

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CARRIE VAUGHN

"I relished this book. Enough excitement, astonishment,
pathos, and victory to satisfy any reader."

—CHARLAINE HARRIS on *Kitty and the Midnight Hour*

Kitty's Big Trouble

FIRST
TIME
IN
PRINT

Kitty's Big Trouble

CARRIE VAUGHN



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

For my family

Acknowledgments

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The Playlist

NORMAN GREENBAUM, "Spirit in the Sky"

SOCIAL DISTORTION, "Making Believe"

WARREN ZEVON, "Lawyers, Guns, and Money"

THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS, "Wicked Little Critta"

P.K. 14, "The Other Side"

BLONDIE, "Atomic"

VERNIAN PROCESS, "The Maple Leaf Rag"

SQUIRREL NUT ZIPPERS, "Le Grippe"

PJ HARVEY, "Down by the Water"

CARSICK CARS, "You Can Listen, You Can Talk"

THE B-52's, "Mesopotamia"

BILLY PRESTON, "Will It Go Round in Circles"

LISSIE, "Little Lovin'"

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Praise for the Kitty Norville series
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Chapter 1

“I KNOW,” I said into my phone. “This isn’t exactly standard—”

“It’s impossible,” said the poor, long-suffering office receptionist at the Calvary Cemetery in St. Louis. He was too polite to just hang up on me. “It’s absolutely impossible.”

“Maybe you can give me the name and number of someone who might be able to authorize this kind of request? Is there any representative of the Sherman family on record?”

His responses were starting to sound desperate. “That information is confidential. In fact, I don’t think you’ll be able to get any further on this without some kind of a warrant or a court order.”

I was afraid of that. I’d been hoping there’d be a friendly way to accomplish this. That I could find a sympathetic historian who would back up my request or explain the situation to one of the descendants and get permission that way. Surely they would want to know the truth as much as I did. Also, I didn’t think I’d be able to convince a judge to issue said court order. The request was based on little more than rabid curiosity.

I soldiered on, as it were. “There has to be some kind of standard procedure for an exhumation. Can you tell me what that is?”

“Ms.... Norville, is it?”

“Yes, Kitty Norville,” I said, thinking *calm*. I could wear him down with patience.

“Ms. Norville—can I ask why you want to have General Sherman’s body exhumed?”

General William T. Sherman, hero of the Civil War on the Union side, war criminal on the Confederate side, considered one of the greatest soldiers and strategists in American history, and all-around icon. And yeah, I wanted to dig him up. It was a little hard to explain, and I hesitated, trying to figure out what to say. Last week I’d received a package from the Library of Congress containing a copy of an interview transcript from the 1930s. It had been made as part of the Federal Writers Project, a New Deal program that employed journalists and other writers to record local histories around the country. Many valuable stories were collected and preserved as part of the program. The one I’d been sent was an interview with a Civil War veteran—one of the last to survive, no doubt. He’d been sixteen when he joined the Confederate army in the middle of the war and was close to ninety when he’d been interviewed, and he claimed that he’d witnessed General Sherman transform into a wolf during the Battle of Vicksburg. A librarian who was also a listener and fan of my radio show discovered it and sent it to me. I had always had my suspicions about Sherman—he looked rough and tumble in his photos, with his unbuttoned collar, his unkempt beard, and a “screw you” expression. If any Civil War general had been a werewolf, it would be Sherman. But was my hunch and a single interview proof? No. Which was why I wanted to exhume the body, to test any remaining tissue for the presence of lycanthropy.

Maybe it was best to lay it out there. “I think General Sherman may have been a werewolf and I want to run tests on his remains to find out.”

Of course, a long pause followed. I kept waiting for the click of a phone hanging up, which would have been fine; I’d have just called one of the other numbers on my list. I hadn’t expected this to

easy.

“Seriously?” he said finally. ~~The same way he might have said, You’re eating bugs?~~

“Yeah. Seriously. So how about it? Don’t you want to help me rewrite American history?”

“I’m sorry, could I get your name one more time?” he said. “Could you spell it for me? And tell me where you’re calling from?”

I felt a restraining order coming on. So in the end, I was the one who hung up.

Oh well. You can’t win them all.

* * *

AT HOME that evening I sat on the sofa, library books lying open on the coffee table next to me and my laptop screen showing a half dozen Web sites open. I was supposed to be researching Sherman. Instead, I was reading through the transcript for what must have been the twentieth time.

Tom Hanson had enlisted in the Confederate army at the age of sixteen. At several points during the interview he mentioned how young he’d been. How innocent, and how foolish. The interviewer kept having to prompt him to return to the focus of the story, his encounter with General Sherman under the light of the full moon.

One night while his squad was on patrol outside of Vicksburg, Hanson had gotten separated from the others and lost his way in the swampy forest some distance from where the Confederates were camped. Trying to find his way back, he’d stumbled across a pair of Union soldiers—an enlisted man arguing with an officer. The enlisted soldier kept calling the other man “General,” and Hanson swore the officer was General William Sherman himself. He couldn’t explain the argument because it hadn’t made any sense to him—the enlisted man was telling the general that he’d overstepped his bounds and that he wanted to challenge him. Hanson had heard that Sherman was crazy—he could understand anyone on the Union side wanting him out of command. But that wasn’t up to an enlisted man, and they certainly wouldn’t have been discussing it in the middle of a swamp.

Hanson didn’t understand it, but he described what happened next. “The general, he took his clothes off. I couldn’t move or he’d’ve heard me, so I didn’t dare. I just sat there and watched. So there I was, naked in the moonlight. And then he changed. Like his body just melted, and I heard his bones snapping. I can’t say that I ever saw a wolf before, but that’s what he turned into—big, shaggy, with yellow eyes. That other soldier, well—he just ran. Didn’t do him any good. That big ol’ wolf chased him down.”

The door to the condo opened and closed—my husband, Ben, lawyer and fellow werewolf—arriving home. He set his briefcase near the desk of his home office, a corner of the living room, and regarded me where I sat on the sofa, papers on my lap, my head bent in concentration.

“Still on that transcript?” he said, his smile amused.

I sighed. Ben had seen me reading it every night this week, searching for some insight. “It’s fascinating, isn’t it? What if it isn’t just a story? What if he’s right?” I pulled one of the books over, referring to a timeline of Sherman’s life. “Did you know that early on in the war Sherman had a nervous breakdown? He was relieved of duty, and the newspapers and everyone said he was crazy, that he couldn’t take the pressure. But he recovered and when he came back he was this badass general. He and Grant started kicking ass and eventually Sherman marched the Union army through Georgia and won the war. What if that’s when it happened? Somehow he got attacked and infected around the Battle of Bull Run, it knocked him for a loop, he took time off to deal with it, and when he came back he was a super soldier. A werewolf general.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” he said. “But if you’re right, he kept it really well hidden.”

“Lots of people keep it really well hidden,” I said. “I’m betting it was easier to keep it hidden than it is now.”

He sat on the sofa beside me, which was too tempting an invitation. I leaned toward him, pulling his arm over my shoulder and snuggling against him. As I hoped, he hugged me close and bent his head toward my hair, breathing in my scent as I took in his. Our wolf sides, claiming each other.

I said, “I just keep thinking—who else is out there? What secret histories slipped through the cracks because people kept it hidden or no one believed it? I’m not talking about Vlad Tepes being Dracula. What if Sherman really was a werewolf? Who else might have been werewolves? Maybe there was a reason Rasputin was so hard to kill, and Jack the Ripper was so bloodthirsty—”

He stopped me with a kiss, which was okay with me. I touched his cheeks and smiled.

“What would it change?” he said. “If Sherman really was a werewolf, would it really change anything?”

“We’d know the truth.”

He looked skeptical. It was a fair question. Did this mean any more than slapping labels on people? In Sherman’s case, it meant a reinterpretation of his history—his nervous breakdown looked a whole lot different if he was a werewolf. But even that was speculation. He might have been infected with lycanthropy years before.

It wasn’t just the labels. It meant history had a whole other layer to it, and that supernatural being might have played an active role in guiding human events for centuries. I could almost get conspiratorially minded about it.

“How can you even confirm something like this for sure? In a way that would hold up in court?” I asked. He added. Always legal-minded.

“I’ve been trying to find out how to get his body exhumed—”

He looked at me. “You *haven’t*.”

“Um, yeah. It’s a lot harder than I thought it would be.”

“Of course it is. You can’t just go around digging up graves. Especially famous ones.”

“Yeah,” I said, wincing. “I know.”

“You need to find a vampire who knew him,” he said. “Get a corroborating eyewitness account from someone who wasn’t a scared teenager confronting a guy like Sherman.”

He probably meant it as a joke, but I turned thoughtful.

“You know,” I said, “I could probably do that.”

“Honey, if anyone can do it, you can.”

Damn straight.

* * *

“GOOD EVENING, it’s Friday night which means it’s time once again for *The Midnight Hour*, the show that isn’t afraid of the dark or the creatures who live there. I’m your ever-eager host, Kitty Norville, and I hope you’re ready for another illuminating evening of supernatural shenanigans.”

Sitting at my table in the studio, in front of the microphone, headphones on, just a few lights glowing in the darkened space, I could imagine myself in the cockpit of an airplane or at the controls of a spaceship, commanding great power. Through the glass, I watched Matt, my sound engineer, at his board. Above the door, the on-air sign glowed red. Epic.

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately about history and what to do with it. Vampires and werewolves and the like have only been public for a few years. Some of us are milking that publicity for all it’s worth. I’m not ashamed to say. But we’ve been around for a lot longer than that. We must have been. Who

impact have vampires, werewolves, and magicians had on history? Were any historical figures—let's say General William Sherman, just as an example—supernatural creatures themselves? Those histories have been deeply buried, either because people didn't believe or because the stories were written off as folklore and fantasy. Let me tell you, when you start digging there are a lot of stories out there. What I'm looking for now isn't stories, but proof. That's where things get tricky, because traditionally, the supernatural doesn't leave a whole lot of proof lying around.

"That's my question for you tonight: what kind of proof should I be looking for, and what kind of proof would you need to be convinced that a beloved historical figure had a toe dipped in the supernatural world?"

Shows like this, where I threw open the line for calls right from the start in a freeform brainstorm, were often a crapshoot. I could get a lot of thoughtful discussion and gain some new insight. Or I could end up yelling at people. NPR to Jerry Springer, my show ran the whole spectrum. Brace for impact.

"For my first call tonight I have Dave from Rochester. Hello, Dave."

"Hi, Kitty, thanks for taking my call, it's so great to get through." He sounded suitably enthusiastic—a good opener.

"Thanks for being persistent. What have you got for me?"

"Well. It seems to me you're just assuming that supernatural beings have been around for a long time. This stuff has only been making news for a few years now, and maybe that's because it hasn't been around that long. What if vampires and werewolves are actually the result of some government experiment that got loose and is totally out of control?"

"I can assure you that I'm not the result of some government experiment," I said flatly.

"Well, no, not directly, but maybe it's some virus that escaped and spread, and *that's* where vampires and werewolves came from. *That's* why we don't have any historical evidence."

"On the other hand we have five thousand years of folklore suggesting that these beings have been around for a long time. What about that?"

"Planted. It's all a hoax."

I blinked at the microphone. That was bold, even for this show. "You're saying *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a hoax? That the story of King Lycaon isn't really an ancient Greek myth?"

"That's right. It's all been made up in order to convince people that supernatural beings have been around for thousands of years when they've really only been around since World War II."

"World War II?" I said. "Like some supernatural Manhattan Project?"

"Yes, exactly! In fact—"

Oh, yes, please say it, sink my show to this level in the first ten minutes ...

"—it was the Nazis," Dave from Rochester said.

I clicked the line to a different call. "And that's enough of that. Moving on now, next call please. Hello, you're on the air."

"Hi, Kitty, I'm a big fan of the show," said a female voice, cheerful and outgoing. Suze from L.A. just wanted to say, isn't most of history based on eyewitness accounts? People reporting what they saw? We should have evidence somewhere of people talking about this. But I'm not sure how you go about proving something that no one ever talks about."

I was right on the edge of whipping out that FWP transcript—a report that had lain buried and forgotten because no one believed it. I wanted my proof before I brought it into the light.

Instead I said, "Or maybe people have been talking about it, writing about it, whatever, but those accounts were buried because no one believed them. Which leads me to a big question: How trustworthy are eyewitness testimonies? We depend on them for historical accounts, memoirs,

battlefield reports, so of course this is going to be high on the list. But is one eyewitness's story enough? How about two, for corroboration?"

"The more the better, I guess," she said. "But you still have the problem of separating truth from fiction."

"Exactly. Part of the reason I'm always trying to get vampires on the show is I figure they've got to be some of the best eyewitnesses out there. They've been around for decades, for centuries. Not only have they seen a lot, they often seem to be in the front row, watching events play out. But I gotta tell you, they don't seem particularly interested in sharing what they've learned. I think they really like keeping secrets from the rest of us. That's why we haven't had any vampire celebrity tell-all books yet. Oh, and if there are any vampires out there writing a celebrity tell-all book, please let me know. Thanks for your call, Suze."

Matt flagged a call on the monitor—from a vampire. Ooh, was I going to have my wish granted? I liked nothing better than to feature an exclusive. What were the odds?

"Hello, you're on the air."

"Kitty, if we keep secrets, perhaps it's for your own good." The woman had a faint accent, probably European, topped with a touch of finely aged arrogance.

"So you're a vampire," I said. "May I ask how old you are?"

"You may, but I won't answer."

The usual response; it didn't surprise me. "Oh, well, I always have to try. Thank you for calling. My second question for you: Why do you get to decide what should be kept secret? Don't you think everyone has a right to the truth? Even a dangerous truth?"

"Your attitude about the truth is a bit naïve, don't you think? The truth isn't an artifact you can put in a box and study."

"But I don't want to be lied to outright," I said. "I especially don't want to be told I'm being lied to for my own good."

"Tell me this: What if you did find the definitive proof you were looking for—a DNA test for lycanthropy for example, or a photograph of someone shape-shifting, or proof that someone was killed with a stake or a silver bullet. What would change? Why would it matter? The events surrounding that person's life wouldn't change. Their identity wouldn't really change—just your knowledge of it."

Ben's question again. I kept saying I just wanted to be treated like a human being—that vampires and lycanthropes of any stripe should be allowed to live normal, law-abiding lives. Would exposing any supernatural secret identities damage that? Make them freaks instead of the historical figures they were?

"I guess I'm looking for a connection," I said. "I've been floundering, wondering where I fit in this world. Would having a role model be too much to ask for?"

"I thought being a role model was *your* job," she said, with that haughty amusement that only vampires could manage.

"Oh, heaven help us all," I replied. "But I have to say that yes, it is important. Being a werewolf is an important enough part of my identity that I've been basing a show on it and writing about it for the last five years. If I'm going to be an authority on the subject I really want to be an authority. And that means speculating like this."

"As long as you're aware that you may never find the answers you're looking for," the vampire said.

"Yeah, I'm used to that. Maybe the important thing is to keep asking the questions anyway."

And get other people asking them, too. Keep knocking on the door until someone answered. Or until

they hauled me away and locked me up.

* * *

AFTER THE show I invited Rick, Master of the local vampire Family, to meet me at New Moon, the bar and grill that Ben and I owned. I was careful not to say anything like, “Let’s go for a drink,” or “How about we grab a bite.” Not that Rick would have taken me literally, but I didn’t want to open myself up for the kind of teasing I’d get. Rick was a vampire, feeding on the blood of the living, although I was pretty sure he only drank from volunteers and just enough to stay functional. Still, you had to be careful about what kind of invitations you offered to vampires.

Rick was a friend, and I trusted him. That didn’t mean he told me everything.

He was handsome, with a hint of old-world aristocracy to his fine features and straight bearing. From what I could gather, he came by it honestly—he’d been the younger son of a Spanish noble family who traveled to the New World seeking his fortune in the first wave of immigration in the sixteenth century. I didn’t know if he ever considered his fortune found. He wore an expensive trenchcoat even in summer, a button-up silk shirt, and well-tailored trousers. Perfect, elegant. You couldn’t help but respect him.

“Hi,” I said, letting him through the glass front door. “I’m not even going to ask if I can get you anything to drink.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” he said, glancing around. “Business seems to be doing well.”

The place wasn’t crowded—not surprising at this late hour—but enough people sat here and there to create a friendly buzz.

“Lack of pretension,” I said, guiding him to a table in the back, where my beer was waiting for me. We took seats across from each other. “I think that may be the secret.”

“I think you may be right,” he said. “Now, what’s the problem?”

“Everyone always assumes there’s a problem.”

“This is you we’re talking about,” he said, perfectly good-natured.

“I just wanted to have a nice, friendly chat,” I said. “How’s life—er, unlife—been treating you? What’s new in your neck of the woods?”

“Is that a pun?”

I had to think about it a minute, my brow furrowed. “Ah. Not intentionally.”

If Rick wasn’t laughing at me, he was at least chuckling, and I scowled.

“Nothing to report,” he said. Gaze narrowed, I studied him. “Kitty, I don’t ask about every detail of the workings of your werewolf pack, I’m not going to tell you every detail about my Family.”

“You can’t blame me—I’ve built a career out of gossip.”

“All the more reason for me to keep my mouth shut.”

That wasn’t what I wanted to hear. I blundered on. “I’d like to ask you about a story I’m tracking down. Did you know Sherman?”

“As in General William T.?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m afraid not, though I’m sure he was fascinating.”

I must have looked deflated.

“It’s not like I knew every public figure who lived for the last five hundred years,” he said.

“But you knew Coronado. And Doc Holliday. That’s a pretty amazing roster right there. Five hundred years is a lot longer than most of us get. Do you know anyone who might have known Sherman?”

“Any vampires, you mean?”

“Anyone who might be able to tell me if Sherman was a werewolf.”

He pursed his lips, considering, making him the first person who hadn't looked at the claim with outright skepticism. “What's your information?”

I told him about the interview with the Confederate soldier, and my own hunch, which couldn't exactly be called information. You couldn't tell a werewolf in human form just by looking. Unless maybe you were psychic, which was something to consider. Maybe I could call my friend Tina, psychic with the TV show *Paradox PI*, and see if she could channel Sherman.

“That would be amazing if you could prove it,” he said. “We'd have a whole new perspective on his career.”

“But the only way I can *really* prove it is to test a tissue sample, assuming a testable sample still exists, or talk to someone trustworthy who might have known him.”

“And no one's very excited about exhuming the general's body, I'm guessing.”

“Exactly.”

“Alette's the only one I can think of who would know. She has her fingers in everything, even going back to that period. If Sherman spent any time in D.C., she would know.”

“Sherman spent a ton of time in D.C. She'd have to know,” I said, excited. Alette was the Master vampire of Washington, D.C., and had been in the 1860s. She was already on my list of people to call after talking to Rick. If she didn't know, I'd probably never find out.

“Something to consider,” Rick continued. “Even if she does know, she might not tell you. You're not the only one who's been asking these sorts of questions since lycanthropy and vampirism were made public. Alette could have leaked the information herself if she wanted people to know.”

That vampire sense of superiority again. I shook my head. “She shouldn't be the one to get to decide what people know.”

Rick made a calming gesture, forestalling the rest of my rant. “Consider this: if Alette knew Sherman, knew that he was a werewolf, but hasn't told anyone, it may be because *Sherman* didn't want anyone to know. The secret may be his, and Alette—or anyone else who has the information—may be keeping a promise with him.”

Sherman was dead and gone, he shouldn't get a say in it. Historical public figures were fair game for all kinds of digging, as far as I was concerned. But a vampire's promise went on forever, didn't it? I had a thing about exposing people who didn't want to be exposed. My own lycanthropy had been made public against my will. Afterward, I took the publicity and ran with it as a survival mechanism, but I could understand why Sherman wouldn't want something like this made public. It would overshadow his entire record and all that he'd accomplished. His autobiography—considered one of military history's great memoirs—would become next to meaningless because it doesn't say a word about it. Which meant that maybe he didn't want anyone to know. If Sherman's ghost appeared and asked me to drop the question, what would I do?

Thoughtful, I rested my chin on my hand and said to Rick, “How many promises like that are you keeping?”

Smiling, he glanced away.

“Oh my God, you are,” I said, straightening. “You know. You've got something juicy on somebody famous. What is it? Who?”

“You've gone this long without knowing, why should I say anything now?”

“I just want to know,” I said. “It's important to know that people like me have existed for thousands of years, living their lives, surviving. Roman's been recruiting vampires and lycanthropes for h

secret supervillain club for two thousand years. I have to assume that vampires and lycanthropes have been opposing him as well, like us. To know who they were, to have some kind of history—who knows what it could tell us about his methods? You *know* Roman would have tried to recruit Sherman. I'd love to imagine that Sherman told him to shove it."

Rick sat back. He seemed amused, thoughtful, studying me through a narrowed gaze. As if he was considering.

"What?" I said. I got the feeling I'd said something funny or strange.

"It's a cliché, you know," he said. "Eternal life being boring. Maybe for some of us it is, the ones who lock themselves away in mansions or castles, cut themselves off from the world and the people. For the rest of us, there's always something new coming along, if we know where to look. We stay interested by having a stake in the game."

"The Long Game?" I said. The Long Game, a conspiracy among vampires. The few people who knew about it spoke of it in whispers, in hints, if at all. Near as I could figure, it really was a game, but one that dealt in lives and power. And the one who dies with the most toys wins.

Rick shrugged. "Not always. After all, Kitty, you're one of the people who keeps life interesting."

He gazed over the dining room and bar, waiting for me to respond. I'd already finished my beer or would have taken a long drink. "I'm flattered, I think."

"If you want my advice, you're narrowing your focus too much," Rick said. "Don't just look for the secret vampires and lycanthropes. Look for people who might have hunted them. People like your friend Cormac."

Now there was an idea. "You're not going to give me any hints about where to start, are you?"

"Think about it for a minute. If I met Doc Holliday, who else do you think I might have known?"

Western history wasn't my strong suit, but my knowledge was better than average. I remembered the stories of the Wild West and the O.K. Corral, and a few choice Hollywood treatments of the same, and my eyes grew wide.

"Wyatt Earp?"

Rick just smiled.

Chapter 2

AFTER MY TALK with Rick, I called Alette, vampire Mistress of Washington, D.C. Because that was how little sense of decorum I had.

“Whatever you want to know, I probably can’t tell you,” she said, an amused lilt to her matriarchal tone.

“So does that mean you don’t know, or you know but won’t tell me?”

“Ask your question, and we’ll see.”

“Was General Sherman a werewolf?”

She paused a moment, and I imagined her sitting in the refined Victorian parlor of her Georgetown home, phone to her ear, smiling an indulgent smile. I was asking a favor; I couldn’t force her to tell me. I depended on her kindness. Her tolerance.

“I can’t say,” she said finally, which made me think she knew, and that the answer was yes. Not that I would ever get her to admit that. I let out a growl, and she chuckled. “Did you expect me to say anything else?”

“I had to try,” I said. “I always have to try.”

“Yes, you certainly do. Have you asked Rick?”

“Asked him first. He didn’t know anything about Sherman, but he did bring up Wyatt Earp. I don’t suppose you have any good dirt on him, do you?”

“Well, I don’t know about dirt...”

She told me a story.

In the early 1870s, a group of vampires had traveled west and settled near Dodge City, Kansas, hoping to take advantage of the lawlessness, of people traveling anonymously across the plains—cowboys on cattle drives, prospectors, traders, settlers. They could feed without consequence, kill who they liked, with no one the wiser. But someone noticed, and their den was burned to the ground and a number of them killed. The established East Coast vampire Families heard of the slaughter but never discovered who was responsible—though truth be told they were relieved that the anarchic vampire had been disposed of. Shortly after, Families began sending their own representatives west to establish enclaves in the burgeoning cities, to prevent such lawlessness from happening again. Alette let drop the information that Rick had already been in the region for decades and that the eastern vampires were startled to find one of their kind of his age in the lawless West. I’d have to ask him about that.

The timing of the fire that destroyed the anarchic vampires coincided with the time that Wyatt Earp spent as deputy marshal of Dodge City, and rumor had it that his law-enforcement activities extended to the supernatural. I thanked Alette for the tidbit and promised to keep in touch.

Research into ghost towns and fires in 1870s Kansas followed, and I marked likely spots on a map. Not that burned vampires left any hard evidence behind. I was never going to find solid proof, a diary or letter in Wyatt Earp’s handwriting stating, “Yes, I killed vampires while I lived in Dodge City.” But I hoped to get ... something. That was how, a month later, Ben, Cormac, and I ended up standing in the middle of a stretch of prairie about fifteen miles northeast of Dodge City.

Getting Cormac out here had been a challenge in itself. He was on parole after serving time for manslaughter conviction and officially wasn't allowed to leave the Denver area for the time being. But we were family—Ben was Cormac's cousin, and I was Ben's wife. So that made us cousins-in-law. Or something. We explained to Cormac's parole officer that we were going to visit a dying relative. The story must have been convincing, because Cormac got permission to leave, but we had to make a lot of promises about getting him back to Denver to check in and sign a lot of papers taking responsibility for anything that happened while Cormac was with us.

We'd jumped through all the hoops because I'd wanted his perspective out here. And, if I had to admit it, the perspective of the ghost he'd picked up in prison—a nineteenth-century wizard named Amelia Parker. She was either haunting him, had possessed him, or was just along for the ride. It was a long story.

I asked, but Cormac said she hadn't known Wyatt Earp herself.

"It's not like the movies," he said. "Not everybody knew each other."

"I know that. I figured it was worth asking." I was getting frustrated with everyone treating me like this quest was naïve and silly. It was easy to get frustrated, standing on a stretch of grass that went on for miles with only 140-year-old rumors as a guide.

While he might be an American hero, Earp hadn't been the nicest guy in the world. His name came up in a lot of court cases involving things like running prostitution rings. Much like Sherman and his nervous breakdown, Earp had some missing time in his history, a couple of years when historians couldn't quite track down where he'd been or what he'd been doing. One account had him hunting buffalo across the Great Plains.

I had a feeling he'd been hunting *something*. Not that I had any hard evidence.

Late afternoon, the summer sun was setting, casting a warm golden haze over a landscape of rolling hills, rippling grasses, and a copse of trees leaning over a trickling stream. Birds fluttered, and a swarm of gnats hovered nearby. I could almost smell the sunshine—ripe grass, rich soil, life thriving just out of sight.

Sweating in the sticky air, we'd hiked a couple of miles off the end of the dirt road where we'd had to leave the car. I had a GPS navigator, and according to the coordinates, there used to be a farmstead around here. We fanned out to search for evidence.

"What are we looking for again?" Ben said.

"I don't know," I said. "Timbers, foundations, scraps."

"Fire," Cormac said. His expression was unreadable behind his sunglasses. He wasn't carrying a gun, but he looked like he should have been. He wore a leather jacket over a T-shirt, worn jeans, scuffed biker boots, determined scowl—ready for action. In the pockets of the jacket he was probably carrying something that he—that Amelia—could use as weapons. Amulets, charms, potions, spells. I didn't know what all she could do, through Cormac's body. Cormac would appear to be the wizard to anyone who knew what to look for. You had to really know Cormac to recognize that he wasn't always the one in charge. I tried not to think too hard about it.

"This is like looking for a needle in a haystack without even knowing if the needle is there," Ben said.

"Everyone needs a hobby," I said.

"We don't have a whole lot of daylight for this," Cormac said, glancing west. A bright orange sun had touched the horizon and was sinking fast.

I turned on him, arms out. "I'm sorry. Next time I'll make sure someone puts out neon lights so you know exactly where to go."

“Kitty, calm down,” Ben said.

“I’m calm.” I frowned.

We hunted. I kicked the grass as I walked through it, hoping to uncover something odd, and took slow, easy breaths, searching for incongruous scents. This was silly—what evidence could possibly have lasted after 140 years?

My toe knocked up against a blackened length of wood. I knelt beside it. Half of it was buried, but looked like a board, planed smooth and square at one time, but now it was charcoal, burned through and cracked. It could have been a year old or a hundred, protected from the elements by remaining buried all these years. A recent storm might have uncovered it.

It could have been anything, but my imagination spun the tale I wanted to see. Had this been part of the building that sheltered the rogue vampire family? Had Wyatt Earp really destroyed them by burning it down?

“Hey,” I called to the others. “You want to come look at this?”

They joined me, kneeling on the hard ground, looking to where I pointed—a straight, artificial line under matted prairie grasses.

Cormac moved a couple of steps out, then a couple more, pulling away vegetation, uncovering more of the blackened timber. In a few minutes, he’d traced out a rectangle, maybe ten by twelve. A tiny little house, reduced to a charred foundation.

There was history here. I could feel it. The place had probably belonged to some pioneer family scraping by. Nothing here would speak to the mystery I wanted to solve.

Standing back, hands on hips, Cormac regarded the remains of the building. “Vampires would have dug down. Built themselves a cellar, out of the sun. The structure would have just been there to protect the entrance. Anything else was most likely buried. We won’t find anything unless we dig.”

Digging would involve a lot more time and equipment, not to mention permits from the regional park service that owned the land and the involvement of any archaeology departments interested in mid-nineteenth-century settlements. I hadn’t really expected to find more than this. But the answer felt close, as if I could read them in a book if I could only find the right page.

“Look at this,” Ben said. He’d parted a section of grass and scraped away a layer of dirt just outside the burned foundation to reveal a slender length of wood, blackened but not burned through like the rest. Giving a yank, he pulled it free of the dirt. About a foot long and a couple of inches in diameter, it tapered to a dull point.

“Let me see that,” Cormac said, reaching. Ben handed it to him.

Cormac ran his hand along the length of the aged wood, then hefted it as if testing its weight.

“It’s a killing stake.” He gripped the end of it and made a quick stabbing motion. Kind of like you do to stab a vampire.

“How do you know?” Ben said. “It may have marked out a garden or held down a tarp.”

Cormac tossed Ben the stake, giving him a chance to heft its weight and test its peculiar suitability for stabbing. “It’s a nonnative hardwood. Somebody carved it and brought it here for a reason.”

“I think we’re letting our imaginations get away from us,” Ben said.

“You could say that about this whole trip,” Cormac answered.

I scowled. “I wish we had a metal detector.”

“Maybe see if we can find some silver bullets?” Ben said.

Wouldn’t that be comforting?

We walked over the immediate area, studying the ground for whatever else we might happen to stumble over. We found a few more burned timbers. Everything was old, weathered smooth, and

didn't know enough to be able to guess the age of the buildings that had once stood here.

~~We wouldn't be able to stay out here much longer; the sun was below the horizon now, and the sky had turned a deep twilight blue. The first stars were flickering. We'd only stayed out this late because Ben and my werewolf eyes hardly noticed the change in light. Cormac had pulled a penlight out of his pocket.~~

I was about to call off the hunt when Ben stopped, head cocked as if listening.

"Assuming this was a vampire lair," he said, "and that it really was burned down by Wyatt Earp, or whoever, a century ago—should I be able to still smell vampire here?"

I took in a slow breath, nostrils flaring to scent what he'd noticed. Because no—smells on this landscape faded, washed away, scoured by wind in a matter of weeks. But he was right, a touch of cold lingered on the earth here. It wasn't ice, it wasn't rot, but a distinctive, living cold.

"It's recent," I whispered.

The three of us were statues, waiting for a sign.

A scraping noise pattered against the earth about ten yards away. It might have been a nocturnal rodent emerging from its den. It didn't matter—Ben and I moved next to each other, backs together in a defensive posture.

The undead smell of vampire grew stronger.

"I don't believe it," Ben muttered. I shushed him and looked for Cormac, who stood calmly, hands at his sides.

The earth before us erupted, a fountain of dirt spraying as something forced its way up from underground. A trapdoor, covered with earth, had hidden a cellar. A gray-skinned being emerged, hissing, lips pulled back to show long fangs.

It had been human. It had the shape—torso, thin legs meant to walk upright, slender arms, a hairless head and face with all the right details. But it had shriveled, mutated—drying flesh pulled taut over bones, every knobby joint visible. Under a hanging, threadbare shirt that had rotted away to clinging fibers, the shape of a rib cage stood out, and the concave belly couldn't possibly have held organs. The teeth were yellow, and the eyes that stared at us were clouded, milky. Shredded trousers were even worse off than the shirt.

It moved like a sprinter, straight toward us.

I braced and shouted, hoping to startle it into stopping its charge. Ben was beside me, hands clenched into the shape of claws, teeth bared.

A light flared, like a camera flash that didn't fade, searing into my eyes. Ducking, I put up my arms to block the light, and Ben hunched over with me for protection. The creature stopped, cowering on the ground before us, sheltering under its raised arms, pale eyes squinting against the onslaught.

Cormac held the source of light in his hand, raised above his head. It wasn't the penlight—the penlight was this strong, this pervasive. Instead, he held some kind of stone—something magical. My vision adjusted to the glaring white light. The creature's didn't. It continued writhing, mewling, cowering away from an enemy that was everywhere. This gave us a chance to study it.

"That's not a vampire," Ben said. "It can't be."

The pair of slender fangs, visible when the being bared its teeth at us, said that it was. But I'd never seen anything like this. All the elegance, the arrogance I associated with long-lived vampires was gone. All the humanity was gone, stripped down to pure, undying hunger. A dry, graying tongue worked behind its teeth; the column of its throat trembled under its skin.

It—He? She? I couldn't tell—had to be one of the old group of vampires that had settled here. It had survived the destruction of the lair and remained here, buried, feeding on whatever chanced by.

Starving, rather. For a hundred-plus years. How sad. I reached out for it.

“Stay back.” Ben gripped my shoulder, and I lowered my arm. The vampire only *looked* weak, after all.

“Who are you?” I asked. “How long have you been out here?”

It hissed, its limbs reaching blindly. It kept trying to open its eyes, then ducking away from the light.

“Cormac, you ever see anything like this?” Ben asked.

“No,” Cormac answered.

I said, “We—we can help you.”

“Kitty—” Ben said warningly. Surely the vampire was beyond help.

“We can try to help you,” I revised. “I know people who can help.” I had to call Rick; there had to be something we could do. “Please, what’s your name?”

It—he, I thought, based on the square line of his jaw—closed his mouth. The flesh moved as he ran his tongue along his teeth. Then he inhaled, inflating his lungs—a preparation for speaking. The skin around the rib cage creaked and cracked. How long had it been since he had drawn breath?

“Werewolves,” he said in a rasping whisper. “Filthy animals.”

So that was how it was going to be. The creature’s vampiric elegance may have vanished. The arrogance was still healthy.

“Excuse me, but you’re the one living in a hole in the ground,” I said.

He hissed again, flailing under the light, but it seemed to be held at bay for the moment.

“Why are you here?” I asked, crouching, moving as close as I dared. “Why not leave? Can you at least tell me your name?”

He leaned toward my voice, blinking, mouth working. I wondered if he saw us as food. As if he was trying to figure out how to get at us. If I could just get him to talk ...

I tried again. “I want to find out about Wyatt Earp—”

The ravaged vampire screeched the howl of a cat and held his hands over his ears as if the sound of the words pained him. Startled, I fell back—even Ben took a step back. Cormac didn’t move.

Drawing a rattling breath, the vampire said, “Did he send you?”

Victory. Earp had been here. He’d killed them. My secret history of the world gained another paragraph. Now if only I could get this guy into a studio to record an interview.

“No,” I said. “Wyatt Earp died eighty years ago.”

“Who killed him?” the vampire breathed.

“No one. He died at home of old age.” The vampire had lost all sense of time—did he realize how long he’d been here, stuck? Maybe thinking Earp would return for a final showdown? Was that what he was waiting for? “It all happened a long time ago,” I said.

The vampire shook his head, spreading his mouth wide to show his fangs, tipping back his head and bellow at the sky. Then he jumped at me.

Arms reaching, he launched himself and grasped clawed hands around my neck. I fell back, and he knelt on me, pinning me. He surged toward me with an open mouth, teeth pressing against the skin of my face.

I yelled and kicked. The vampire fell—he hardly weighed anything, but he was fast, and sprang back before I could sit up. This time I grabbed him, managing to hold him away from me, but it was like trying to hang onto an angry badger. An angry, skeletal badger. He clawed, kicked, snarled, and thrashed.

Ben shouted, seemingly right in my ear. The vampire seized, back arcing, ribs straining, face froze

in an agonized grimace. And he disintegrated, ash falling around me like soft snow. So little had been holding him together, he was just gone. A hard, metallic object fell onto my chest.

Ben crouched above me, still stabbing the old stake through the space that used to be the vampire's heart. The point of it was centimeters from my own chest. We looked at each other and tried to catch our breath.

"You okay?" he said finally.

A fine powder of former vampire covered me. I coughed—it smelled like dirt and death. The thought of sucking that ash into my lungs made me cough harder. I wanted to howl. Ben threw away the stake and gripped my shoulders. "Kitty—"

"Yeah. I'm okay." I leaned against him and tried not to think about it. My breathing steadied, and my Wolf settled. "That was crazy."

"I think we're a couple of steps past crazy on this one." He was right, as usual. I tried brushing myself off. The stuff just smeared. I grimaced. My hand knocked off an object—the piece of metal that had dropped onto me. Holding it up, I studied it: round, blackened with age and strung on a length of braided leather, it held the worn lines of a design etched into it. It looked like a coin, heavily tarnished, the size of a nickel. The vampire must have been wearing it.

In the meantime, the light that had flared over the twenty feet around us for the last few minutes had faded.

"What did you do?" Ben asked.

Cormac showed us a clear quartz crystal the size of his thumb. Its luminescence was fading. Another trick of Cormac the wizard. I'd never get used to it.

"You get what you needed here?" Cormac said.

I chuckled, shaking my head. "I guess I did. I knew it. Wyatt Earp, vampire hunter. I just *knew*."

"You still can't prove it," Ben said.

"Yeah, I know. But still." I'd take what little victories I could get. "So what do you guys make of this?" I said, offering the ancient pendant.

Ben took it, ran a thumb over it. "What is that, bronze? Was that thing wearing it? What's it say?"

Cormac took his turn with it, squinting at it. "I don't know. But I'm thinking we should get moving."

Ben held his hand out to me and pulled me to my feet. I brushed myself off, then searched the ground—I had to get back on my knees and feel around for the stake that Ben had tossed aside. It took a few minutes, with Ben and Cormac standing on, impatient.

Ben said, "Kitty—"

"Just a sec." Then I found it, and held it out to study it. A killing stake, Cormac had called it. Over a century old, belonging to Wyatt Earp once. I didn't know that for sure, all the evidence was circumstantial, but this was all the proof I had that vampires had been here. I'd take what I could get.

"Okay, let's go," I said.

"Good," Cormac said.

"If you didn't want to come along you could have just said so," I said.

"Somebody's got to look after you two."

"We were doing fine," I said.

"Then why did you even drag me out here?"

Ben said, "Everybody shut up."

The three of us trekked back to the car. The sun had set; the sky was dark. Every rustle in the breeze made me jump. I needed a shower. I kept scratching my hair and having ash fall out.

We were in sight of the car when I smelled werewolf. Ben stopped me, his hand on my arm, the same time I muttered, “Oh, not now.”

“What is it?” Cormac said.

My shoulders tensed in place of hackles rising. Ben and I stood arm to arm, both of us looking outward, tracking the intrusive scent—skin and fur, that distinctive mix of human and wild, neither one nor the other, and something more. Like us, but strangers. Enemies, even. Werewolves were territorial, and this wasn’t our territory. I had in fact considered that we’d be invading someone else’s territory on this trip. I also figured the chances of doing so in the middle of Kansas were pretty low. So much for that.

A nondescript SUV was parked near Ben’s sedan. There were two of them waiting at the car, one leaning on the hood, his arms crossed, the other standing a few feet away, watching our approach. Both were male, midtwenties, wearing T-shirts and jeans. The one by the car was average height, on the stout side, with a shaggy beard. The other was taller, a square-jawed frat-boy type, straight out of a beer commercial.

“What’s the plan?” Ben whispered.

“We talk. What else?” I said.

“There’s only two. We can take ’em,” he said. Cormac had stepped a little ways to the side, to flank them. I shook my head at him.

“Hi,” I said when we reached spitting distance.

“You mind telling us what you’re doing here?” said the tall one. He curled his lip and bared his teeth. Not a happy camper.

I pointed over my shoulder. “You know you had a starving vampire living in a hole back there. Took care of that for you.”

“Wait a minute,” said his companion. “That voice—I know you. You’re Kitty Norville.”

I straightened and beamed at him. “Yeah, that’s me. You listen to the show?”

Bearded guy glanced at tall guy and looked chagrined, ducking his gaze. “Oh, you know. Once in a while.”

Tall guy frowned even harder. “It’s a dumb show. And it doesn’t explain what you’re doing here.”

“C’mon, Dan. Give her a break.”

The tall guy—Dan—just glared at me. I glared right back. Ben and Cormac had taken up tough-guy poses, like bodyguards. I almost yelled at them to just chill out, I could handle it.

“I’m doing some research,” I said. “I didn’t expect to be here long enough to ruffle any fur.”

“What’s this about a vampire?”

This wasn’t going to make any more sense when I explained it to him. “Is there a restaurant or diner or something where we can maybe grab a cup of coffee and talk about this like human beings?”

Dan squinted, apparently confused. “What?”

His buddy tapped his arm. “I told you, it’s Kitty Norville. That’s her thing. You’d know if you’d listened to her show.” Dan glared at him, and his compatriot’s shoulders slouched, cowering.

I crossed my arms and regarded them. Bearded guy was a fan, which was cool. But Dan was the more dominant werewolf and had decided I sucked. If I appealed to the weaker wolf, that would piss off Dan even more. But Dan didn’t seem inclined to be sympathetic.

“I really don’t want to step on toes,” I said. “We can just get out of here—”

“Tell me about the vampire,” he said, stepping in front of the driver’s-side door.

Ben tensed up and approached the guy—about as aggressive a move as he could make. Cormac looked relaxed, but he held his hands in the pockets of his jacket, probably holding onto something

weaponish.

I went to stand in front of Ben, holding his arm, willing him to relax. I didn't want a fight to start—not because I thought we'd lose, but because I was pretty sure we *wouldn't*, and I didn't want to leave any messes.

“Short version,” I said. “I got some information that a den of vampires settled here about a hundred and fifty years ago, and that Wyatt Earp might have been the vampire hunter to finish them off. Cool, huh? So I came out here looking for evidence. And, well, it turns out Deputy Marshal Earp didn't get them all, you know?” I held up the stake, as if that explained it all, as if it looked like something other than a stray twig we'd found. “I'd have called to ask for permission first, but werewolf alphas aren't exactly listed in the phone book.” But maybe they should be. There was an idea ...

Dan's stare had changed from a werewolf's stare of challenge to a purely human stare of bafflement. “Huh?”

“Oh my gosh, *really?*” said his friend. “Wyatt Earp hunted vampires?”

“Mike, shut up, let me handle this,” Dan said.

“Yeah,” I said, talking around Dan to Mike. “I want to do a whole show on it if I can get enough information.”

“Both of you, shut up!” Dan said.

“She's telling the truth. You can smell the damn thing all over her,” Ben said. Their noses wrinkled. Clearly, they could.

“So,” I went on. “Are you guys part of a big pack around here or is it just the two of you?” I tried to look innocent.

Dan put his hands to his temples and made a noise like a growl.

“Dan—hey Dan,” Mike said, reaching for his friend, tentative. “You okay?”

Taking a deep breath, getting ahold of himself, Dan straightened. “One more time. What are you doing here?”

“I already told you,” I said, quiet and straightforward this time. I didn't want to push him any further.

“You're not here to take over?” Dan said.

“Why the hell would we want to take over Dodge City, Kansas?” Ben said.

Mike and Dan didn't answer, because Ben had a point. Instead, Dan nodded at Cormac. “And who are you? You're not a werewolf.”

“Nope,” Cormac said. “I'm just along for the ride.”

Dan looked at us, disbelieving. We must have made a strange picture.

“Look, seriously, I'm really sorry if we freaked you out,” I said. “We have rooms in a hotel on the other side of town, but if you don't want us here, say so, and we'll just ... we'll just...” Oh God. I couldn't bring myself to say it.

“Get the hell out of Dodge?” Dan said, raising his eyebrows.

I shrugged. Ben was holding his forehead like he had a headache.

“No offense,” Dan said. “But I'd feel better if you weren't anywhere within a hundred miles of here.”

There wasn't much of anything within a hundred miles of here. Leaving would mean driving all night. But staying meant picking on these guys, which didn't feel particularly productive or necessary.

“All right. We'll leave. Thanks for understanding,” I said. I waved at the guys, and we headed for the car. Dan and Mike stepped out of the way.

Then the pair had a brief, whispered conference. Dan still looked sullen, but Mike was bouncing

Dan gave a frustrated shrug, throwing his arms up and stalking away, and Mike turned to me. I really was bouncing, his eyes alight. Confused, I regarded him until he slunk toward me.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I really don't mean to bother you. But—could I get your autograph?"

* * *

MIKE GOT his autograph on a piece of scratch paper, and then we were driving west, looking for a hotel that wasn't within a hundred miles of Dodge City. I'd been looking forward to a hot, cleansing shower at the hotel. I itched, and every time I scratched, a fine powder of ash rose up from me. I pulled on my ponytail, shook my hair, and created a cloud of dust. Ben, who was driving, sneezed.

"Sorry," I muttered.

"Don't apologize," he said. "The whole thing's pretty funny when you think about it." He was smirking. I couldn't tell if he was laughing at the situation or at me.

"I'm trying not to think too hard about it," I said.

From the backseat Cormac said, "We probably could have just checked into the hotel and those guys never would have known."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I told them we'd leave so we left."

"I'm just saying," he said.

"It's too late to bitch about it now." My phone rang, and I dug it out of my pocket and flipped open. Someone calling at this hour of night could only have bad news. "Hello?"

"Kitty. It's Anastasia."

Bad news. Right. The hair on the back of my neck rose, tingling. I didn't need this now.

"Hi," I said. Ben glanced at me, concerned at the sudden change in my tone of voice.

"I need help."

"Is it Roman?"

"Yes, it is," Anastasia said. Her voice was hushed but not panicked, as if she was in hiding but not in immediate danger. Not that she'd stop to call if she was facing down Roman *right now*. At least, I hoped not.

"What's happening? Where is he? Where are *you*?"

"San Francisco. When can you get here?"

I blew out a breath. "Not for a while—I'm in a car in the middle of Kansas right now."

"Kansas?"

"Never mind. Are you in trouble? What's going on?"

She took a deep breath, gathering air for a speech. "I'm safe for the moment. I've kept ahead of him. Roman is here looking for an artifact of immense power. I know where it is—I can get to it first. But he's brought allies with him."

"You need foot soldiers, then," I said, frowning. I wanted a chance to stop Roman, certainly. I didn't really want to be cannon fodder.

"I wouldn't have called you if I didn't think you could handle it," she said, and maybe she believed that, and maybe she just wanted to use me as a decoy while she got the goods, this artifact. Which, I had to admit, made me curious. Immense power, huh?

Cormac had shifted forward to lean in between the front seats, and Ben was glancing at me from the driver's seat.

"It'll be a few days before I can get there," I said.

"He hasn't moved yet," Anastasia said. "If I have to do this on my own, I will, but I could use help. Should I wait for you?"

Glancing at Ben and Cormac I said, "Let me call you back." I clicked off the phone and put it away.

"Well?" Ben said. "I heard 'Roman' and 'help.'"

"A terrible combination, isn't it? So—do you want to go to San Francisco?"

"And do what? Stand between two ancient, all-powerful vampires? Not particularly."

"You know how I feel about vampire politics," Cormac said, grimacing.

"This isn't exactly vampire politics," I said. "It's bigger than that. I think."

Ben chuckled, but the sound was bitter. "So we run off on the next quest before the last one is even done. You keep getting us wrapped up in this shit, and you want to have kids? How would that work?"

I sank back in the seat and glared out the window. "It's a moot point anyway so why bring it up?"

"There's adoption. We've talked about this."

I didn't want to talk about it. Not right now. Ben was making me face the question, yet again—did I have any business being a mother? How did someone be a mother and a crusader at the same time?

If I had kids, would Roman come after them?

"If I don't go, who will? What happens the next time Roman decides to take us out?"

Cormac shrugged. "This Roman character can't be as badass as all that."

"Oh, I think he can," Ben said.

The hunter's lip curled; he liked a challenge.

"I'm just not sure I can actually help. What does Anastasia expect me to do, talk Roman into submission?"

"You stood up to him once," Ben said.

That didn't mean I wanted to stand up to him again. Once was enough. On the other hand, Anastasia and I had a chance to stop him, I'd rush to San Francisco.

"Amelia's game," Cormac said.

"Does she get a vote?" I said.

Cormac glared at me, but maybe it wasn't Cormac doing the glaring. Yes, then.

"This isn't your fight, you don't have to go," I said.

"Will Porter even let you go?" Ben said. "I know we got you a few days off for this, but San Francisco?" Porter was Cormac's parole officer.

"I'm a model student," Cormac said. "He'll let me."

I wondered sometimes if wizard Amelia had some kind of spell to put the whammy on Porter—let Cormac get away with so much. But I wasn't going to complain; I'd feel better with Cormac watching our backs. Not that I would necessarily say that out loud.

Ben said, "We go to San Francisco, then. Check things out. But we get out of there the minute things go south."

"Too bad I don't usually notice things have gone south until it's too late to run," I said.

The silence I got in reply to that was a little too pointed.

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