. I’ll see what we find today.

I can imagine there are a number of paranormal activities going on, given the history of the place.

Kerris told me that the Pest House in Whisper Hollow has been cordoned off, along with the part of the cemetery that belonged to it.

She said it’s been considered off-limits for as long as she can remember.

I know there's a small graveyard belonging to this one too.

Have there been any reports from that area? ”

“The ghosts were reported near there. It looks like the other reports come from trailheads near the house itself.”

“So these other reports may not be due to the Pest House?”

Hank was busy searching on the computer. He turned around. “These aren't the first reports. I did a search and there have been cryptid reports from that area since we've been in business. We've just never gotten around to investigating them.”

I glanced at the wall clock. It was almost noon. “Kerris should be here any moment. My grandmother will be here in about forty-five minutes. Do you think there's any equipment I should take with me?”

Hank thought about it. “Unless we're staging a full-scale investigation, just take one of the cameras set to capture thermal images. The other stuff all needs to be hooked up to take recordings.” He paused, then added, “This Gatekeeper—Penelope? So she's a ghost?”

I shook my head. “The Gatekeepers are a different type of dead. They are corporeal, to a degree, which is probably why the Covenant of Chaos and the Hounds were able to kidnap her. I think the Gatekeepers phase in and out. According to Kerris, Penelope looks like she did on the day of her death. Her mother killed her, with the spell that apparently acted like an internal nail gun?”

“What?” Hank asked.

“Apparently, Penelope's covered with spikes, or nails projecting out from her skin.”

Tad grimaced. “I remember when my parents told me about her. They told me stories about a number of the spirit beings in Whisper Hollow. All I can say is that, given what we have seen over the years, I’m grateful we don’t live there.

A lot of those beings in Whisper Hollow are deadly, and they rule the town, in some ways.

My grandpa was taken by Diago, a spirit that visits the hospital and feeds off the ill.

And the thing is, a lot of the spirits in Whisper Hollow are corporeal; you can touch and feel them.

And that means they can touch and feel you. ”

“I really don’t want to think about that,” I said, shivering. “I think I’ll just stay right here in Moonshadow Bay.”

At that moment, the takeout delivery person showed up.

Tad paid him and brought the chicken and sides back to our main office.

He had installed a bell on the reception desk for anybody who might come in looking for help.

Wren was our usual receptionist, but I had the feeling we’d be hiring a temp until she was ready to come back full-time.

My phone jangled and I glanced at it. Kerris had just texted me that she was out in the parking lot. I told her to come on in through the door next to the reception desk.

A moment or so later, she opened the door and peeked into the room. We waved her



in.

“Hey,” I said. “Join us. The food just arrived and it’s piping hot.”

She sniffed the air and smiled. “It smells good. Bryan is taking care of business today so he won’t be with us.” She looked around. “Is Killian coming with us?”

I shook my head. “He’s a vet, and he has a full schedule today. It’s just you and my grandmother and me. But trust me, Rowan’s a powerful witch. She doesn’t let anything stand in her way. She was one of the original founders of Moonshadow Bay.”

After I introduced Kerris to Tad and Hank, we settled down at the table and began to eat lunch. Tad showed her the reports he had showed me.

“It sounds like a typical Pest House,” Kerris said.

“They’re all filled with remnants of the past, both on an astral level and a physical level.

They were horrendous places, and a lot of people were abused before they died.

Remember, they’re from a time when a lot of people thought the devil inhabited sick individuals.

And they were around when people consigned their mentally ill family members to institutions, where they were treated like animals or worse. ”

Tad and Kerris began to discuss Whisper Hollow, as I wandered over to Hank’s desk. He seemed overly quiet today. I settled on the chair next to him. “So, how are things going?”

He shrugged, letting out a long sigh. “It’s been a rough past month,” he said. “My favorite uncle died, and my girlfriend left me. I haven’t talked about it much, because I don’t tend to bring my personal life into the office. But I’ve had better years.” He gave me a sad smile.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I thought about asking why his girlfriend left him but didn’t want to rub salt in the wounds. But apparently he decided he was ready to talk.

“She left me because of my obsession with UFOs. The whole Men in Black thing terrifies her. To be honest, I actually believe she was abducted. She has so many traits similar to other abductees. But she doesn’t remember anything like that, and I think with my fascination with the subject gets too close to repressed memories. ”

I didn’t exactly know what to say to that.

I wasn’t even sure what I thought about UFOs.

I believed they existed, but I didn’t know what they were—whether they were alien spacecraft, interdimensional creatures, or what.

The truth was, talking about them made me uneasy.

I wasn’t sure why, though I knew I had never been abducted by one.

I patted his arm and gave him a hug, then encouraged him to come over to the table for lunch.

We sat there, eating until Rowan showed up.

“Well, I guess we should get moving,” I said after Rowan made her hellos to Tad and Hank. Kerris shouldered her bag, and I grabbed mine and we headed out to the car.

My grandmother had volunteered to drive and I happily accepted.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, all I could think about were the reports that Tad had told me about, and what we might be walking into.

\* \* \*

Larrabee State Park was located on Samish Bay.

Almost three thousand acres, it was on Chuckanut Mountain.

The park offered everything from fishing and boating to beachfront property to campgrounds and hiking trails.

It had been first established in 1915, on land that had been gifted to the state by Charles Larrabee.

The Pest House had been in existence in the late 1800s, and it stayed intact, as the park built up around it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:08 am*

Heavily wooded, Larrabee State Park encapsulated Western Washington scenery in a compact package, including two beautiful mountain lakes—Fragrance Lake and Lost Lake. It was a beautiful spot, incredibly scenic, and it gave a taste of the wilderness and the mountains in an easily accessible place.

As we drove south from Moonshadow Bay, I told Rowan about the reports that Tad had shown me.

“It sounds like we may be up against something formidable,” she said.

“I’m just surprised that the Covenant of Chaos chose that spot.

Well, if they did choose it. We still don’t know if they’re keeping her there.

” I stared out the window, thinking about my life choices.

I was headed to a former asylum for deathly ill people, which was apparently Ground Zero for everything from zombies to ghosts to cryptids.

Toss in the Covenant of Chaos and Cú Chulainn’s Hounds, and we had a recipe for disaster on our hands.

“I’m pretty sure that’s where we’ll find her,” Kerris said.

“I can’t think of many other places they could keep her captive.

There’s something about the magic of Pest Houses that traps the dead.

That's why there are so many ghosts around most of them—the very energy of the house reaches out and absorbs them into its being.

Kind of like flypaper, when you think about it. ”

I grimaced. “Well, that's an image. But I think I know what you mean.

When I first returned to Moonshadow Bay and I was hired by Conjure Ink, the first case that we investigated was an old asylum filled with ghosts and astral creatures.

It was as though they were drawn there. We found a land wight had burrowed beneath it. And that's what kept them trapped.”

“A land wight? Are land wights attracted to chaotic places? Because it makes me want to check on the Pest House at home to find out if there's one there.”

We both looked at Rowan, who kept her eyes on the road as she spoke.

“That's a definite possibility,” she said. “Land wights aren't like elementals, not in the true sense of the word. They are creatures that act like a vortex, and they trap chaotic energy and astral energy.”

“Are there fire wights and water wights?” Kerris asked. “Air wights?”

Rowan shook her head. “No, not in the sense of what a true wight is. But there are other types of creatures for the different elements that play the same role. They are far fewer in number, though, and usually you don't find them on land.

I'm not even sure what their true names are. And I work with fire magic.”

“I'd really like to learn more about witchcraft.

I know several witches over in Whisper Hollow, but we're not exactly on the best of terms. There's a lot of dark magic over there, and while I know a few good witches, Magda kind of overshadows everything.

"Kerris let out a sigh. "You'd think that all of the shadow towns would have meetings occasionally, at least the ones around here. Like a conference of sorts."

"We should start reaching out," I said. "Maybe send invitations to our festivals to the different towns. After all, we're sister cities, all watched over by the Court Magika."

At that moment, Rowan made a left turn into the park.

Immediately, we were swallowed up by dense woodlands on both sides.

The state parks in Western Washington all had a similar feel: an energy that felt both ancient, yet new and volatile.

The woods felt like they were from out of some prehistoric rainforest, yet the fact that we were connected to a vast string of volcanoes running the length of the coastline, infused every tree, every inch of ground, every stone with a feeling of volatility.

The ring of fire encircled the world, and a number of the volcanoes in our area were still alive.

They might be asleep, but they could waken any day and roar to life, just like Mount Saint Helens had in 1980.

About a mile in, a small driveway veered to the left.

A sign posted on the edge of the road indicated that it was the turnoff to the Wildcat Cove Pest House.

Rowan made a left, slowing her speed to the five-mile-per-hour limit.

A couple minutes later we came into a clearing with a weathered four-story house up front, and several side buildings to the left and right.

I could see that beyond the house was a cemetery.

“Well, it looks like we’re here,” Rowan said. “Nobody split up. I know that there’s a groundskeeper here, but the last thing we want is for one of us to attract the attention of some of the nasties that may live here.”

The rain had backed off, and a sliver of sun shimmered through the clouds.

But as it reflected off the raindrops covering the grass and trees, the diffused light managed to make everything about the house more eerie.

I glanced up at the top floor, feeling like something was watching me from one of the windows.

“Well, they certainly kept this up better than they did the one in Whisper Hollow.” Kerris shook her head.

“I understand the historical significance of maintaining this place, but I think they should all be brought down—raze them to the ground and then salt the earth. There are so many unsettled spirits around these places. People might realize how uncomfortable they are around Pest Houses, but they can’t think of why.”

“I agree,” Rowan said. “Who owns this place?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea. In fact, I did a little more research. Apparently, the state tried to buy the land from the owners before it was made into a park, and the

owners refused. The house passed down through the family for years, and then, in a couple years ago, it was sold to a private company. I can't find a record of who bought it.

That's when the tours started. I do know there is someone on-site at all times, but I couldn't find his name. Or her name."

I looked around the small parking lot that surrounded the house.

There were two other cars in sight. From where we stood, I could see a couple out in the cemetery, looking around.

The man was kneeling by a gravestone, while the woman stood nearby, her arms folded against the stiff breeze that had sprung up.

"Shall we go inside?" Kerris asked. "We're going to have to pretend to be tourists, but I know that we'll have to sneak around in order to find Penelope.

They aren't going to keep her front and center.

If the Covenant of Chaos and Cú Chulainn's Hounds have trapped her here, they can't do so in plain sight.

So she'll have to be hidden. My guess is that she's in some mausoleum out in the cemetery, given she lives in a tomb at home. "

We headed toward the house. It was colonial in style, with a wraparound porch and what looked like Corinthian columns spaced along the front. I hadn't expected it to be red brick, but it was. The brick was weathered.

The second, third, and fourth stories were lined with windows.



I supposed that made it a mansion, given the size of it.

How many people had it housed during its heyday?

How many people had died from the myriad diseases that were fatal back then?

If I closed my eyes, I could hear the sound of women and children crying, and men cursing.

It was a dark house, with a dark soul, forged through pain and loss.

Shaking my head, I tried to pull out of the mood. The energy was overwhelming and I felt smothered. I drew closer to Rowan, not wanting to go anywhere alone. I noticed that Kerris did the same. Her gaze darted from side to side, taking in every detail.

“I don’t like this place,” I whispered as we climbed the front porch. It was obvious that the porch had been restored, but it didn’t look modern.

“I don’t like it either,” Rowan said. “There are far more shadows here than I first thought. It feels like something is keeping them agitated.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Kerris said. “Haunted houses bring in a lot of traffic, from wannabe ghost hunters to thrill seekers. And that agitates the dead. They don’t like being used as a spectacle. Some of the haunted house events use the dead in that way, and it never ends well.”

“I can believe that,” I said. “Well, shall we get on with it? Pay attention to whoever’s at the desk—we have no idea if they’re an innocent employee or working for the Covenant of Chaos.”

I put my hand on the doorknob, then—after taking a deep breath—I opened the door

and stepped inside.

### CHAPTER FIVE

The inside of the house looked a lot nicer than the outside, but the energy was heavy and oppressive. Ghosts filled the house. I wasn't sure if they could see or sense us. Spirits weren't always aware of the living around them.

Some were caught in a time loop, reliving their deaths over and over, unaware of anything else on the physical or spiritual plane.

Others watched, some content to be where they were, some as guardians, and some hating the living because they no longer had that option.

I glanced at Kerris, who caught my eye and gave me a little nod as though she knew what I was thinking.

There was a reception desk in the foyer, and a bell sitting on it. Straight ahead, as we entered the house, a staircase ascended to the upper floors. There were doors to both the right and left, and a hallway ran parallel to the staircase, with yet more doors on either side.

Rowan rang the bell, and we waited. Another moment and the door to the right opened, a man peeking out. His eyes lit up as he saw us, and he scurried over to the desk, taking his seat behind it. He seemed an officious little man, though he had a smile on his face.

“Welcome, ladies. My name is Abernethy, and I'm the caretaker of the Wildcat Cove Pest House. Are you here for the tour?”

Rowan nodded, giving him her best smile. When she wanted to, my grandmother could be incredibly diplomatic. “Yes, we’ve been exploring local historical sites, so we thought we’d come visit.”

“The Pest House has a long and involved history,” Abernethy said. “It was built in 1875, and for ten years served as a mansion for Jimenez Garcia and his family. He was a local grocery magnate. He ran a chain of stores back east until he and his family traveled here to open a new line of markets.”

“So, how does the tour work? How much does it cost?” I asked.

Abernethy brought out brochures and what looked like tickets.

“We charge ten dollars per person, five dollars for children under twelve. You’ll get a brochure, and we’ll lead you through the house and then let you look around the grounds for a while.

The cemetery is off-limits at this point, since we’re doing some renovation.

But you can see some of the old gardens.

We’ve restored them, so they’re still beautiful even though we’re in the off-season. ”

I brought out my purse and handed him thirty dollars. He gave us each a brochure and a map to the area, then stood.

“If you’ll follow me, we’ll start in the living room.” He led us through the door to the left, into a large room.

“This was the parlor originally, and through that door, was the original living room. As I said, Jimenez Garcia owned the house originally. It was built to his

specifications. But in 1885, his parents grew ill. They were back east, as were a number of his brothers and sisters who were still under age. Rather than move everyone out here, Garcia sold the house to Dr. Calvin Johnston, and he and his family returned to the East Coast after selling off the grocery marts he had already opened in the area.”

“Who was Dr. Johnston?” Kerris asked.

“Calvin Johnston started out as a medical doctor, and he specialized in lung disorders. At this time, Pest Houses were spreading across the United States. They probably started with good intentions, but most of the doctors who ran them were on the shady side. And if one thing could be said about Calvin Johnston, it was that he was shady. He was a greedy man, looking to make the most money he could, with the least amount of work. At first, he marketed the house as a spa to help treat tuberculosis patients. Then, as cholera, TB, diphtheria, and other diseases spread, he turned it into a sanatorium.”

Abernethy led us into the living room beyond the parlor.

It was just as beautiful as the parlor, but that same sense of foreboding followed me.

There were ghosts everywhere in this house, and I had the feeling they were walking the grounds as well, especially given the cemetery adjacent to the house.

“How many people were housed here over the years?” Rowan asked.

“We don’t have accurate records,” Abernethy said.

“But it’s theorized that over a hundred and fifty people came through the doors of the sanitarium.

And well over a hundred and twenty died here.

Johnston hired nursing staff that weren't fit for the job, because he could pay them less.

They were basically guards rather than health care workers. ”

I shuddered. “That sounds horrific.”

“Oh, it was. A few of the guards had some knowledge on how to help, but most of them just kept order and ignored the needs of the patients. It's documented that a few of them were actually abusive.

There were reports of beatings and rapes, but nobody looked into it.

There was very little oversight from the state. ”

We returned to the parlor and then Abernethy let us across the hall, into a long dining area. The kitchen was beyond it. As we entered the kitchen, a knot in my stomach made me freeze. Something horrendous had happened here. Rowan and Kerris both stopped still as well.

“Did anything ever happen in this room?” I looked around.

Abernethy gave us a long look, then said, “Yes. A number of our guests seem to sense that something tragic happened here. One of the kitchen workers was only eleven years old. Back then, child labor laws were only a vision of the future. Young Amanda Carter was in charge of keeping the wood stoves stoked, and it was her job to clean up after dinner. All for the princely sum of five cents a day. One evening, as she was scraping the ashes out of one of the stoves, an ember flared to life and caught her apron on fire. Before anyone could reach her, she was engulfed in flames. They

managed to put them out, but she had burns over 70 percent of her body and died a very painful death two days later.”

I stared at the stove. It was a modern range now, but I knew full well that was where the old wood stove had stood. The entire area was infused with an immense sense of sorrow and pain.

“Do you have many problems with the stove?” I asked.

“Actually, we keep it turned off. And by turned off, I mean unplugged. I mainly use the microwave. There were too many unexplained fires over the course of the past twenty years. So if I want something hot, I use a microwave. Or I go out to eat,” he said.

“Do you live here?” Rowan asked.

Abernethy shook his head. “I did at first, but now I live in the guesthouse out back. It just feels safer. Are you ready to see the upstairs?”

I had the feeling that by now, a number of tourists had walked out on the tour, too uncomfortable from the energy that hung heavy in the air.

“Yes, please lead on.”

Abernethy led us toward the stairs and we began the long climb up. I imagined what it must have been like to have to climb these steep stairs while you were infected by a life-draining illness.

At the landing, we found ourselves on the second story.

The stairs continued up for two more floors.

But Abernethy led us down the hall, opening each bedroom door as we went.

The bedrooms were all beautiful, with high ceilings and the original wallpaper still intact.

However, I noticed that some of the floorboards looked new, and the molding had clearly been replaced.

Closet doors had been painted and the bathrooms were far more up-to-date than they should have been.

Renovations, I thought. Somebody had been renovating the house.

But why ?

Wouldn't the house be more attractive to history buffs if everything was kept intact, in its original state?

As we listened to Abernethy talk about some of the inmates they'd kept locked up, I also began to notice that each room bore a number on the door, and those numbers looked all shiny and new. The carpeting was also new.

Abernethy prattled on, talking about the decor and the furnishings, but all the while I was searching psychically through the house, sensing for spirits.

By now, I had encountered about seven or eight, including the little girl in the kitchen.

I could tell a few of them were beginning to understand that I could sense ghosts and that Kerris could sense them, too, and so could Rowan.



As we made our way up through the bedroom suites and secondary parlors on the upper floors, I became more and more uneasy. Then, on the third floor, I heard someone whispering.

We need your help. We're being held hostage. Please help us go through the Veil. Some of us are ready to move on but he won't let us. I know you can hear me, so please, won't you help us?

That wasn't what I had expected to hear.

I'd expected a threat, or a warning, not a cry for help.

It wasn't Penelope. While I hadn't met her, I knew that I'd recognize her if she spoke to me.

No, this plea came from a spirit trapped inside the house.

I turned to Kerris and Rowan, wanting to tell them, but something told me to keep my thoughts to myself, in terms of saying anything aloud in front of Abernethy.

Are you in danger? It seemed odd to ask a spirit if she was in danger—she was still dead, after all, but there were threats to spirits and I didn't want to make this ghost even more of a target.

If we don't do what he wants, he threatens us with obliteration. He's even worse dead than he was when we were alive. I don't want to frighten people. I don't like being used as a sideshow feature.

The woman solidified into view. She was wearing a dress from turn of the nineteenth century. She was a lovely young woman, around twenty. Or she would have been if she hadn't been covered with sores and boils. She was standing at the side of one of

the bedroom doors.

Who are you? I asked.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:08 am*

My name's Agnes. My family institutionalized me here when I was eighteen.

I died when I was twenty, she said . I developed tuberculosis and the doctor promised them he could cure me, but they needed to leave me here.

I died a painful year and a half later. She gave me a long, sad look and I could feel her pain and the sense of loss.

A thought occurred to me. Did the owner remain here after he died? Surely, he couldn't still be alive, not unless he'd been a shifter or a witch.

Agnes glanced around nervously. He left after he died, but not long ago, he returned. She summoned him back.

Who did? I was beginning to get seriously worried.

The Gatekeeper. The men made her do it. And once Dr. Myopa returned, he began to corral us again. I want to leave. I'm tired of being here. I want to rest.

So Penelope was here.

Do you know where she is?

The spirit shook her head. She looked tired and sounded tired. More than that, her entire demeanor shifted as she spoke.

No, I wish I did. Maybe, just maybe, she could do her job and help me escape.

“Are you all right?” Abernethy startled me out of my thoughts. I looked over to see him staring at me, his eyes narrowed.

I didn’t want to tell him I was conversing with ghosts in the house, since we had no idea whether he was part of whatever was going on.

“Sorry, just thinking about the past and what happened here. Do you ever feel like the past seeps through to the present?” I wanted some idea of whether he was just doing his job, or whether he was part of the kidnapping.

Abernethy paused, then sat on the bed in the room we were in. He looked at me, then at Kerris and Rowan.

“Every day I think about the past. Every day I walk through this house and think about the victims who lived here. My great-grandmother died here. When I had the chance to take this job, I jumped on it. It’s a way for me to reconnect to a past that very few in my family care about.”

In that simple speech, I knew—in my heart—that he wasn’t part of whatever Agnes had said was happening.

His voice was clear and free of subterfuge.

Over the past months, my ability to read people had grown, especially with the increase in magic I’d had to do in order to stop the energy reflux syndrome.

“What was your great-grandmother’s name?” I asked.

“Carolina. She was forty-five when she was infected with cholera. My grandmother was ten years old when Carolina was confined here, and three months later, Carolina died. They couldn’t even bring out her body for burial,” he said, sadness permeating

every word.

“That must have been rough,” Rowan said.

“It was, from all the reports. She was buried in the cemetery here, in an unmarked grave. In town, my great-grandpa and the children buried the empty casket in the regular cemetery with a headstone. My great-grandma’s body is out there in the cemetery here, somewhere, with a blank marker like the others.

I have no idea which grave is hers.” Abernethy lowered his head.

“I usually don’t tell people that story.

I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to bring down your tour. ”

“Don’t apologize,” Kerris said.

“We’d like to see the cemetery if you don’t mind,” I asked.

“I’m sorry, but it’s off-limits,” Abernethy said, glancing out the window. “I’d like to show you but...” He paused, looking uncertain, and I scrambled to think of a way to get out there, without telling him who we actually were.

“I’m somewhat psychic,” I said. “Just a family trait, I guess. I read tarot cards and sometimes I can sense spirits. We could look around the cemetery and maybe find out which grave is your great-grandmother’s.”

That brought the response I hoped for.

He looked up, hope in his eyes. “You think you might be able to find out?”

I nodded. “Possibly. I can’t promise, of course, but we might be able to. Why do they exclude the graveyard from the tour?”

Abernethy shrugged. “I don’t know, to be honest. It didn’t used to be. Then when the Broadman Group bought it last year, they suddenly changed the rules. I asked why, but they just said to mind my business and do my job.”

Rowan sighed. “I hate it when people won’t explain themselves, especially when the question’s a fair one.”

I caught her gaze and gave her a half-nod. Rowan knew how to appeal to people.

“Me too,” Abernethy said. “I’m the one who has to think of a reason to explain to tourists why their entrance fee doesn’t give them a walk through the cemetery.

” He frowned, then said, “As long as you don’t tell anybody, I’ll be glad to let you look through the cemetery.

And if you can figure out which grave is my great-grandma’s, I’d be so grateful. ”

Right then, that confirmed he wasn’t part of the kidnapping. The Covenant of Chaos and Cú Chulainn’s Hounds weren’t about to let us out there if they were keeping Penelope around.

I gave him a grateful smile and nodded. “Of course. We won’t say anything , and I’ll do my best to figure out where your great-grandma is buried.”

As he led us through the kitchen, toward the back door, I caught sight of Agnes again. I closed my eyes and reached out. We’ll do our best to help, Agnes.

And Agnes let out a soft sigh and smiled.

### CHAPTER SIX

The footpath from the kitchen to the cemetery was made of slate stones, and for as old as the cemetery was, the trail was weeded and tidy. Abernethy glanced over his shoulder once, then led the way.

The path wound through a large backyard, to a stone wall that fenced off the cemetery. An old iron gate straddled the sidewalk, but it opened smoothly without a squeak. I had the feeling Abernethy came out here to look for his great-grandma a lot. He seemed shaken up by the whole situation.

As he opened the gate, standing to the side to let us through, I looked around.

The cemetery wasn't large, but there must have been well over a hundred graves in it, and it had grown wild, with climbing roses and ivy creeping over gravestones and markers, and blackberries encroached from the other side.

A massive yew tree grew in the center of the cemetery, and as we entered the cemetery, Kerris let out a little gasp.

"I have to ask you not to take any photographs," Abernethy said. "If my employers caught sight of any online, they'd have my head for this."

We promised, and he seemed to believe us because he relaxed.

"Oh good grief," he said. "I forgot to put up my out for lunch sign. I doubt we'll get any more visitors today, but I have to leave a note to tell them that I'm around." He

worried his lip. “If I leave you here alone, do you promise not to do anything to compromise my position?”

I wasn’t sure what more he could do to put his job in danger than let us in here, but I nodded. “We’ll just look around.”

“All right. I’ll be back in a moment.” He hurried out of the graveyard, shutting the iron gate behind him.

I turned to Kerris. “What’s wrong?” I asked. “I noticed you—”

“I sense Penelope. She and I have a bond, and I can feel her out here. I’m not sure where, but...she’s here, all right.”

I told them about the conversation I had had with Agnes as we looked around. “Penelope is out here. We just have to find her.”

There were several mausoleums, along with all the graves.

They were made of weathered stone, with thick ivy growing over the roofs and up the walls.

The longer we stood here, the more active I realized the graveyard was.

I could feel the movement of spirits everywhere, and as we stood silent, I heard muffled crying on the wind.

The sound of a woman singing a melancholy dirge lingered on the edge of my hearing, sounding faint like an echo from the past. I shivered, feeling like I was walking between worlds.



“This place gives me the creeps,” I said. “There are spirits everywhere.”

“It reminds me of the Pest House Cemetery over in Whisper Hollow. I wonder if they’re all like this. So much death and pain and loneliness can’t help but imprint on the area,” Kerris said. She began to walk toward one of the mausoleums. It was small—they all were—but still impressive.

Shrines to the dead, I thought. Set up to stop the hands of time, to push back against mortality and remind people that the inhabitants had once walked this Earth, as alive and vibrant as we were now.

Death was an odd thing—we traveled through life and then, often in the blink of an eye, we faded away, left behind.

Or gone ahead, perhaps? To another world?

Whatever direction, we were no longer woven into the tapestry that made up the living mass of humanity.

And all our dreams and plans and hopes faded into the past.

“Are you all right?” Rowan asked.

I shrugged. “Just thinking about death. It’s the one thing most of us fear, and yet it’s the one commonality we all have. Regardless of our differences, regardless of our similarities, we all come to that day when we must say goodbye. And then...we become memories for others.”

“We travel on, though,” she said. “You know there’s no end to the spirit—to the essential self.”

We transition, we change. We move on ahead.

We go 'round on the Wheel again and again, and with each journey, we hopefully evolve until we're ready to let go of the physical and move on to another realm, beyond the physical.

Beyond the spirit world." Rowan glanced at Kerris. "Can you pinpoint where Penelope is?"

Kerris began walking around the graveyard, stopping at each mausoleum. The first, she shook her head at. And the second as well. But the third one, at the far end of the cemetery, she paused and nodded.

"Here—" she started to say but quieted when Abernethy reappeared. He was breathing heavily as though he'd just run a marathon.

"I'm back," he said. "I need to ask you to go back inside. While I was there, I got a call from one of my employers. He's going to arrive shortly and I can't have you out here."

We hustled out. I didn't want to be around if one of the Covenant of Chaos members showed up.

"We have to leave anyway," I said. "Thank you for the tour. We'll talk to you soon."

"What about my great-grandma—" Abernethy started to say, but we were back at the house and heading for the front door.

"I'll talk to you later. I didn't find her grave yet, but I'll be glad to give it another try," I said, waving as we hurried out the door and toward the parking lot.

Leaving a bewildered Abernethy behind, we were in the car and pulling out when a large, black sedan pulled in.

The windows were tinted—probably to an illegal level—and we averted our gaze, trying to remain anonymous as our car passed theirs.

Another moment and I did my best to snap a picture of the back of the car, trying to get the license plate.

As we headed home, I leaned back against the seat. “Well, what do you think?”

“She’s there,” Kerris said. “I think we should sneak back at night. Otherwise, Abernethy’s going to notice that we’re there.

And I want to do it quickly, before they have a chance to move her or try to destroy her.

While I don’t think they could kill her, so to speak, I don’t want them to disrupt her. ”

“There’s another issue besides Penelope,” I said. “Agnes and the doctor. I’d like to help, if I can.”

“Who do you think summoned him back?” Kerris asked.

“Who else but the Covenant of Chaos?” Rowan said. “I wonder what they’re planning.”

“Agnes seems to think it was Penelope. Anyway, I might be wrong but I have the feeling they may reopen the Pest House as a haunted B&B. Did you notice how neatly all the bedrooms were made up? There have been some renovations done there lately.”

“That would make sense,” Rowan said. “And you know it would draw ghost hunters of all kinds.”

“Agnes told me this: If we don’t help, he threatens us with obliteration.

I don’t want to frighten people. I don’t like being used as a sideshow feature.

So yeah, I think the future of the Pest House is headed toward the haunted house route.

” I shook my head. “Can you imagine being dead and being forced to play up to tourists? Being imprisoned and used as a prop?”

Both Rowan and Kerris grimaced.

“That’s so wrong,” Kerris said.

“When we get home, let’s look up this Dr. Myopa. And we can make plans to return to look for Penelope. You said you think she’s in that third mausoleum?” Rowan asked.

Kerris nodded. “I know she is. You know, if they do try to turn it into a hotel, then it would make sense to have a Gatekeeper. But only if she was under your control, because her job is to help spirits cross through the Veil. In this case, they’d want to keep the spirits around.”

“Is the Gatekeeper strong enough to prevent them from crossing over?” I asked.

“Oh yeah, she could do that. But only if she’s under their control.

” Kerris frowned. “That would kill two birds with one stone—if you’re right.

It would get her out of Whisper Hollow, for the Hounds, and then it would also prevent the dead from leaving the Pest House, for the Covenant of Chaos.

But they'd have to figure out how to control her. ”

“How would you do that?” I asked.

Rowan let out a deep sigh. “There are ways. Old spells, meant to control the dead. I think we need to visit Charles Crichton at the library. He can help us with research. He’s well-versed in local lore, and the Pest House is close enough to Moonshadow Bay that he should know something about it.”

Charles Crichton was an older gentleman—a true gentleman—who worked in the Garrison Library. He was tall, fit, and in his seventies. A recent widower, Charles came over to dinner on a regular basis, and we’d spend the evening talking about the history of the town.

“Of course,” I said. “Well, if we’re right and they’re planning to use Penelope to trap the spirits so they can make money off of that, then we shouldn’t have to worry that they’re going to try to destroy her.”

“True, but whatever they do to her, it could forever change her. We can’t bank on having lots of time,” Kerris said.

As we headed back to Moonshadow Bay, it occurred to me that we’d learned a lot for one afternoon and we at least had a fighting chance.

\* \* \*

By the time we made it back to Moonshadow Bay, I’d put in a call to Charles and he was waiting for us at the library. We meandered through the stacks, heading toward

the second floor where Charles had his office.

We reached his door at three o'clock, and I knocked lightly, then opened it.

Charles was sitting behind his desk. "January," he said, standing. "I'm delighted to see you. And Rowan, you as well."

We shook hands and I introduced Kerris. "Kerris is the spirit shaman of Whisper Hollow," I said. "We have a confidential request, and it's vital that whatever we say remain private."

"Pleased to meet you. I've never talked to a spirit shaman before," he said with a nod, looking as stately as ever. "I give you my word, ladies. Please, sit down."

As we took chairs around his desk, he cleared his desktop computer and brought up a browser, though it looked to be an internal one used by the library staff, because I'd never seen it before.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"We need information on the Wildcat Cove Pest House. We think there's something shady going on there." We told him what had happened.

"Can you see what you can find out about the mausoleums in the cemetery? Also, can you find out who the Broadman Group is made of? Apparently they own it now," I added.

Charles was strong with the search engines. He had been teaching me tricks and tips on how to find the information I needed, but I still couldn't match him when it came to digging out historical information.

“Give me just a moment,” he said. He tapped away at the keys, his fingers still swift and sure on the keys.

A few moments later, he looked up. “The group who owns the Pest House—the Broadman Group? The ‘group’ is made up of two men, and both are members of the Covenant of Chaos. Also, and this probably plays into matters, too, the Broadman Group is known for presenting events. They sponsor all sorts of presentations through the year, from Bellingham down to Everett. They’re successful at what they do—a lot of good reviews. ”

I asked, “Are they going to do a haunted house soon?”

“Yes—they’re advertising tickets to a haunted house tour starting next week, at the Pest House.” Charles frowned. “They guarantee manifestations and they plan on running these tours year ’round.”

“Then there’s another reason they kidnapped Penelope.

If they’re controlling her, she can command the ghosts to do whatever they want.

That’s despicable.” I shook my head. “Ten to one, the Hounds saw the opportunity to rid Whisper Hollow of the Gatekeeper and simultaneously make allies with the Covenant of Chaos by providing them with a moneymaking opportunity. Who are the men who run the Broadman Group?”

“Cleese Jenkins and Wily Shelton. And I think you’re right,” Charles said.

“The pair have made a lot of money over the years, and this will just increase their wealth.” He held up one hand.

“Let me check on something.” He went back to the computer and a moment later,

looked up.

“Ghost hunting groups all over the area are talking about the event, and they are starting to line up tours to come visit the Wildcat Cove Pest House.”

“Crap,” I said. “We can’t let this happen. For one thing, Whisper Hollow needs Penelope. For another, I hate seeing ghosts being exploited. Agnes—the spirit I talked to earlier—said something about being part of a sideshow and how much she dreaded it.”

“What are you going to do?” Charles asked.

I glanced at Rowan and Kerris. “We’ll have to figure that out. When does the event begin?”

“Friday. You have tomorrow and Thursday before it’s going to get very crowded there.” Charles frowned. “I wish I could help.”

“You just did,” I said. “You gave us the most valuable thing we needed—information, and timing. Thank you.” I gave him a quick hug and we headed out.



### CHAPTER SEVEN

We gathered in my living room that evening—Rowan and Tarvish, Kerris and Bryan, and Killian and me. Xi and Klaus bounced through the room and Kerris caught Xi up and gave her a snuggle.

“I have three Maine Coons,” she said. “Agent H., Gabby, and Daphne. They’re doing really well for their ages—they’re all eleven now. They’re littermates.”

“Cats make the world a better place,” Tarvish said. “We have four kittens?—”

“You have four kittens,” Rowan said, laughing.

“You love them and you know it.” Tarvish leaned over and kissed her. It still seemed odd to see a demon kissing my grandmother, but I’d mostly gotten used to it.

“So what do we do about Penelope? We have two days to rescue her and to free the ghosts that want to leave,” I said.

“We’ll have to sneak in there at night,” Kerris said. “That’s the best time for me to talk to Penelope. But we have to get her sarcophagus out of there, too. They stole the entire thing. They had to, because during the day she sleeps in it.”

“Then we’ll need the men,” Rowan said, glancing at Killian. “Are you willing to help us?”

“Whatever you need,” Killian said.

Bryan and Tarvish nodded.

“If you’re moving a sarcophagus, then we’ll also need a truck to carry it in,” Tarvish said. “Mine should work. We’ll have to drive over to Whisper Hollow to return the sarcophagus to you.”

Kerris blushed. “I hadn’t even thought of that. How could I be so dense?”

“It’s easy when you’re flustered and facing a serious problem,” I said. “So, what do we do? I know it’s already late, but we might do best to go tonight. How do we deal with Abernethy? We don’t want to alarm him so that he calls Wily and Cleese.”

“Leave that to me,” Rowan said. “But rather than go tonight, let’s aim for tomorrow night.

That way we can prepare charms to free the ghosts who want to cross over the Veil, and we won’t have to go back a second time.

I guarantee you, once we rescue Penelope, the security on the Pest House will go up by tenfold. ”

We all agreed that Rowan was right, so the rest of that night we prepared.

As Rowan prepared a spell to knock out Abernethy and keep him asleep, Kerris meditated for guidance on Penelope.

I meditated because my focus would be on freeing the other ghosts who wanted out of there.

The men prepared Tarvish’s truck to hold Penelope’s sarcophagus, and all the while, the October night mirrored our moods with rain and wind and storm.

\* \* \*

By the next afternoon, we were ready to go. Rowan took the first step. She headed out for the Pest House in a taxi, freshly baked cherry pie in hand. When she called an hour later—at four o'clock—it was with the news that Abernethy had taken the bait and was in a deep sleep.

“He won’t wake up till morning,” she said.

“I put a sign on the door that the Pest House is closed for cleaning this afternoon, and we’re good to go.

Come on over. I also took the precaution of making certain that there are no cameras around here, and when his employers texted him, asking how things were going, I texted back as Abernethy, stating that I was a little under the weather and going to bed early.

They said they’ll be down tomorrow to prepare for the ‘grand opening’ ...

so we have to finish this before morning. ”

“We’re on our way,” I said. I was driving, with Kerris and Killian riding along.

Tarvish was driving the truck, with Bryan riding shotgun.

We were bringing everything we could think of to help, from magical gear to ropes and hammers and whatever else we might need to physically extricate Penelope’s sarcophagus from the mausoleum.

Twenty-five minutes later, we pulled into the Pest House parking lot. Rowan, who had been waiting by the door, hustled out.

“Abernethy fell for it like a piece of cake. Or piece of pie. I put enough sleeping potion in there to keep him out for the night. It won’t hurt him, and he should wake up tomorrow, feeling chipper and alert.

As I said, I checked for any security cameras and bugs, but there aren’t any.

I imagine they’ll be installing some tomorrow when they prepare for their haunted tours.

They’re not going to want groups in here without some sort of supervision.”

She led us into the house. Abernethy was sleeping soundly on the sofa, and he didn’t even twitch when we came in. I wondered what herbs my grandmother had used, but I could ask her later.

“So we get the sarcophagus now?” I asked.

“Yes, before Penelope wakes up. We’re going to want to seal it, and to break the spell that’s keeping her under their control,” Kerris said.

“Leave that to me,” Rowan said.

We headed out to the mausoleum. The wind rose, buffeting us as we crossed the cemetery.

The ghosts were active—I could feel them all around.

I glanced at Kerris, who was looking pale and drawn.

As a particularly nasty gust swiped past us, its chill razor-sharp, she tightened the belt of her jacket, crossing her arms.

“You can feel them too, can’t you?” I asked.

She nodded. “The ghosts are active. They know something’s up. Everything feels agitated here, and it reminds me far too much of the Pest House over in Whisper Hollow. The Covenant of Chaos really intends to offer a disturbed presentation, don’t they?”

“They delight in chaos,” I said. “They’re banking on the fact that there are actually ghosts here. They’ll be able to pull in thousands in revenue if they carry this off. No one can say they’re faking it. They’re just taking advantage of a number of trapped spirits.”

“They seem crueler than even the Hounds.”

“I don’t know about that, but they’re definitely a threat.” I fell silent as we reached the mausoleum. As we stood there by the threshold, the wind caught up a whirl of leaves, spiraling them around us like a vortex.

Rowan, who was in the lead, pushed open the heavy door and the three of us stepped inside.

The mausoleum was empty except for a sarcophagus.

It was smooth stone, and it looked heavy as hell.

I wondered if the men would be able to lift it, although with a demon and two wolf shifters, they should be able to.

I wasn’t sure what the stone was made of, but it was smooth, and felt cool, like marble.

Embellished with rune work, the moment I touched it I could feel Penelope.

Even though I'd never met her, I recognized the energy from working with the dead.

"Is she asleep?" I asked.

Kerris nodded. "She seldom wakes before sunset." She brushed her hand across the stone. "Yes, she's sleeping right now. And we need to keep her that way until we get back home to Whisper Hollow." She turned to Rowan. "You said you have a charm or talisman?"

Rowan held up a wax seal. She crossed to the top of the sarcophagus and gently pressed it against the marble. There was a silent hush, and suddenly, everything about the sarcophagus felt muffled.

"I'm pretty sure this is what they used on her to kidnap her," Rowan said. "And a second use will nullify their control over her. I found the recipe for the charm in an old book that I have about spirit shamans."

"What's the book?" Kerris asked.

"I'll lend it to you, if you like. But I need it back. There aren't too many copies in existence. In fact, I'll make a copy for you, because the copy I have is from the early 1900s and it hasn't been reprinted in decades."

As Rowan turned toward the door, there was a noise at the back of the mausoleum. I glanced over just in time to see two skeletal guards appear, manifesting right in front of me. A pale green illuminated their eye sockets, giving them a freakish look, and they began to advance on us.

"Crap," I said. "They set up a booby trap."

I had only been planning on taking care of a few ghosts. I wasn't prepared to fight a skeleton.

"Killian!" I shouted.

Killian immediately rushed in, taking in the sight.

"Get out," he growled.

Rowan, Kerris, and I dashed out of the mausoleum as the men pushed in. We weren't equipped to fight walking skeletons—but they were. Shifters were always stronger, physically, than witches, and demons trumped both. As they dove in, fighting the skeletons, we backed off to give them room.

I heard something and turned to see a swirl of mist heading toward us.

It began to coalesce into a ghostly form as it approached, driving anger and fear before it.

The form took on a shape and features—it was a man, in a doctor's coat, with a malevolent glare in his eyes.

He barked a silent command and three glowing orbs of light shot forward, heading toward us.

Before I could move, the spirit of Dr. Myopa slammed against me, his hand forward, and what felt like an icy sharp needle pierced my shoulder, the sensation ricocheting through my body in a shockwave of pain.

I screamed and stumbled back, surprised by the amount of pain the ghost had inflicted.

As I struggled to recover, Kerris jumped in front of me.

“I am the spirit shaman of Whisper Hollow—hear me and despair!” She held up her athame and the ghosts hesitated.

“Well, we know they’re not friendly.” I stood, trying to shake off the pain. I pulled out my own athame from my tote bag. The blade glistened in the dim afternoon light. Crossing to Kerris’s side, I began to draw a series of runes in the air to bind enemies.

By earth and air, by water and fire, I cast this spell from my desire,

By cave and storm, by wave and warmth, I bind thee from inflicting harm.

Back to the Veil, I command thee fly, Back to the spirit world, all who’ve died.

Back to the grave, back to the ground, away from sight, away from sound.

Away from life, away from thought, all spirits flee and harm us not.

As I poured energy into the spell, Kerris joined me.

I had taught her the incantation this morning, and she used her force as a spirit shaman, drawing her own series of runes with her own dagger.



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Her runes, unlike mine, were brilliant and visible, taking on a neon glow as she carved out their shapes in the air. The first was a lightning bolt with an upside-down scythe. The second, a crescent moon with an arrow through it, and the third, a cauldron with a skull on it.

The ghosts hadn't moved since she had stepped up. Now, they began to back away, as though they already knew what she was doing.

I drove the incantation harder, and as Kerris finished the third rune, she cut them free and the arrow in the crescent moon flew, straight toward the doctor's spirit.

The ghosts turned, trying to flee, but the arrow hit the doctor and he—and both of his companions—froze.

Kerris shouted something in a language I didn't understand. The next moment, there was an explosion of light and all three of the ghosts vanished, sizzling like dying embers.

She turned toward me. "We have to hurry. The energy we created will alert every malevolent ghost in the cemetery. Nobody's been around to move them on through the Veil, and there are a lot of angry spirits here. If you want to free Agnes and any others, we have to do it now."

"Rowan—" I wasn't sure what to do.

"Go, you and Kerris help those who want to be free. I'll try to keep the path clear as the men carry Penelope's sarcophagus to the truck." She turned toward the graveyard

and began to chant a low, thrumming song.

I grabbed Kerris's hand and we ran toward the house. At that moment, Tarvish, Killian, and Bryan appeared, carrying Penelope's sarcophagus. They struggled, even with their combined strength, but they were managing.

Kerris and I raced inside. Abernethy was still out like a light, so I dashed up the stairs, Kerris following, to the bedroom where I'd met Agnes.

She was there, waiting, her eyes filled with hope.

I took Kerris's hand and we built the energy together.

I conjured the image of a door, opening into the Veil, and for the first time, thanks to my connection with Kerris, I saw exactly what the Veil was.

The room faded around me and I found myself standing in front of a shimmering shroud of light that stretched across the horizon.

Shades, figures cloaked in shadow, moved through it—most heading to the other side, but a few coming back through to our side.

The lights sparkled, strands that glistened and beckoned, whispering a summons to the dead.

I gasped—it was so beautiful—and I wondered whether Esmara had been through the Veil and returned, and my mother and father. And once they passed through, how could they bear to return? Drawn, I stepped forward, but Kerris caught hold of me.

“No, you can't go there. I can, as a spirit shaman, but you can't.

Your place is here , January, on this side.

Until your day comes.” She shook her head, drawing me back.

“But now you understand my world. I’m one step in, one step out.

And if you need advice learning about your death magic, I can help you. ”

I blinked, and there stood Agnes, along with a handful of other spirits.

“You can go through, if you like. It’s time to let go,” Kerris said.

Thank you, Agnes said. I’ve been waiting a long time for this.

Will you tell my great-grandson goodbye for me? Tell him, it’s all right. I know he remembers me, another ghost said—this one a woman who looked somewhat older.

I knew immediately who she was. You’re Abernethy’s great-grandmother, aren’t you? Carolina?

Yes, I am. Please, tell him to find a happier job?

I will, I said.

Kerris held out her hand then. The Veil parted. Agnes and Carolina and the others moved forward and, as they passed through, their forms vanished, shifting into orbs of light that twinkled like cold starlight.

The next moment, we were back in the room, and Agnes and the others were gone.

“Let’s go,” I said. “Our work here is done. At least for now. I dread what’s going to

happen here when they open their ghost tours, but we can't do anything about that now. We have to focus on the task at hand."

Downstairs, before we left, I wrote a note to Abernethy, stating only: i want you to be happy and find a better job. i'm gone now, and i'm at peace. great-grandma carolina.

Leaving it tucked next to him, we headed out of the house. The men had managed to take out the skeleton warriors, and they were loading the sarcophagus in the back of the truck. Rowan joined us.

"Did—"

"Agnes and the ones who wanted to go to the Veil made it through. And..." I paused, then said, "I saw the Veil. It's beautiful and vast and...like nothing I expected."

"How are you from the attack earlier?" Rowan asked.

"No worse for the wear, I think," I said. "Let's get moving."

We returned to my car. Once again, Kerris, Rowan, and Killian rode with me, while Bryan and Tarvish took the truck. We were heading for Whisper Hollow.

We had an hour's drive to Mukilteo, where we'd catch the ferry over to Clinton on Whidbey Island.

Then we'd drive up to Coupeville, where we'd catch the last ferry over to Port Townsend.

After that, we had about an hour and half drive along the winding and at times, dangerous, highway that encircled the peninsula.

We'd stop at Crescent Lake and Whisper Hollow.

Kerris had offered for us to stay the night, and then we'd return home the next morning.

"Are you ready?" Rowan asked.

I nodded. "We'll stop at Starbucks on the way, and then—I guess I'll get to see Whisper Hollow sooner than I expected."

And with that, we were on the way.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:08 am*

It was close to midnight by the time we neared Whisper Hollow.

I leaned back in my seat. Rowan had offered to drive once we reached Port Townsend, and I gratefully ceded the driver's seat to her.

The road was harrowing at night, winding and narrow, but we made it, stopping right before the junction leading to Whisper Hollow. Once there, Kerris took the wheel.

As we drove into the woodland town, the gloom descended.

It was a miasma, surrounding the town, and immediately, I wondered how Kerris could live here.

There were spirits everywhere, but they weren't all ghosts—the town was haunted by a dark cloud of creatures, and I could sense the nightmares waiting to happen.

Shadow town ...I thought. This was truly the epitome of a shadow town.

“How do you handle this?” I asked.

“You get used to it. I had no choice. This is where I belong, and if I leave, there's no one to do my job.

Spirit shamans are far and few between.” Kerris sighed.

“Once I get pregnant—and it better be soon—my daughter will be brought up to be a spirit shaman. If we have a son, he'll be a shifter like Bryan, and he'll grow up to be a

guardian. ”

I thought about their bloodlines—actually, there were nine. Nine families that carried the spirit shaman blood, and so also, nine families for their guardians. But they were scattered around the world and seldom met or mingled.

Grateful I was one of the witchblood, I let the subject drop.

We came to a stop at a crossroads on Bramblewood Way.

“The cemetery is to the left, and my house isn’t far from here,” Kerris said, turning left.

“We’ll need to drive through the cemetery to get as close to Penelope’s tomb as we can.

Her crypt straddles the line dividing the modern graveyard from the Pest House Cemetery, so be on your guard when we get there. ”

“How are you going to prevent her from being kidnapped again?” Rowan asked.

“The Crescent Moon Society will be meeting tomorrow, and we’ll figure out something. Trust me, we’re not letting this happen again,” Kerris said, turning into the cemetery.

We wound through the graveyard, and I could see spirits everywhere. They were wandering, talking, leaning on tombstones. I’d expected to see the graveyard clear, given they had a spirit shaman, but apparently not all spirits were ready to go to the Veil.

We parked near a mausoleum that was at the base of a knoll of grass, beneath a large

yew tree.

In the dark, it would be almost impossible to see the crypt clearly, but a nearby light shone just bright enough so that we could find our way to it.

Tarvish pulled in behind us, and we all spilled out, tired and weary from the long trip.

“We’re almost done,” Rowan said. She yawned, stretching. “I’m so glad we’re not driving home tonight. We couldn’t catch a ferry anyway. We’d have to drive down the peninsula, through Shelton, around through Olympia, then all the way up. It would take all the rest of the night.”

“We owe you so much,” Kerris said. “We couldn’t have done this without you.”

She headed toward the crypt and we followed. A sconce with a light affixed to the side of the door illuminated a plaque that read: Here Lieth the Mortal Remains of Penelope Volkov, Guardian of the Veil, Gatekeeper of the Graveyard. Enter and Despair.

As Kerris opened the crypt door, Tarvish, Killian, and Bryan unloaded the sarcophagus and carried it through the opening. Inside was a chalice in which a blood-red liquid churned and boiled, circulating like a lava lamp. I had no clue what it was but decided to ask later.

The men fit the sarcophagus back in place, and Kerris stepped forward, peeling off the seal. “Let’s hope she’s not under a spell,” she said.

“She won’t be,” Rowan said. “The seal that kept her in her sarcophagus for the trip was also enchanted to negate any spells that might be lingering. She should be back to herself.”



We stepped back, watching.

I had no idea what we were waiting for, but Kerris motioned for the men to leave.

They stepped outside, and the next moment, the door swung shut, and the lid of the sarcophagus started to move.

It made a sound like hollow wind rustling through dry husks.

My stomach knotted, but I forced myself to not to move.

Rowan reached out and took my hand, steadying me.

A figure slid out of the sarcophagus, reminding me at first like a snake in her movements. But as she unfolded, standing at a full six feet tall, I felt both terror and yet, a pull so strong it was hard to stand still.

Penelope, Gatekeeper of Whisper Hollow, stared at us.

Her blond hair was piled up in a messy chignon, and she wore a sheer dress, black lace beaded with black sequins.

Her skin was as pale as a vampire's, and her irises were bloody red.

Her eyes were ringed with black, like a raccoon, and her veins showed through the pale skin, black as ink, trailing across her body like delicate lace lines. Her lips were black as her veins.

But it wasn't her countenance that sent a trail of terror through me.

No...it was the steel nail points jutting out from her skin—covering her forehead, her

neck and shoulders, peeking through the lace dress, protruding from the inside out.

Around each nail tip was a halo of blood, sparkling like rubies, dried and permanently decorating her skin.

I remembered what Kerris had told me—Penelope’s mother had killed her with a curse, and that curse stayed with her, an ornamentation of betrayal.

I felt myself bowing, and realized Kerris was doing the same.

“Kerris, stand and introduce me to your friends.” Penelope’s voice echoed, dry and husky, aged like her body.

Kerris turned to me. “This is Rowan Firesong, high priestess of the Crystal Cauldron. And her granddaughter, January Jaxson. And this, is Penelope, the Gatekeeper of the Veil.”

Penelope looked at me. “You bear the energy of the Veil.”

“I work with the dead, where I live. I’m not a spirit shaman, but I’m witchblood.”

“Then you are part of the cycle, like Kerris is, like I am. You are always welcome here when you visit Whisper Hollow, but I don’t recommend you spend much time here. It will drain you.” Penelope paused, then said, “Leave me now, to talk to Kerris.”

I nodded, easing my way out the door. I knew better than overstay my welcome with spirit beings. As Rowan and I stepped outside, the men looked up from where they were sitting on the damp grass. I nodded to them, giving them a thumbs-up, then walked over near the yew tree.

From here, I could feel the energy of the Pest House and the Pest House Cemetery, and I didn't like it. In fact, the sooner we left, the happier I'd be. I was strong, but I couldn't imagine the energy it took to face the darkness surrounding this town.

As I stood there, I heard a noise behind me and turned. There, in a swirl of mist, stood the Crow Man. I walked over to him. The men were still talking amongst themselves behind me. I didn't know if they could see him.

"Your debt is paid," the Crow Man said. "But this is not the end. There are darker days ahead for all of you. And you will all have to work together to face the rise of chaos."

"I don't like this town," I said.

"Then do what destiny calls you to do, or all the shadow towns will be in danger. We will cross paths again, but your debt is fulfilled. Do not fear me. I come and go to the will of the gods." He smiled at me then and reached out.

I stretched out my hand and our fingers entwined.

"Never fear, January... You are watched over by Druantia, and the Morrígan will smile on you, now that you have helped her spirit shaman."

I took a deep breath and smiled back. He was glorious, gorgeous, and enticing, but the gods were dangerous in their beauty, and so were their messengers. I let go and turned away as he faded from sight.

Kerris had emerged from Penelope's tomb, and we headed back to our cars, as overhead the night sky shimmered. I wished I was home in my bed. Whisper Hollow was like a dark jewel, and while it was as magical—if not a bit more—as Moonshadow Bay, it made me appreciate my home and my life.

As we returned to Kerris and Bryan's house, I was grateful we'd been able to help, and I was glad we'd finally met. But I also wouldn't change my life with hers, not for a million dollars.

\* \* \*

The next day we returned home. Xi and Klaus pounced on us as I dropped onto the sofa.

I was with the love of my life, with my fuzzy children, and my friends, in a town I loved.

But my thoughts returned to the Crow Man and what he had said: dark days were on the horizon, and we would be facing even greater challenges.

Until then, though, I would embrace every day, and find every joy I could, because every moment wove the tapestry of our lives—the exciting, the joyful, and the sad, forever bound together.

Xi curled up on my lap and I slowly stroked her fur. I looked up at Killian. "I'm glad we're home," I said.

"So am I." He snuggled next to me on the sofa and we sat in silence, soaking up the peace of our home.

\* \* \*

I hope you enjoyed Feathered Web . Begin Moonshadow Bay Series with Starlight Web . There will be more paranormal women's fiction to come. And if you love this series, you'll love my Whisper Hollow Series . For the first chapter of Autumn Thorns , read on.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:08 am*

To my right, waves frothed across Lake Crescent as the wind whipped against the darkened surface.

The rain shower turned into a downpour and I eased off the accelerator, lowering my speed to thirty-five miles per hour, and then to thirty.

The drops pelted so hard against the asphalt that all I could see was a blur of silver on black.

These winding back roads were dangerous.

All it took was one skid toward the guardrail, one wrong turn of the wheel, and the Lady would claim another victim, dragging them down into her depths.

As I neared the exit, I eased off the road, onto the shoulder, and turned off the ignition.

This was it. My last chance to drive past the town and loop around the Olympic Peninsula.

My last chance to turn my back on all of the signs.

But my life in Seattle had never really been my own, and this past month, the Crow Man had sent me three signs, calling me home.

When my grandmother died last week, her death sealed the deal. It was my duty to take over her post.

I opened the door, making sure I was far enough off the road to avoid being hit, and stepped into the rain.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I stared at the lake through the trees.

The wind whipped up currents on the water, the surface dark and dangerous.

The rising fog sent me into a coughing fit as a flock of crows spiraled out of a tall fir.

They circled over me, cawing, then headed toward Whisper Hollow.

Crows.

Crows were messengers, and so was the Crow Man. He had reached out to me over the past few weeks, sending me three omens. The first sign had been the arrival of his flock. Crows began to follow me everywhere, and I could feel him walking behind them.

The second sign had been a recurring nightmare, for three nights running.

Each night, I found myself walking along a shrouded path through the Whisper Hollow cemetery, as the Blood Moon rose overhead.

As I came to the center of the graveyard, I saw Grandma Lila, standing next to a headstone.

Dripping wet and smelling of lake water, she embraced me, kissing me on both cheeks. Then she lit into me.

“You’ve turned your back on your gift—on your heritage.

Face it, girl, it's time to accept what you are.

Whisper Hollow is waiting. It's time you come home.

You're needed. You were born a spirit shaman, and you'll die one—there's no walking away from this.

Something big is coming, and the town needs your help.

Don't let me down. Don't let Whisper Hollow down. ”

Each of those three nights, I woke up crying, afraid to call her in case there was no answer.

The third sign came last week. Signs always go in threes. Always have. Third time's the charm, true. But bad things happen in threes as well.

I was walking home from work, deep in thought, when I glanced at the store next to me. There, staring from the storefront window, was the Girl in the Window. A cold sweat broke over me, but when I looked again, she was gone.

It couldn't have been her, could it? The Girl in the Window belonged to Whisper Hollow and she was never seen outside the borders of the town.

Squinting, I craned my neck, moving close to the pane.

Blink ...it was only a mannequin. But mannequin or not, my gut told me that I had been visited by the sloe-eyed Bean Nidhe.

One of the rules of Whisper Hollow echoed in my head. If you see the Girl in the Window, set your affairs in order.

That was all the proof I needed. I went home and began to sort through my things. The next day, a letter from Ellia arrived, informing me that my grandparents had plunged off the road, into the lake. The Lady had claimed them.

She was a hungry bitch, the lady of the lake was, and neither age nor status mattered to her. She marked whom she chose.

The car hadn't surfaced, and neither had my grandfather's body.

But Grandma Lila had been found on the shore, her hands placed gently over her chest. Even the Lady knew better than to get the Morrígan's nose out of joint by disrespecting her emissaries.

And now, a week later, I was on my way home to take Lila's place before the dead began to rise.

I sucked in a deep breath, took one last look at the lake, and returned to the car.

"What do you think, guys?" A glance into the backseat showed Agent H, Gabby, and Daphne all glaring at me from their carriers. They weren't at all happy, but the ride would be over soon.

"Purp." Gabby was the first to speak. She stared at me with golden eyes, her fur a glorious black, plush and thick. The tufts on her ears gave her an odd, feathered look. She was Maine Coon, through and through. She let out another squeak and shifted in her carrier.

Not to be outdone, Agent H—a huge brown tabby and also a Maine Coon—let out a loud yowl.

He was always vocal, and he was not amused.



Daphne, a tortoiseshell, just snorted and gave me a look that said, Really, can we just get this over with?

Littermates, they were three years old. I had taken them in from a shelter after they were rescued from an animal hoarder.

They had been three tiny balls of fluff when I brought them home.

Now they were huge, and—along with Peggin—they were my closest friends.

Frowning, I squinted at them. “You’re sure about this? You might not like living in Whisper Hollow, you know. It’s a strange town, and the people there are all... like me.”

I stopped. There was the crux of it. The people in Whisper Hollow were my people. And even though I had run away, both they, and the town, were waiting for me.

Gabby pawed her face, cleaning her ears, and let out another squeak.

“Okay. Final answer. Head home, it is.” With a deep breath, I pulled back onto the road, turning right as I eased onto Cairn Street.

We were on our way back to Whisper Hollow, where the ghosts of the past were waiting to weave me into their world as seamlessly as the forest claimed the land, and the lake claimed her conquests.

\* \* \*

I’m Kerris Fellwater and I’m a spirit shaman by birth, which means I connect with the dead.

I can talk to them, see them, and drive them back to their graves when they get out of hand.

The gift is my birthright, from the day I was born until the day I die.

My training's incomplete, but instinct takes me a long way.

And I've always been a rule breaker, so doing things my way seems the natural order of things.

Like my grandmother, and her mother before her, I'm a daughter of the Morrígan.

Our matriarchal line stretches back into the mists.

I can feel and see energy, and I can manipulate it—to a degree.

Some people might call me a witch, but the truth is, my actual magic is minor, except when it comes to the world of spirits and the dead. There, my power blossoms out.

When I turned eighteen, after a major blowout with my grandfather, I ditched everything, took my high school diploma and two hundred dollars I had saved, and headed for Seattle.

I found a room for rent in the basement of a house and a job at Zigfree's Café Latte.

As the years passed, I moved into a high-rise, and I worked my way up from barista to managing the store, but it was just a way to pay the rent.

At night, I tackled my second gig—one that made little money but kept me sane.

A few months after I arrived in Seattle, the headaches started.

If spirit shamans don't use their powers, the energy builds up and will implode.

At best, ignoring the power can drive you mad.

At worst, it can kill you from an energy overload.

So I found a gig with an online e-zine investigating haunted houses and paranormal activity. The ghost hunting kept the headaches at bay. I spent all my spare time tromping through haunted buildings, looking for the ghosts who were troublemakers.

When I found them, I'd drop a hint to the owner.

About fifty percent asked me to deal with the spirits.

Kicking astral butt kept me from falling over the edge of the cliff into la-la land.

I did my best to create rites and rituals from what training Lila had given me before I left home.

For the most part they worked. I'd had a few missteps, some of them embarrassing and a few downright dangerous, but overall, I managed.

In my personal life, I kept to myself. I had a few cursory friends, but no one I could trust. I kept in touch with Peggin, but she was the only one from Whisper Hollow who knew where I was, other than my grandmother and Ellia.

Mostly, I read a lot in my spare time. I'm a speed reader and I have a photographic memory when it comes to what I read in books. Turns out, I had a lot of time to pursue my hobby.

You see, once people find out that I talk to spirits, it goes one of two ways: Either

they're afraid of me, or they glom onto me hoping for a glimpse of the future, especially lottery numbers.

My talents don't make for easy dates, either.

When guys find out that I can chat up their dead sisters or friends and get the lowdown on what they're really like, the date usually ends.

At first, their fears bothered me. After all, the boys in Whisper Hollow had accepted me for who I was, quirks and all.

But after a while, I decided to just stop dating.

But now...now I'm headed home, where everybody in Whisper Hollow is eccentric.

Everybody's just a little mad. And if I'm honest, I'm actually looking forward to it.

Especially since my grandfather's dead and can never bother me again.

At least, that's my hope. Because in Whisper Hollow, the dead don't always stay where you plant them.

\* \* \*

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:08 am*

I yawned. As I struggled to sit up, I wondered where I was, but then I remembered.

Home. I was home. For the first time in a long while, I had slept soundly.

When I'd pulled into town it had been past seven.

After stopping to grab a burger and fries and a few things at the local convenience store, I reached the house around quarter past eight.

I'd been exhausted. After setting up the litter boxes in the utility room and locking the cats in there for the night, I called Peggin to let her know I was back in town. After that, I dropped on the sofa to think about what to do next. The next thing I knew, it was morning.

Stumbling to the bathroom, I showered, then settled in at the vanity.

I grimaced. I looked as tired as I felt.

Circles underscored my eyes, but they would clear up with enough water and a good night's sleep.

My eyes were dark today—they varied from almost golden to a deep brown depending on my mood. Right now, they were mostly bloodshot.

I brushed my hair and braided the long, brunette strands to keep them out of my face while they dried. At thirty-three, I had yet to see a gray hair, for which I was grateful. As I shifted, looking for my bra and panties, I caught the reflection of the mark on my

back.

A reminder of what I was.

The birthmark looked like a tattoo. In the center of my back, it was right above my butt like a natural-born tramp stamp. It was the shape of a crow standing on a crescent moon, and it was jet black. The mark of a spirit shaman.

I slid on my panties and fastened my bra.

At a solid size eight and a 38F cup, I was happy enough with my body.

I liked my curves—and I had plenty of them.

I jammed my feet into my jeans, pulled on a snug V-neck sweater and patted my stomach.

I needed to find a gym. I loved working out, favoring weight-lifting and the stationary bike.

Unlike so many women, I ate what I liked, preferring meat and vegetables and the occasional pasta dish.

I loved my junk food, too, but tried to limit it to a few times a week.

But I was a caffeine freak, and I made no apologies for my addiction.

Finally, I was ready to face the day.

You mean, face a new way of life, don't you?

Fine. Face a new life. Happy now?

Yeah, I guess so.

Snorting—I usually won most of the arguments I held with myself—I wandered into the kitchen. Next order of the day: secure caffeine. Life always looked better after a pot of coffee.

Morning light filtered through the kitchen window, silver from the overcast sky.

The kitchen was spacious, with an eat-in nook—a large window by the table overlooked the backyard.

I ran my hands along the smooth countertops.

My grandparents had renovated during the time I'd been gone.

The laminate had been replaced by quartz; the white cabinets had been switched out for dark.

All the appliances were stainless steel, and tile on the floor had replaced the checkerboard linoleum.

But the walls were still the same warm gold color they had always been, and the kitchen still felt cozy.

On the counter stood a shiny espresso machine. I spotted a grinder and a container of beans. Grandma had loved her caffeine and I'd inherited my addiction from her. Grandpa Duvall had preferred tea—strong and bitter, like him.

I peeked in the cupboards. Tidy shelves were filled with packaged foods.

The refrigerator, however, was spotless and empty, with just the bottle of creamer I'd bought when I pulled into town.

When I'd called Peggin to tell her I was coming home, she had promised to clean it out for me. One less task I'd have to deal with.

I pulled a couple of shots of espresso and added creamer. As I carried my mug to the table, the phone on the kitchen wall rang, startling me out of my thoughts.

Who the hell was that? Peggin was out of town till Monday night, and she was the only person who knew I had come home, besides my lawyer. Hesitating, almost hoping it was a telemarketer, I picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Kerris? You're really back! Peggin called me. You got my letter, I trust? I'm sorry about your grandparents, my dear."

Ellia. No matter how many years it had been, I could never forget the lilting sound of her voice. When I was little, I'd clutch my grandmother's hand as we followed Ellia into the graveyard. She would sing, leading the way, her violin in hand. I had been mesmerized by her songs.

I propped the receiver on my shoulder, shrugging to hold it up to my ear as I peeked in the various drawers.

"I was going to call you before I left Seattle, but figured it would be best to talk in person. Grandma Lila came to me in a dream; she told me things are happening in town. What's going on? "

"There have been stirrings in the forest for the past few years. The Lady has been overly active, and the spirits are on edge. Penelope's having a hard time keeping them reined in."

I frowned. Penelope was in charge of holding the Veil closed. That she was having



problems spelled trouble. And when the Lady of the Lake was hungry, nobody was safe.

“What changed? Has Veronica been at it again?”

Veronica played both sides. Both friend and foe, depending on her mood, most of the time she ignored the living. But when she thought up some agenda, she’d turn the town on its ears. I was thirteen when Veronica decided to throw a grand ball for the dead. The results had been hair-raising.

Ellia paused. “No, I don’t think so. I have my suspicions, but I don’t want to discuss them over the phone.

Over the past few months, encounters with Haunts and the Unliving have increased.

Since your grandmother’s death, the dead have been raising hell.

I’ve tried to play the shadows to sleep, but my songs won’t work without a spirit shaman. ”

I licked my lips. I’d have to take charge faster than I thought.

On the night of the new moon, the lament singers and spirit shamans would go to the graveyards to calm the dead who had not yet passed beyond the Veil.

And when the dead went walking, they’d corral them and send them back to the grave.

The Veil existed between the worlds, like a massive transit station for the dead. A nebulous place of mist and fire and ice, the Veil housed spirits who hadn’t detached themselves from the world of the living. They weren’t ready to cross the threshold and move Beyond.

Around the world, the line between realms was usually well-defined, and it was easy for the Gatekeepers to guard the dead and keep them reined in, but in Whisper Hollow, things were different.

The Veil was nebulous here, and ghosts walked easier.

Now, with Grandma Lila dead, the door had been thrown open.

Grandma Lila had been a strong woman, though Grandfather fought her every step of the way. Oddly enough, Grandma Lila hadn't been paired with a shapeshifter. I wondered if that would be my fate as well, but there was no one I could ask now that she was gone.

I shook off my thoughts. "When can we meet?"

"Tonight, at my house? Six p.m. You remember where I live, don't you?"

"Fogwhistle Way. I don't remember the number, but I remember your house."

"That's right—337 Fogwhistle Way. It's good to have you back, Kerris. I'm sorry about your grandmother. We needed her. And now, we need you." With that, Ellia hung up.

I glanced out the kitchen window as a flock of crows rose into the sky from the maple in the backyard. They circled the house once, then headed south. A storm was coming in off the Strait of Juan de Fuca. My gut said that it would barrel through the forest and hit us by afternoon.

Deciding I needed more caffeine, I pulled another couple of shots, then checked on the cats, setting down fresh food and water for them. They were freaked, of course, but they were safe.

“I’ll let you out when I get back from town. Until then, you just stay in there.” I wanted to go through the house first to make certain there was nothing that could hurt them, or allow them to escape.

Reaching for my jacket and purse, I paused, my hand on the doorknob. A shadow rolled past. It reached out to examine me. Cold and clammy, it tickled over my skin before vanishing. Whirling, I glanced around the kitchen. But the room was empty.

“I’m home, Grandma,” I whispered. “I just hope you’ll be around when I need you.”

A goose walked over my grave. Whatever was going on, I knew I was going to need all the help I could get—from both sides of the grave.