

g u t t e r

GRAVE ECHOES

A KATE WATERS MYSTERY

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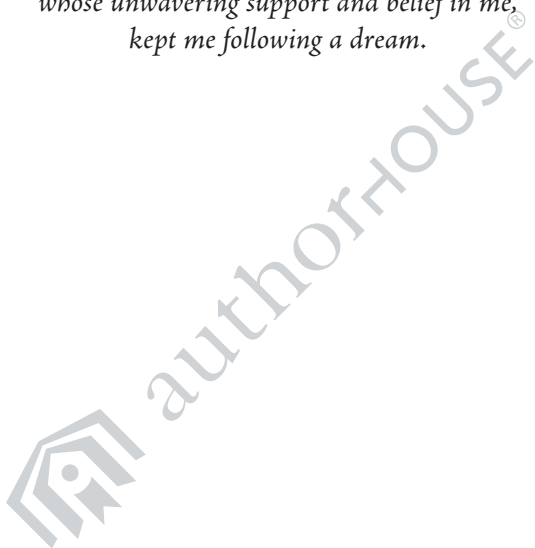
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*To my husband, Vasile,
whose unwavering support and belief in me,
kept me following a dream.*





PREFACE

This novel began from an unusual nightmare I had—the one that Kate has in her house on the couch. About $\frac{3}{4}$ through the novel completion, a tragic death hit my family. It paralleled Jev's death in many ways. After that, I threw this manuscript in the fire. I wanted to burn the devil out of those pages—Kate's nightmare had become my own. But through the incredible strength of my sister, Chris, and her three wonderful children: Amber, Katie, and Scott; and knowing that my brother-in-law of 20 years died pursuing a better life for him and his family, I was able to finish the novel. But it wasn't just a book to me anymore; it became a resurrection of hope. Kate Waters follows a similar path. Unknowingly, we both became the wolf.



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*“That’s the thing with magic.
You’ve got to know it’s still here,
all around us,
or it just stays invisible for you.”*

—Charles de Lint





CHAPTER 1

No, not again, she thought. Kate felt so tired, heaviness seeped into her like mud. After an exhausting move in with her boyfriend David, she needed to relax for a few moments, just enough to rest her eyes. Five minutes, that was all. But sleep softened over her and she slipped into an unconsciousness so deep, body and soul detached. Her worst nightmares followed this kind of sleep. The doctors said these episodes would feel like they were really happening, but to remember they were only hallucinations, a common feature of sleep paralysis. Except this was the third time this week.

Something cold pressed against Kate's face and she wondered if it was the steering wheel. The same suffocating pressure came at her again, as if someone was pushing her down. She tried to move her legs, but they were lifeless and felt disconnected from the rest of her. She couldn't lift her arms, or even feel them, and then she recalled having wrapped them around the steering wheel where her head lay. Her shoulder sockets stretched as the weight of her torso slumped into them. She couldn't move her hands, eyes, or mouth. Nothing. She was completely paralyzed. *It'll be over soon*, she said to herself.

Outside the jeep, she heard the loud drone of a car, an engine gunning. The shrill squeal of tires screeched and Kate's heart kicked in her chest—she sat helpless in the car,

unable to brace herself for a possible collision. She wasn't even wearing a seatbelt. Even though adrenaline coursed through her body, her muscles continued to disregard every impulse to move.

A deafening crash exploded, and the sound of shattered glass and twisted metal blasted through the street, coalescing into an awful clamor of destruction. Pieces of the wreckage clanged against the pavement. Iron and metal scraped against asphalt. Kate imagined the brutal force of the wreckage would slam into her any second, hurling her comatose body like a child's doll. But the collision didn't occur. Quietness returned with a whisper, a muffled voice that sounded like her sister, Jev. Kate couldn't make out what Jev was saying, though it had the distinct edge of fear, one that she hadn't heard in Jev's voice since their mother had died two years ago.

'Jev!' Kate tried to call out. She still couldn't move. Jev's voice disappeared, and that is when Kate saw her—blood trailing down her face and dribbling over her lip. Fear ripened in Kate's mind. *Was this all part of the hallucination?*

Her vision shifted again, and Kate noticed something shiny and gold on the floorboard of the passenger's seat. She knew what it was. She had seen it before, in her last hallucination. A gold key. It was uncommonly long and brassy with a Celtic knot twisted at the base. For the first time, she could see letters inscribed along the stem..., T. C., ...and a third, but the image disappeared when Kate heard the clap of footsteps approaching. Whether they were real or imaginary, she couldn't tell.

A woman shouted, her voice unfamiliar to Kate. Whoever she was, she cried out in panic and Kate presumed she was the source of the women's alarm, paralyzed and slumped in the driver's seat of her Jeep. Desperate to move, she knew the harder she fought her cemented hell, the worse it would

get. *Relax, breathe in and out five times...*but pounding on the window startled her. Kate suddenly broke through her concrete shell, jerking awake and emerging like a gargoyle statue coming to life. Her body shook violently. She flailed her arms trying to grab onto something. With great difficulty, she lifted her head, her body sluggish and heavy. Brightness swallowed her. Through blurred vision, she could see the silhouette of someone standing outside the car. It wasn't Jev. Kate clutched onto the wheel and sat up. Her eyes glanced at the door locks. The red strip indicated they were locked. Not knowing who was outside, she felt reassured by the security.

"Kate?" the woman called out. "Are you okay?" A girl's eyes were wide upon her. The black of her pupils swelled into the iris until there was only a thin ring of cobalt remaining. "Kate, it's me, Terry. Jev's neighbor."

Through the combination of voice and name, Kate recollected her. She reached for the lock and opened the door, her arm moving stiff like machinery. Terry reached for Kate's shoulder, steadying her as she stepped from the jeep. A cool breeze, tinged with the dank sweetness of fall, roused Kate's awareness.

"Are you all right?" Terry asked again.

Kate nodded, although she didn't feel right. She glanced around the neighborhood, looking for the wreckage she'd just heard. The cars parked along the curb, free of damaged fenders and windows, suggested nothing had occurred.

"I'm okay, but what about the accident?" Kate asked. Terry appeared confused. "I thought I heard a wreck." She looked down at Terry, noticing her skirt and white blouse were clean and unwrinkled, not like someone who had just been in a car accident.

"What wreck?" Terry's eyes flitted sideways at the street and back to Kate. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, I just fell asleep." Kate turned to the surrounding houses, expecting to see people gawking out their doors and windows, wondering what happened too, but she and Terry were the only ones visible in the neighborhood.

"I'm sorry for waking you," Terry said. Her eyes were still distended with concern, though the fear Kate saw in them a moment ago, had dissipated. "I saw you hunched over...I thought something was wrong."

"Sometimes I have sleep attacks." Anticipating Terry's frown, Kate elaborated. "The doctors call it narcolepsy; it's just a fancy word for a sleep disorder."

"I see," Terry said. Kate sensed she didn't.

"Jev's been fixing up her place; looks real nice," she said, changing the topic. "Are you watching Jev's house for her?" Terry looked down the driveway.

"No...Did she go somewhere?" The comment troubled Kate. She hadn't been able to reach Jev, and she didn't think her sister would leave town without telling her.

"Oh...", Terry paused. Her manicured hand came up to her mouth as if to stop further mention of Jev's personal activities. "Well, she left last night with what I thought was an overnight bag. I just assumed she went out of town."

"What time did she leave?"

"Maybe 10:30 pm. Some time around then."

Kate glanced around the yard, wondering if Jev had gone over to Sean's house. They had been spending more time together, a romance she didn't necessarily approve of since Sean was her coworker. Her job as a geologist and evacuation specialist for the Pacific Northwest Geological Survey had always been a positive escape from family and friends and she regarded the mingling of the two as an invasion on her privacy. Jev found Sean intelligent and gregarious, and he thought she was refreshing and eccentric. Kate believed they were both too much alike, but she felt ill equipped to

offer opinions on relationships, since she had been single and downhearted for months before she met David and had been close to accepting celibacy as a new lifestyle.

She looked back at Terry. "She's probably staying with her boyfriend."

"Oh, right," Terry said, nodding.

"If you see her around today, would you mind telling her to give me a call?"

"Sure," Terry replied and then walked across the street to her silver Prius. Kate waited for her to leave, watching the golden spray of leaves whirl across the street behind her car as she drove off. Dusk was nearing and a gentle breeze fanned through the neighborhood. The rustling of brilliant red, yellow, and orange leaves flickered in the canopy of branches above, reminiscent of Kate's pulse, which still palpitated from her hallucination. The bloody image of Jev. The visions were getting stronger. She glanced around the neighborhood one more time, before going into Jev's house. Everything looked normal. *It was only a hallucination.*

Retrieving Jev's spare key hidden underneath a ceramic toad, Kate opened the front door and stepped inside the living room. A log-framed pine-colored futon and several lush houseplants furnished the room. In the center, above the fireplace, hung a Steve Lyman painting of a wolf in the snow, staring back at the viewer. Jev loved wolves and believed they were kindred spirits, sharing roots with the earth and the night. Maybe Jev was just breaking away from her pack for a few days, Kate thought.

On the coffee table, she noticed an empty mug, a plate of crumbs, and a pillow on the floor. It looked as if Jev had been home recently. She crossed the living room and went into the kitchen, looking through drawers for a pen and paper. If Jev wasn't answering her phone, Kate wondered if her sister could avoid the traditional "note."

A row of mason jars, filled with roots and herbs, lined the counter. Kate picked one up and turned it around to read the label. "Horehound Root." She shook her head, thinking how Jev would make an excellent candidate for *Fear Factor*. Eating bowls of maggots, tiptoeing over coals, sitting in a pool of snakes—they were all things Jev would have the guts to do. She, on the other hand, couldn't even watch the show and was more likely to be a contestant on *Jeopardy* or *Wheel of Fortune*.

Kate set the container back down on the counter, and found a tablet and pen in a desk tray. She asked that Jev contact her right away, but she didn't mention why. That her sleep attacks were worsening. That each episode she'd experienced this week had visions of a gold key and Jev, who always seemed distressed and hurt. Kate kept telling herself they were probably just neurological fragments of random memory. Although, these were different from those she normally had. Panic and mild delusions dominated many of them, but they had never lasted as long or came on as often. And, they never repeated.

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There were no messages on the machine when Kate arrived home. Disappointed and a little irritated, she set her keys on the bureau next to the phone, wondering why her sister hadn't called her yet. It wasn't unusual for Jev to retreat into hiding, but considering Kate had just moved to the outskirts of town with her new boyfriend, one that Jev reminded her she hardly knew, she thought her sister would at least want to check in on her. Maybe Jev was just trying to give her and David space to settle in. After all, it was a big move, shifting from the convenience of city life to the

isolation of the suburbs. Still, another reason for a check-in call, Kate thought, especially when it came to sisters.

She heard David in the kitchen and went in to see what he was doing. Normally he worked Saturday nights, but he'd taken a vacation day to fix the place up when she'd decided to move in with him. He had wanted to rejuvenate the classic two-story farmhouse since he and his ex-wife, Robyn Bradshaw, had moved in several years before, but remodeling plans had ceased when they divorced. The old charm of the country home, close in proximity to Mt. Hood and the Columbia River, had always appealed to David. Yet, for just himself, it was too big. Then he'd met Kate.

"The rooms look great," Kate said, noticing a fresh coat of ginger-colored paint on the walls, and white trim on the floorboards and ceiling.

David glanced over his shoulder and stepped down from the ladder. "Hey," he said with brightening eyes. The shadow of a beard swathed his jaw line and upper lip. Because his job as a paramedic at the Providence Medical Hospital required him to keep his beard trimmed, he took pleasure in the shaggy growth during his off days.

He sent the hammer down and walked over to her, reaching for her arms. His lips met hers slowly. Kate returned his kiss, but it came stiff. David noticed it.

"Something wrong?"

Kate licked her lips, catching the faint taste of hops from the beer he was drinking. "I had another sleep paralysis and hallucination."

"Another one?"

"With terrible visions this time."

He reached for her wrists where he could feel her pulse and then pulled her to him. "You seem worried. Is it the hallucinations or Jev?"

"Mostly Jev. I talked with her neighbor, Terry. She thinks Jev left town."

David let go of her wrists to take a sip of his beer. "Jev has done this before, right?"

"Yeah, but she usually returns my phone calls and always tells me when she's actually going to leave town." His Lycra shirt accentuated the firmness of his body underneath and Kate started to feel some of the difficulties of the day melt away with the heat of his sweat, the strength of his hold. It felt good to be with someone again.

"She's probably just finding herself," David replied.

Kate imagined so, but didn't say anything. David moved his face in front of hers. She noticed that his almond-brown hair matched his hazel eyes tonight. Sometimes his eyes were green, like a desert cactus, but now, he had a mellowness about him that brought light to his face, softening his features. He kissed her on the lips and stepped back on the ladder.

"Give her a call tomorrow, invite her over for dinner. I know Jev wouldn't turn down a home-cooked meal." He sunk a nail into a bracket to mount the blinds on the wall.

"I don't want to bug her," Kate said.

He lifted the frame of the blinds into the bracket. "She's your sister. You're supposed to bug her."

Kate smiled and sat down at the table. "You know, I am the little sister. She's supposed to be taking care of me."

"Well, now she's got Sean to take care of her."

Kate thought about that, but she didn't think Sean had it in him to take care of Jev. Not because he wouldn't try, but because she didn't think his qualities were of any use to Jev. She needed a man with heroic traits, a superman who could spin her world around, or a James Bond who could lure her into a world of intrigue and mystery. Neither of which she saw in Sean. He was good looking, with dark hair and bright blue eyes, but he seemed too young for Jev—too normal.

David turned to Kate. "Maybe it's time she took care of herself."

"That'd be a rainy day in heaven." Kate took a drink of David's beer and set it back down on the table next to a bowl of pretzels.

"Tell me about your hallucination," David said.

Kate didn't really want to recap the nightmare, or embarrassing incident, one of many she'd had before. In college, she'd entered into a sleep study at Oregon Health and Sciences University where they had attached monitors to record her REM sleep patterns. She received a diagnosis for narcolepsy and was given treatment options. Usually, her disorder comprised of insomnia and the occasional paralysis, nothing to take medication for, rather than the bizarre hallucinations she'd been having lately.

"Why do you think your hallucinations are so severe this time?"

"I'm not sure. Stress usually induces more insomnia and sleep attacks, but I've never had hallucinations quite like this before."

"I think you should get a refill on your medication." He turned to look at Kate.

She nodded, agreeing, but couldn't stop thinking about Jev's well-being. "Maybe Jev's been staying with Sean," she said, switching the topic. "He hasn't really said anything to me though."

"Maybe because he's more like you, not wanting to mix his work with his personal life. I'm sure she'll get in touch with you soon."

"You're probably right," she said, though still unconvinced.

She took another drink from David's beer. Outside the window, the porch light illuminated tall grasses in the corner of the yard. They waved animatedly in the wind. It was there

that Kate had had her first hallucination this week, after she'd fallen asleep in the lawn chair. It was the first time she had seen the gold key and heard Jev's muffled cry, though Jev hadn't been bleeding in that one. When Kate had finally woke from her paralysis and could move again, the grasses had been swaying in front of her then too, dancing wildly, as if expressing her own fear. That something terrible was going to happen or had already happened. Kate realized it had been two days when she had last spoken with Jev. It wasn't completely uncharacteristic of Jev to go into hiding, but past experience had taught Kate it was more than enough time for her to find trouble.

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Missing the fir tree by inches, his car skidded to a stop. Steam choked and sputtered from under the hood of the other car, a crumbled mess of metal stuck against the base of an old cedar. He stepped out of the pickup in his brown boots and flicked the cigarette behind him, exhaling the sweet smoke from his puckered lips. He reached behind the driver's seat, pulled out a large flashlight with a long black handle, and clicked it on.

He hadn't expected to chase her down, or anybody for that matter. Nobody was supposed to find out. He was forced to do this. What the fuck was she doing there anyway, spying on him? *She brought it on herself*, he cursed, walking over to the wreckage. Bits of glass, scattered across the pavement, sparkled underneath the lights that still shone from the crumpled car, like wet diamonds. He walked around it, careful not to disturb the scene. He could see her hunched over in the car. She wasn't moving but that didn't mean she was necessarily dead. No airbag was deployed; an older model like that probably didn't have them.

He looked away from the car's headlights, toward the debris strewn across the road, looking for something small, gold-plated, and tarnished with age. But in this dark weather, the sheen of glossy, wet pavement could hide just about anything.

He scanned the perimeter of the car and found nothing. It must still be in the car somewhere, he concluded, peering into the passenger window. Trash littered the seats and floor. *Why did she have to be a goddamn pack rat?* he thought. How was he ever going to find what he was looking for in this shithole?

He walked around to the driver's side of the car. She lay hunched over, her head in the passenger seat. She hadn't buckled her seat belt—all the better for him. He stopped when he noticed something in her hand. Leaning through the window, he uncurled her fingers and withdrew a black bracelet with a pentacle on it. Disappointed it wasn't something more important, he threw it behind him, and then lifted her wet hair aside. Blood trickled down her milky-white throat. He placed two fingers against her carotid artery. No pulse. She was dead. A surge of relief warmed him—he didn't want to have to kill her, not by choking her or hitting her over the head with the flashlight. No, this had to look like an accident. And it was, he convinced himself, an accident he couldn't avoid and one that she deserved. She shouldn't have been meddling in his business.

He put his glove back on and lit another cigarette, taking a quick drag. It was time to get down to business, no time to waste. Another car could drive by at any minute. He had to cover his tracks and find that fucking key.