

Autumn Thorns (Whisper Hollow)

By Yasmine Galenorn

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In an all-new series, *New York Times* bestselling author Yasmine Galenorn invites readers to Whisper Hollow, where spirits walk among the living and the lake never gives up her dead…

Fifteen years ago, I ran away from Whisper Hollow, Washington, a small town on Crescent Lake in the Olympic Peninsula. But truth is, if you were born here, you can never really leave. I'm Kerris Fellwater, and when I returned, I inherited my grandmother's house—and her gift. As a spirit shaman, it's my responsibility to drive the dead back to their graves, because around Whisper Hollow, people—and secrets—don't always stay buried.

When I was little, I was told my mother ran off. But now it looks like she was murdered. With the help of my mysterious neighbor Bryan, we begin to unravel the mystery of her disappearance, and in doing so, unearth a dark force seeking to bury Whisper Hollow. Now I must work with the dead, rather than against them, because our enemy will do whatever she can to destroy the town, and she means to start with me.

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Autumn Thorns (Whisper Hollow) By Yasmine Galenorn Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for the novels of *New York Times* bestselling author Yasmine Galenorn:

“Yasmine Galenorn creates a world I never want to leave.”—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Sherrilyn Kenyon

“Erotic and darkly bewitching…a mix of magic and passion sure to captivate readers.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Jeaniene Frost

“Spectacularly hot and supernaturally breathtaking.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Alyssa Day

About the Author
Yasmine Galenorn is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Flight from Death*, the Otherworld series, and the Indigo Court series.

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Praise for Yasmine Galenorn’s Novels

Berkley titles by Yasmine Galenorn

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear Reader:

I welcome you to my new Whisper Hollow series. This world, when I first envisioned it, began to haunt my dreams and waking life, and I knew I had to write about it. The characters and world came to life and are firmly established in my head and keyboard now! I hope that you enjoy your time spent in Whisper Hollow, and that you'll be back for Kerris's next adventure. Dreaming Death, the next book in the series, will be out in October 2016.

Next up, in February 2016, will be Darkness Raging. This will be the last Otherworld book from Berkley,

but rest assured, I plan on continuing the series on my own after that. After Darkness Raging will be Flight from Mayhem, the second Fly by Night book, in August 2016.

For those of you new to my books, I hope you enjoy your first foray into my worlds. For those of you who have followed me for a while, I want to thank you for taking a chance on my new series. Check my website, galenorn.com, for information on my newsletter, short stories, release info, and links to where you can find me on the Internet.

Bright Blessings,
The Painted Panther
Yasmine Galenorn

Advice for Visitors to Whisper Hollow

- If you hear someone call your name from the forest, don't answer.
- Never interrupt Ellia when she's playing to the dead.
- If you see the Girl in the Window, set your affairs in order.
- Try not to end up in the hospital.
- If the Crow Man summons you, follow him.
- Remember: Sometimes the foul are actually fair.
- And most important: Don't drive down by the lake at night.

Whisper Hollow:
Where spirits walk among the living, and the lake never gives up her dead.

THE MORRÍGAN

The Morrígan, Night Mare Queen, and Goddess of Sovereignty, Queen of Shapeshifters and Mother of the Fae, culls the dead from the battlefield and gathers them to her, under the embrace of her feathered cloak. She is mother to the Bean Nighe and the Bean Sidhe, the sirens of the spirit world, who warn of death to come by vision and by song. She is mother to the Crow Man, who haunts the woodlands, surrounded by a murder of crows, carrying her messages to those to whom she would speak. The Crow Man walks before the goddess, announcing her appearance. He speaks through the raven and the crow, and to ignore his summons is to ignore the gods. Do so at your own risk.

But not all dead wish to stay in their shadowed realm, and not all dead understand the reality of their situation. And in some lands, the energy of the Veil is so strong that spirits can walk freely between the worlds. So it was that the Goddess of Crows engendered nine great families—the bloodline passing through the maternal side—of women born to drive the wandering ghosts back into their graves, to stand between the dead and the living as protectors. The Morrígan's daughters, known as the spirit shamans, are charged with these duties.

To each spirit shaman, a match is born—a shapeshifter by birth. He will be her protector and guardian. They will be forever bound. And to each spirit shaman, a lament singer will be assigned—a daughter of the Bean Sidhes. She will bring her magical songs to complete the triad. Together, these triads will protect the portals of the world that lead into the realm of Spirit, and keep the dead from flooding the land of the living.

CHAPTER 1

The road twisted, curving through a series of S turns as my Honda CR-V wound along Highway 101. To my left, the forest breathed softly, looming thick and black even though it was still early afternoon. Brilliant maple and birch leaves—in shades of autumn bronze and yellow—dappled the unending stands of fir and cedar. With each gust of wind, they went whirling off the branches to litter the ground with sodden debris. October in western Washington was a windy, volatile month. The fact that I was making this trip on a Sunday evening worked for me, though. There weren't many cars on the road, especially not where I was going.

To my right, waves frothed across Lake Crescent as the wind whipped against the darkened surface. The rain shower turned into a drenching downpour, and I eased off on the accelerator, lowering my speed to thirty-five miles per hour, and then to thirty. The drops were pelting 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 secreted recesses.

It had been fifteen years since I had made this drive . . . fifteen years, a ferry ride, and about 120 miles. I grabbed the ferry in Seattle over to Kingston and then wound through Highway 104 up the interior of the peninsula, till I hit Highway 101, which took me through Port Townsend and past Port Angeles. Now, three hours after I had left the city, I neared the western end of Lake Crescent. The junction that would take me onto Cairn Street was coming up. From there, a twenty-minute drive around the other side of the lake would lead me through the forest, back to Whisper Hollow.

As I neared the exit, I veered off the road, onto the shoulder, and turned off the ignition. This was it. My last chance to drive past, loop around the Olympic Peninsula. My last chance to turn my back on all of the signs. But I knew I was just procrastinating against the inevitable. My life in Seattle had never really been my own, and this past month, when the Crow Man sent me three signs, I realized I was headed home. Then, last week, my grandmother died. Her death sealed the deal because, like it or not, it was my duty to step up and fill her shoes.

I slowly opened the door, making sure I was far enough off the road to avoid being hit, and emerged into the rain-soaked evening. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I stared at the lake through the trees. The wind was whipping up currents on the water, the dark surface promising an icy bath to anything or anybody unlucky enough to go tumbling in. The rising fog caught in my lungs and I coughed, the noise sending a murder of crows into the air from where they'd been resting in a tall fir. They circled over me, cawing, then headed north, toward Whisper Hollow.

Crows. I pulled my jacket tighter against a sudden gust of wind that caught me from the side. Crows were messengers. In fact, the Crow Man had reached out all the way to Seattle, where he summoned me with three omens. The first sign had been the arrival of his flock in Seattle—they followed me everywhere, and I could feel his shadow walking behind them, looming down through the clouds.

The second sign had been a recurring nightmare, for three nights running. Each night, I found myself walking along a dark and shrouded path through the Whisper Hollow cemetery, as the Blood Moon gleamed full and ripe overhead. As I came to the center of the graveyard, I saw—standing next to a headstone—Grandma Lila. Dripping wet and smelling of lake water and decay, she opened her arms and pulled me in, kissing me on both cheeks. Then she lit into me, tearing me up one side and down the other.

"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 came home to carry on with my duties. It won't be long now, and

you'll be 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 will need 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 on the other end of the line.

The third sign came last week, a day or two after I had the last dream. 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 a morning gig at work, deep in thought, when I glanced at the store next to me. There, staring from behind the storefront, 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, dripping wet and beckoning to me.

One of the rules of Whisper Hollow echoed back to haunt me. *If you see the Girl in the Window, set your affairs in order.* This was all the proof I needed. I went home and began to sort through my things. The next day, an express letter from Ellia arrived, informing me that my grandparents had gone off the road, claimed by the Lady of Crescent Lake. She was a hungry bitch, that one, and neither age nor status mattered in her selection of victims. The car hadn't surfaced, and neither had my grandfather's body—no shock there. But Grandma Lila had been found on the shore, hands placed gently over her chest in a sign of respect. 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 started to walk. 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 with me, 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, standard Maine Coon regalia. 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 short, loud yowl. He was always vocal, and right now he was letting me know that he was not amused. Daphne, a tortoiseshell, just snorted and gave me a look that said, *Really, can we just get this over with?* They were littermates, three years old, and 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. That was the crux of it. The people in Whisper Hollow—they were *my* people. Even though I hadn't been home in fifteen years I knew that 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 if they get out of hand. At least, that's the goal and job description, if you want to think of it as a profession. The gift is my birthright, from the day I was born until the day I die. My training's incomplete, of course, 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.

As my grandmother was, and her mother before her, I'm a daughter of the Morrígan. Our matriarchal line stretches back into the mists, as do the spirit shamans. 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, most magic I can cast is minor, except when it comes to the world of spirits and the dead. There, my power truly blossoms out.

When I turned eighteen, after a major blowout with my grandfather, I decided to ditch my past, the town, and anything resembling family, so I took my high school diploma and the 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. Over the years, I moved into a high-rise, and I worked my way up from barista to managing the store, but it was just something I did to pay the rent on my shiny new apartment.

At night, I slipped out into the rainy streets to take on my second gig—one that made very little money but kept me sane. A few months after I arrived in Seattle, the headaches started. I knew what they were from, and the only way to stop them. If spirit shamans don't use their powers, the energy can build up and implode—not a pretty future, to say the least. At best, ignoring the power can drive one mad. At worst, it can kill from an energy overload.

So I hunted around till I found a gig for a penny paper that later turned into an online webzine as the Internet grew into something more than an oddity. I investigated haunted houses and paranormal activity. On the side, I evicted a number of ghosts. The job didn't pay much, but that didn't matter to me. The coffee shop kept me in rent and food money, but the ghost hunting? That was what kept the headaches at bay. I spent all my spare time tromping through haunted buildings, looking for the ghosts who were troublemakers—the dead who were too focused on the world of the living to do anybody any good.

When I found them, I'd drop a hint to the owner, and about fifty percent asked me to come in and deal with the spirits. And kicking their astral butts, so to speak, is what kept me from falling over the edge of the cliff into La-La Land. I began to create my own rites and rituals from the training Lila had given me before I left home, and for the most part they worked. There were 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 met a few friends but no one I felt like I could trust, other than keeping in touch with Peggin. Mostly, I read a lot, and I'm a speed reader and I have a photographic memory when it comes to what I read in books.

I have a lot of time to pursue my hobby. See, once people find out that I hang with spirits . . . well . . . it goes one of two ways: Either they're afraid of me, or they glom on to me in hopes of gaining tomorrow's lottery numbers or finding out if old Uncle Joe had actually squirreled away money somewhere and forgot to leave a note about it in his will. Being a spirit shaman doesn'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, that usually ends the date. At first, their fear—couched as "It's not you, it's me"—bothered me. After all, the boys in Whisper Hollow had accepted me for who I was, quirks and all. So it seemed like a pale excuse. After a while, though, I learned to ignore the brush-offs and eventually, I stopped dating, for the most part.

But now I was going home, where everybody in Whisper Hollow is eccentric, in one way or another. Everybody's just a little bit mad. And I realized that I was actually looking forward to it. Especially since my

grandfather was dead and could never bother me again. At least . . . that was my hope. Because in Whisper Hollow, the dead don't always stay put where you plant them.

* * *

I yawned, blinking. As I struggled to sit up, I wondered where I was, then it hit me over the head. *Home.* I was home. Stretching my neck, I realized that, for the first time in a long while, I had slept soundly. The master bedroom was on the main floor, but 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, more emotionally than anything else, so I had set up the litter boxes in the utility room and locked the cats in there for the night. After I called Peggin—my best friend from high school and the one person I'd kept actively in touch with while I was in Seattle—to let her know I was back in town, I dropped on the sofa to think over my next step. The next thing I knew, I was waking up, still dressed, and morning was pouring through the partially opened curtains.

Stumbling to the bathroom, I showered, then sat at the vanity. As I leaned in, trying for a decent makeup day, I grimaced. My face looked as tired as I felt. Circles underscored my eyes, but that would clear up with enough water and another 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 out 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 and paused. *A reminder of who I was. Of what I was.* It was a birthmark, though it looked like a tattoo—and it was in the center of my back, right above my butt. If it had been actual ink, they would have called it a tramp stamp. But I had been born with it, as had my mother and grandmother. It was the shape of a crow standing on a crescent moon, and it was jet black. It was the mark of a spirit shaman.

I slid into my underwear and then fastened my bra, shimmying to position my breasts in the cups. At a solid size eight and a 38F cup, I was happy enough with myself. I liked my curves—and I had plenty of them, in the classic hourglass shape. I hurried into my jeans and a snug V-neck sweater and patted my stomach. I did need to find a gym, though. I worked out a *lot*. I tended to favor weights and the stationary bike, though mostly for health and strength. Unlike so many of the women I met, I wasn't on a diet and I ate what I liked, preferring meat and vegetables and the occasional pasta dish. I ate my junk food, too, but tried to keep it to a few times a week.

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 in my head—I wandered into the kitchen. Next order of the day: Secure caffeine. Life always looked better after a pot of coffee, and as a former barista, I made a mean cup of java.

Early light filtered through the kitchen window, silvery and gray with the overcast sky. The room was

spacious, with an eat-in nook, and a large window by the table that overlooked the backyard. I ran my hands along the smooth, cool countertops. My grandparents had renovated during the time I'd been gone. The laminate had been replaced by granite; the white cabinets had been switched out for dark. All the appliances were now 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—although the paint looked fresh—and the kitchen had the same cozy feel.

On the counter stood a shiny stainless steel espresso machine. Spotting a grinder and a container of beans next to the machine, I smiled. Grandma had loved her caffeine and I'd inherited her addiction. Grandpa Duvall had preferred tea—strong and black and bitter. I opened a cupboard at random to find neat, tidy shelves of packaged foods. The refrigerator, however, was empty and spotless. A few days ago, when I told her I was coming home, Peggin had promised to come in and clean it out for me. Apparently, she had managed to do so before she left on vacation. I breathed a sigh of relief. One less task I'd have to deal with.

I pulled a couple of shots of espresso and added some of the creamer I had picked up at the store the night before. As I carried my mug over to the table, the phone on the kitchen wall rang, startling me out of my thoughts. Who could be calling me? Peggin was out of town till Monday night, and she was the only other 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, then? I'm sorry about your grandparents, my dear."

Ellia. She sounded shaky, but no matter how many years it had been, I would 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, looking to see what might be there. "I was going to call you, but figured it would be easier to talk in person. I suppose we'd better meet. Grandma Lila came to me in a dream; she told me there were things happening in town. What's going on?" I knew I sounded abrupt, but Ellia had never been aces in the diplomatic department either, and she didn't expect it from anybody else.

"There have been stirrings in the forest for several years. The Lady has been more active over the past couple of years, as well. Spirits are on edge, Kerris. Lila noticed this before she died and told me. We think Penelope's having a hard time keeping them over on her side." Down to business, all right.

The news didn't bode well. First, Penelope was usually pretty good at keeping the Veil closed. That she was having problems was a bad sign. And second, that the Lady of the Lake was hungrier than usual meant nobody was safe.

"What changed? Has Veronica been at it again?" Veronica could be friend or foe depending on her mood, though mostly she was interested in her own agenda and tended to ignore the living. But if she got her mind set to an idea and had to turn the town on its ear to achieve her goals, she wouldn't hesitate. We had seen that when I was thirteen and Veronica decided to throw a grand ball for the dead.

A pause. Then—"No. I have my suspicions, but I don't want to discuss them over the phone. Let's just say that over the past few months, things have begun to escalate with more Haunts, more Unliving. Your grandmother started to investigate, but then . . . Anyway, since her death, the dead have been walking more. I've been doing my best to play the shadows to sleep, but my songs won't work right without a spirit shaman

to lead the rites for me."

I was nodding, though she couldn't see me. The night of every new moon, the lament singers and spirit shamans went out to the graveyards to calm the dead who had not yet passed beyond the Veil.

The Veil was a world between the worlds—it was a transit station for the dead, in a sense. A nebulous place of mist and fire and ice, where spirits wandered, not fully detached from the world of the living, and not yet ready to cross the threshold and move on to the Beyond. In most cities and places on the planet, the line between worlds was highly 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 strong here, and so were the ghosts.

And now, with Grandma Lila dead—without a spirit shaman to perform the rites and escort spirits into the Veil to begin with—the lament singers' songs would not work. And while Penelope held the ghosts at bay as much as she could, until she was able to persuade them to cross the threshold and leave behind all they had once been, the dead were still able to return and walk the earth.

Grandma Lila had been a strong woman—a stronger spirit shaman than I could ever hope to be, though Grandfather fought her every step of the way. I never knew why, but I knew that he wasn't her protector. In fact, unlike most spirit shamans, Grandma Lila had not been paired with a shapeshifter to watch over her. I wondered if that would be my fate, as well. She had never broached the subject during my training, and I had been too nervous to ask.

Shaking off my thoughts, I tried to push away my self-doubt. "When can we meet?"

"Tonight at my house? At six P.M. You remember where I live, don't you?"

I let out a slow breath. This was my job now, my heritage. I owed it to the town. "Fogwhistle Way. I don't remember the number, but I remember your house."

"That's right. Three Thirty-seven Fogwhistle Way. I'll be waiting for you. It's good to have you back, Kerris. I'm sorry about your grandmother. We needed her. And now, we need you." With that, she 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 out to the south. A storm was coming in from the north, 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 and I'd let them out of their prison once I returned from shopping. I wanted to go through the house first to make certain there was nothing that would hurt them—no open windows, no rat traps.

With one last glance at the kitchen, I reached for my jacket and purse. As I paused, my hand on the doorknob, a wave of shadow rolled through. It reached out to examine me, cold and clammy as it tickled over my skin. Then, as I blinked, shivering, it vanished. Whirling, I glanced around the room, searching the corners. But the kitchen was empty.

Something was looming in the town, all right, and whatever it was, it knew I was back.

"I'm home, Grandma Lila," I whispered. "I just hope you'll be around when I need you."

And right then, I knew that—before whatever this was had ended—I was going to need all the help I could get . . . from *both* sides of the grave.

CHAPTER 2

I pulled into the driveway and eased the car into park. As I stared at the stone house, I wasn't sure just what I had expected. I had been to Ellia's house before, but I remembered it as cold and looming. I was expecting to see a broken-down house, covered in moss, behind an overgrown tangle of weeds. But there it stood, pristine and tidy. The house was old, that much was true. Built of stone, it looked like it was from out of another era and it probably was. Whisper Hollow had been founded in the mid-1800s, when it was barely a settlement of ramshackle houses in the woods.

As I gathered my purse and slipped out of the CR-V, I took a deep breath as I looked around the yard. The gardens were neat and tidy, with a hint of overgrown wildness. Ellia liked mums—a row of mums lined the pavers that ran up to the front of the house. The lot, like my own, was thick with trees looming up and over the yard. Where Ellia lived on Fogwhistle Way wasn't far from my own house, and close enough to the cemetery that she could walk there if need be.

It had stopped raining and the clouds had scattered for the moment, letting the stars shine through. In late October, the night came early, especially out in the outlying areas without the incessant glow of the big city to light the area. Finally, I decided to face the inevitable. Somehow, the thought of facing Ellia made everything real—once I walked through her door, my grandmother was truly dead, I was committed, and both thoughts scared the hell out of me. But my time to run was over. Slinging my purse over my shoulder, I took a deep breath and headed up the stone steps to the front door, slipping on my gloves as I did so. The last thing I wanted to do was to touch Ellia's hands. That was one rabbit hole I knew I didn't want to fall down.

The bell was shaped like an ornate brass flower. I pressed the center and waited. Another moment and then the door opened, and there she stood, pretty much the way I remembered her. A little older, a little grayer. An ethereal smile stole across her lips, and she stood back, ushering me in.

She smiled at my hands, not offering me her hand or a hug. "Gloves. You remembered."

Her voice took me back and I flashed her a shy grin. "How could I forget? Are things the same? Do you still . . ."

"Oh yes . . . these old hands of mine can still drag you down to hell." She laughed, then sobered and held up her hands. She was wearing long cream-colored opera gloves that disappeared up her sleeves. "If I could wear gloves and play the violin, I would, but unfortunately, I'm not quite that dexterous. I hate causing unnecessary pain, so I just make sure I carry them with me wherever I go."

She stood aside as I entered the hallway. A sharp bark came from behind her, and a dog peered around from behind her, gorgeous and white as snow, looking suspiciously like a wolf.

"Don't mind Viktor. He knows friend from foe." She ushered me into the foyer and shut the door behind me. The dog gave me a long look, sizing me up. He was either going to eat me for dinner or—he pranced forward, leaned down toward the ground with his head against his front feet, and then did a little wiggle and barked. A lick to my hand and he bobbed his head, then abruptly turned and padded down the hallway, out of sight.

"His name is Viktor?"

"Yes, and you guess correctly if you are thinking he looks like a wolf. He's an Arctic wolf–Siberian husky mix. Apparently he's decided you're nothing to worry about." But she said it with a laugh.

As she led me toward the living room, she glanced back at me, as if reassuring herself I was really there. Ellia was a tall woman, at least five eleven. Her hair flowed in shimmering waves down her shoulders to her lower back, and it had shifted color only slightly in the fifteen years I'd been gone, transitioning from spun platinum to silver. But her face remained unlined; her lips were a little more pursed, her eyes still blue and crackling with flashes of white heat. She was a lean woman, but not gaunt, and tonight she was wearing caramel-colored slacks with a green plaid blazer. She had always struck me as elegant, and when she spoke, her voice registered with a regal, yet ephemeral tone.

"Come now, Oriel and Ivy are waiting."

Oriel, I vaguely remembered. But Ivy? I wasn't familiar with anyone named Ivy. As we entered the living room, the décor looked the same as it had the week I left Whisper Hollow. Sparse, but refined, in neutral shades of camel and rust and tan, contrasting greatly with the outside of the house, which looked like it belonged in the middle of a dark forest.

Two women waited on the sofa. One was round and stout, with a cheery smile and golden hair wrapped up into a braid around her head. Oriel. She would have been around my mother's age, if my mother had stuck around. I remembered that she had taken over the boardinghouse or something, but I had never really had a reason to speak with her when I was a teenager. She was dressed in a green jersey dress, with a brown leather belt that wrapped around her ample belly.

The other woman looked closer to my own age. In her late thirties or early forties, I'd guess, with shoulder-length black hair, streaked with white like a skunk. It was cut in a fashionable bob. Her eyes were a deep brown, and for some reason, she reminded me of someone, though I couldn't figure out who. She was wearing a denim pantsuit, though, that looked oddly out of place on her, though she seemed comfortable enough in it.

Ellia motioned me to a chair off the side of the sofa and I sat on the edge. A tray of cookies and hot cocoa rested on the coffee table.

I sniffed appreciatively. "Cookies and cocoa? Whatever we're going to talk about must be bad if you're already bribing me with food." I turned to the woman I didn't recognize. "I'm sorry, but I don't remember you. I'm—"

"Kerris Fellwater. I know who you are. I've watched you since you were a baby."

At my startled look, she smiled. "I'm not a stalker, I promise. There's a reason I've kept watch. We're kinfolk, though you don't know it."

I stared at the woman for a moment, not sure what to say. Finally, I settled for, "How could you have known me when I was born? You can't be that much older than me." Then the second part of her statement hit me. "*Kinfolk?* We're related?"

She leaned forward, holding out her hand. "I'm Ivy Primrose. I've wanted to meet you since you were born, but your grandmother was always the voice of reason—she insisted it wasn't the right time yet. I live down the street from you."

Either she had the best plastic surgeon around, or there was some hidden secret about her that I didn't know. Still uncertain of what to say but figuring she'd get around to it in her own time, I slowly reached for a cookie and a mug of hot cocoa. Over the years I'd learned that I found out more by being observant than barging in with a slew of questions. Sometimes, being taciturn was a tactical maneuver.

I decided to stick to my life as a topic. “I wasn’t going to come back, you know. I swore up and down I’d never set foot in this town again. But you know how well that works.” With a laugh, I settled back in the chair and put my feet up on the ottoman. “So yes, I’m back, and here to stay. The Crow Man came to me, and so did my grandmother. The week before she died, she came to me three nights running in a dream. And I saw the Girl in the Window. Well, it was a mannequin in a window, but the Bean Nighe was superimposed over her. I know better than to ignore the summons.”

Oriel shook her head. “So many try to leave, yet almost everybody born here stays. Or returns.” She cocked her head to the side. “I tried once, you know. Long ago. I got as far south as Portland before the town insisted I come back.” She let out a sigh. “I want to state up front that we tried to persuade Duvall to lighten up on you. We didn’t want you running away. But the old bastard wouldn’t listen. Except for at the end . . .”

Something in her voice caught me short. “What?”

With a glance at Ellia, Oriel cleared her throat on a sip of hot chocolate. “Your grandmother wanted us all to meet her the night that she died. She said she had something important we needed to know, and that Duvall would be there with her. That he wanted to tell us something before—” A slight shift told me that she was debating whether to continue.

“Go on. I want to hear this.”

“Your grandfather was dying. About three years ago, he developed idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. There is no cure, and Doc Wallace gave him two years—three at the most. About a year back, something changed in his nature . . . I think the fear of what waited for him on the other side of the Veil took hold. He started doing his best to turn things around.” She stopped, waiting for me to digest the information.

A pit opened in my stomach. Five months ago, I’d received a letter from him—one I had never opened. I had burned it without reading it. “Crap.” They looked at me, but I shook my head. This realization was one I’d have to take to my grave with me. “So . . . Lila and Duvall were supposed to meet with you the night they died? And he wanted to tell you something?”

She nodded. “That’s right. And whatever it was, was important. Your grandmother stressed that we needed to talk to him now—all three of us. She was crying . . . her voice shaky. When I asked her what was wrong, she told me that her world had just been shattered . . . but she wouldn’t talk about it over the phone. Two hours later, the Lady took them. They went off the road.”

So the Lady had taken them before Duvall could reveal whatever it was that had apparently caused a change of heart. I stared at my cup. “I wish I’d come home in time to see my grandmother before she died. But I was too stubborn.” I paused, then glanced over at Ellia. “Did you . . . did you play for her? For my grandmother?” A sudden hitch caught in my throat. What if she said no? What if . . .

Ellia reached out and almost touched my arm, then paused and ducked her head, pulling her fingers back. “Yes, I did. You’ll have to lead the rites over her grave, of course. But I think she heard me, and so far, she rests easy. I doubt she’ll be walking any time soon.”

Relieved, I let out a long sigh. The thought of Grandma Lila up and prowling the city felt like heresy. I didn’t really want to ask but decided I’d better. “Still no sign of my grandfather’s body?”

Ellia slowly shook her head. “We haven’t been able to find him. Their car went over the edge at the Lady’s Finger mile marker, down near Juniper Creek. That seems to be one of the prime places lately for the Lady to drag them in.”

I frowned. The fact that she had kept his body could turn out to be a serious problem, but there was nothing we could do about it right now. “Do you have any idea what Duvall wanted to tell you?”

Oriel shook her head. Ellia followed suit, but more slowly.

Ivy, however, toyed with her cookies. “I’m not sure, but I think it might relate to your father, Kerris. And maybe . . . your mother.”

My father? My father had taken off, abandoned my mother when he found out she was pregnant. I hadn’t thought about him in years—not really. I had no idea who he was, other than his first name and a picture my grandmother had given me.

“What do you mean . . . You think he knew where to find him?” Not sure why that was the first thing out of my mouth, I stopped. I wasn’t looking to meet Avery, the man who had decided his life was better off without my mother and me.

“I think . . . perhaps that might be the case.” There was still something she wasn’t telling me, and I felt like I was tiptoeing around in the dark, cautiously skirting a can of worms that—once I opened it up—I’d never be able to close again. Sipping the steaming drink, I tried not to think about my grandfather, somewhere under the dark surface of the lake, dancing with the Lady. She reached out for those she wanted. Not even the spirit shamans could counter her desires in that regard.

Desperately trying to stall, I said, “It’s true that I don’t have the full training I should, but as I said, I think I’ve learned enough to tackle the job. But I need to find my grandmother’s tools. Do any of you know offhand where she might have kept them?”

The three of them looked simultaneously relieved and worried.

Ellia shook her head, a somber look crossing her face. “Your grandmother kept them hidden. Through most of his life, Duvall fought her calling. He hated what she was. They’re probably still hidden away somewhere in the house.”

“Then, first order is to find them because normally, she would have helped me to gather my own, and gifted me a few of hers. If I can find her kit, so much the better.” I worried my lip. “You said the dead have been walking more, even while Lila was alive?”

“Yes. Even though we worked together to persuade as many families as we could to perform the rituals over their dead, we were still noticing a rise in spirit activity. And that from more than just those who went to their graves unprepared. The dead are returning from the Veil. Haunts . . . Mournfuls . . . the Wandering Ones. I fear that next, we’ll see a rise in the Unliving crossing back over. And only a spirit shaman can take on the Haunts and the Unliving.”

And *this* was why the Crow Man had summoned me. But there was one little problem. “Over the years, I have developed some rites and rituals but I don’t know how they’ll work here in Whisper Hollow. And Lila was the only one who could teach me.”

Oriel spoke up. “We can guide you. We can’t *teach* you—the spirit shamans keep their secrets—but we’ll do our best.” She reached across the coffee table to give me a gentle pat on the hand. She cocked her head to one side. “Penelope might be able to help us out.” She paused, then continued. “Kerris, you know I guard this town. That’s part of my job—to keep Whisper Hollow and its secrets safe. I worked with your grandmother on occasion, when the need arose. Her gifts ranged beyond merely turning the dead back to

their graves—she was a very strong spirit shaman. So are you, but you just don't realize it yet."

So Oriel was more of an interested bystander. I glanced over at Ellia. I knew how *she* fit into the equation. But Ivy . . . There was something about her. I finally quit evading the subject. "How do you play into all of this?"

She paused, staring into her cocoa mug. After a moment, she sat back, crossing her legs smoothly. Regarding me quietly, she finally said, "I'm your grandmother. Your father was my son."

Cue a dozen bombs going off one after another.

Ellia caught my cup as I let go of it. As hot chocolate splashed across the knees of my jeans, as well as all over the floor, she set the cup on the table, then handed me a napkin before returning to her seat. As I dabbed at the liquid, the room plunged into a deep silence, freezing us all.

Your father . . . The words echoed inside me, ricocheting like bullets. *Your father was my son* . . . words I never thought I'd hear. Especially from a woman who looked like she could be my older sister, rather than my grandmother.

"I'm a shapeshifter. Your father was one, too—he was matched to your mother."

Of course . . . shapeshifters were very long lived, aging normally till they reached their twenties, and then the process drastically slowed. That was why she looked so young.

My world shifting with every breath, I searched for something to say. I didn't know how to respond. I'd long ago given up hoping to ever find out about my father, and now the opportunity was sitting right here in front of me. I thought about just getting up and leaving—this was all far more than I had expected to face and I had no clue how to react. Finally, I cleared my throat and looked over at her, into those clear brown eyes. No wonder she had seemed familiar to me—she was my blood kin.

"I suppose . . . you'd better tell me everything." Though I spoke calmly, inside I was screaming, pounding on the walls in a tantrum born out of both frustration and joy. I'd given up hope long ago of ever knowing about my father and why he had left before I was born, and all along, the answer had been living right down the street.

* * *

When I was three, my mother disappeared. Tamil just vanished one day, never to be heard from again. For a long time, I thought I saw her—she'd be there, around the corner. Or I'd turn to find her standing behind me, watching me with worried eyes. But I'd blink and she'd be gone and eventually, I stopped seeing her. I told myself she ran off to find my father, and that someday, they'd come back to get me. *Someday* never came.

My father was gone before I was born. When I was old enough to realize that other kids had fathers and I didn't, I asked Grandma Lila why. She just shushed me, telling me he had gone away for a long time and that he was very important and was on a secret mission for the government. Being a highly imaginative child, I bought her story. And later, when I asked her if my mother was with my father—hiding like spies in some foreign country—she just murmured a soft answer that could have been yes or no. What I *didn't* realize was that her stories were a source of wicked arguments between her and Grandpa Duvall. I learned the hard way when I was eleven. On that day, I asked him when Daddy would be allowed to come home.

Grandpa Duvall, who was well over six feet, long and lanky with eyebrows the color of ink, and thin, and

scary as hell, glared down at me. “Never. Your grandmother’s been feeding you a pack of lies about him, and you’re old enough to know the truth. Your father skipped town when he found out your mother was pregnant with you. He disappeared, leaving her in the lurch. That’s why she ran off, you know—she couldn’t handle raising you alone. So let that be a lesson to you, young lady. Don’t go getting yourself knocked up without a ring on that finger.”

I stared up at him, assessing his answer. Grandpa didn’t sugarcoat anything, and he was always a little too eager to squash any joy or enthusiasm. The gleam in his eye told me he had enjoyed destroying my dreams. And right then, I realized just how much I hated him. He was a hard man, and I’d learned to stay away from him when he was in one of his moods. He never hurt me, not physically, but I knew the hard way that he enjoyed tormenting people.

As I stood there, staring right back at him, he never wavered. Without a word, I turned and walked out of the room. Ten minutes later, I was sobbing into Grandma Lila’s skirts. Half an hour later, I knew little more than I had before, except that he—like my mother—had simply vanished. There was no secret government job, no mission, no romantic liaison half a world away. Just two people who had loved each other, gone missing three years apart.

Lila had given me a picture of them, though she warned me not to tell Grandpa Duvall about it. Tamil and Avery were standing together, he behind her with his arms wrapped around her shoulders. They looked happy—my mother’s eyes were smiling. But Avery looked distant, almost frightened. I tucked the picture away behind a book on my shelf to hide it should Duvall come searching my room one day. I still had it, in my jewelry box.

The one thing I *did* realize on that day was that I would never love my grandfather. Our relationship was tenuous to begin with, and after that—no matter how polite he was, no matter what he said—I kept my feelings protected from him. He was a stranger to me from that day on.

* * *

You’re sure that *you’re* Avery’s mother?” The questions barraged my brain, but I managed to keep my mouth shut. It wouldn’t do any good to swamp her.

“Yes, your *other* grandmother.” She paused, glancing at Oriel and then Ellia. “This is so not the way I wanted you to find out. I tried to get Duvall to let me tell you when you were young, but the old bas—” She paused.

I held her gaze, shrugging. “Call him whatever you like. I fell out with him when I was young, and my only regret is that our feud separated Grandma Lila and me.”

Ivy nodded. “Yes, he was a bitter man. Duvall wouldn’t let me near you, not even when your grandmother tried to intervene. He threatened me, and . . . when your grandfather made threats, he followed through. Lila kept me updated on your progress. She gave me pictures of you.” This was said almost shyly, and as I gazed into the softened face, I realized that none of this had been Ivy’s fault.

“Grandma Lila could handle Duvall to a point, but he had a nasty temper. He never struck her, not that I knew, but he was cold and bitter and a poor excuse for a human being. I never understood why she married him. Spirit shamans are supposed to have guardians—a shapeshifter born to each of us. But she didn’t. At least, not that I know of.” I ducked my head, wishing that Lila could be sitting here with us, free from him. “Tell me about my father, please. Did he really run out on my mother like Duvall told me?”

Ivy let out a soft sigh. “Avery loved your mother. One morning, shortly after Tamil announced she was pregnant, Avery went out to go buy supplies, and then he was supposed to head up to Timber Peak to go hunting. He never returned. My ex-husband—Roger—came back to Whisper Hollow as soon as I called him. He led a group of searchers, but they found no evidence Avery had ever walked into those woods. The store he normally bought his gear from hadn’t seen him that day. Roger stayed for two months before finally giving up and returning to the city. It almost pulled us back together, but Whisper Hollow is a dangerous place for him, so I told him to leave. He wasn’t born here, and . . . the town doesn’t like him. His clan is . . . different. If he stayed, Whisper Hollow would offer him up to the Lady, I fear.”

I frowned. “My grandfather told me that my father just up and left during the middle of the night. He never said anything about Avery disappearing in the woods.” My disgust for my grandfather was rapidly escalating, even more than I thought it could. Still . . . what secret had he wanted to tell these women? And if he was truly trying to change, had impending mortality been the only reason for the shift?

“Duvall hated my son. He was furious when he found out that Tamil had gotten pregnant and that she wanted to marry Avery and have the baby. When Tamil announced they were engaged and why, well . . . the blowup was epic.” Ivy snorted, shaking her head. “The shot heard round the world, so to speak.”

Ellia nodded. “Tamil showed up at my doorstep, begging me to let her stay here. I had been helping her learn how to use her gifts. Lila had asked me to take part in Tamil’s training—lessons that I could show her. I took her in, but Duvall insisted she come home the next week, and neither Tamil nor I dared go against his wishes. Lila did her best to intervene, but he insisted.”

My ears perked up. *Training?* “You helped my mother with her training? I thought only another spirit shaman could do that.”

“We did what we could, child.” Oriel laughed. She always looked like the cat who’d swallowed the canary, but she managed to make it appealing instead of a threat. “Your mother’s gifts were incredibly strong. She would have taken over from your grandmother if all had gone as planned. But the minute we found out she was pregnant, we had to stop. Working with the spirits while pregnant is not the best idea. To be honest, we don’t know if what she was doing affected you or not, since she was four months gone by the time she let anybody know.”

Four months. I frowned. “Why did she wait so long to say anything?”

Ivy glanced over at Ellia, who nodded. “We think she and Avery kept it a secret so your grandfather couldn’t force her to have an abortion, and when they did reveal that you were on the way, they told a lot of people all at once so the word got around. Duvall would have made her get rid of you, you know.”

Stunned, I sat back and mulled over everything that I had learned in the past ten minutes. The three women waited quietly, and I was grateful to them for that.

One: I had a grandmother I never knew about. A grandmother who looked close to my age and was a shapeshifter.

Two: My father may not have run out on my mother—he seemed to have disappeared as silently and abruptly as Tamil. Which brought to mind the question: If they *had* left town, had she caught up with him? Had they intended to come back for me, but been unable to?

Three: My grandfather had a secret he felt he could no longer keep hidden, and had died hours before he was to reveal it.

Four: My mother was incredibly talented with her gifts. And on top of that, her training may have affected me, since she had been pregnant with me while she was learning. I let the information settle in, then glanced over at Ivy.

Suddenly hungry for answers, I decided to put to rest some of the questions that I'd been carrying around my entire life. I slowly let out a long breath. "What else can you tell me about my father? My grandmother didn't want to talk about him, and I didn't dare mention him in front of my grandfather. What was he like?"

"My son loved your mother, Kerris. Please know that. His last name was Forrester. When I left his father, I went back to my maiden name of Primrose, but I left Avery with his father's name. Avery liked to cook. He loved rockabilly music, he drove an old pickup truck. His favorite color was green, and he loved hot dogs and pizza and lasagna. He was a smart man and had planned on going to college until Tamil got pregnant, but he adjusted quickly. In fact, the day they broke the news, he went over to the newspaper and secured himself a job with Earl—the publisher of the *Whisper Hollow Gazette*. He also asked me if he could have his grandmother's wedding ring to give to Tamil. He had already proposed, I gather, but hadn't been able to give her a ring." Her smile faded away. "I don't know if he ever got the chance. I never saw the ring again after that evening."

I paused, then asked one more question. "You said he was a shapeshifter. So he was her guardian? And how does that affect me? I've never even had a whiff of that ability."

"Yes, he was. And as for you, when shapeshifters mate with spirit shamans, the daughters come out with the spirit shaman ability—not the shapeshifting one. You would only be able to shift your shape if your mother hadn't been a spirit shaman. If she had just been . . . well . . . a *typical* human, you would have had the ability. The shapeshifting gene is dominant. We can talk more about that later," Ivy said.

And that was enough for the night. There were a million other things I wanted to know, but they would keep. I slid over to her side and hesitantly wrapped my arms around her. "Thank you. Thank you for telling me. Thank you for . . . being here."

She looked startled, but hugged me back, kissing me on the forehead. "Kerris, you don't know how many times over the years I almost sent you a note, or stopped you on the way home from school. But Duvall . . ." With a shudder, she shook her head. "He was a dangerous man."

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