

CHAPTER THREE

You accumulate a lot of day-to-day experiences with people when you share a wall between you. The house was separated into two flats, but we shared bills, so it wasn't a big step to things like sharing recipes and cat care tips, fixing plumbing disasters, or cleaning out each other's pockets at poker. Three years had made Carson Saunders and Jake Tanaka great housemates. But their willingness to pitch in without hesitation in real emergencies—like getting Christopher MacSimidh to the ER—was what made me love them like brothers.

I'd never seen a more welcome sight than the two of them hastening into my living room. Physically they were as different as night and day. Jake, of Asian-American extraction, was slim and youthful, while hulking, broad-shouldered Carson, with his twice-broken nose, was as white as white bread and looked like he ought to be driving a semi and gulping down coffee in a highway truck stop. His wardrobe on the other hand was pure Seattle, or at least pure Capitol Hill, a neon pink tank top and

tight-fitting black jeans that set off Jake's yuppie uniform of pressed khakis and a navy Izod shirt so well starched that even its alligator logo looked uncomfortable. But the sight of me holding up a dazed, bleeding total stranger triggered identical expressions of shocked concern across their faces—and calm, steady, efficient action as they helped me get the situation under control.

A step behind his partner and armed with his first aid kit, Jake took immediate charge, shooting directions at Carson: help him get Christopher settled back down, call 911, and see to me. Carson took care of the latter two tasks at once. With one hand he grabbed my phone and started punching buttons; with the other, with a gentleness that ran counter to his size, he took my bike helmet off my head. That made me blink in dazed confusion since I'd completely forgotten I was still wearing it.

"I'd like to report an accident," he rumbled into the phone, his gray eyes searching mine as he spoke. To me he added, "Ten words or less, kiddo. What happened?"

My mind jolted, but with Carson on the phone for help that very instant, I had no time to stall. "Uh, I was biking home on Burke-Gilman—he fell! Hit his head!"

Which was true. But dread rolled through me as I tried to figure out what else I could tell the boys. I downloaded eight gigs over quota this month, here's twenty extra dollars for the DSL bill—I could handle that. Your stove has just exploded and

the fire department is on the way—no problem. But I was attacked by a monster tonight?

I wasn't ready to admit it to anybody if I was going insane. Even my own housemates.

Carson nodded at me as he rattled off a concise summary of the situation and a thank-you for the dispatcher on the line, and then hung up. "Ambulance on the way," he reported. "Should be only a few minutes. That boy going to be okay, Jake?"

Jake bandaged Christopher's head, critically looked into each of his eyes, and pronounced, "Probable concussion. He's going to need stitches, but I've got the bleeding under control." Then he glanced my way. "Kendis, you said he fell?"

His gaze was just as searching as his partner's, and embarrassment flooded through me along with the dread. I pulled in a few deep breaths, and fought to look as far from having a nervous breakdown as possible.

"On the trail, pretty hard," I said, taking some comfort in the presence of help and more help on the way. But I was still uneasy; I could almost smell the troll. My shoulder was oddly warm where Christopher's head had lain, and when I reached a hand up to that spot, I felt a damp stickiness along my shirt. His blood.

Every nerve between my fingertips and my brain tingled sharply, setting off my headache once more. In that same instant Christopher stirred, and as his eyes flickered open, I jerked as

though I'd been smacked upside the head myself.

I barely heard Jake reproving me, "With a head injury like this, you shouldn't have moved him."

"Didn't have much of an option..." My reply came out thin and reedy, and the next thing I knew, I was trembling violently. Carson took me by both my shoulders, heedless of the stains on my shirt, and turned me around to give me an easy nudge off down the hallway.

"We're taking care of your friend, kiddo," he assured me. "He'll be okay. Now go take a minute or two and take care of yourself."

The chance to flee was a benediction. I seized it, stumbling into my bedroom to fetch fresh clothing, and then into the bathroom to change. As bathrooms went, mine wasn't much. It was small, with old tile that needed caulking and a long crack that spider-webbed its way across one side of the sink. But it was mine, it was private, and there wasn't a single monster anywhere within it. Right then, that made it paradise.

I got him help. He's going to be all right.

Now it was okay to freak. The act of acknowledging that let me release a little tension. Safely out of sight of anyone else, I leaned against the door, shook a little, and cried. It took me a full minute before I was able to make myself move, peel off my sweaty, bloodstained clothing, and throw the garments into the tub. The effort alerted me to half a dozen scrapes and bruises

all over me, small points of pain standing out against the background noise of exhaustion. More distinct than anything else, my head pounded. So once I got my clean shirt and shorts on, I lurched for the sink to splash cold water on my face.

Then I straightened to reach for the medicine cabinet and the bottle of ibuprofen I kept in it. I got a look at myself in the mirror. And I froze.

Most people would chalk me up as your basic offspring of a mixed-race marriage. I had skin people of poetic bent called café au lait and which I called, to myself at least, 'my daddy shagged a white woman' brown. I had in-between hair, a thick umber mane that resisted dreadlocks, braids, and every other form of styling. And I had Dad's features, or so my Aunt Aggie always told me, which I liked; all of Dad's pictures pegged him for a looker of the Denzel Washington variety.

Last time I'd checked, though, my eyes had been the color of dark chocolate. They weren't any longer. They were a rich, uncanny shade of yellow, and they gleamed like gemstones.

Somewhere between my brain and my mouth, the signal to scream got lost. All I got was a tiny, mindless gurgle, and it took Carson rapping on the bathroom door to jolt me back into semi-functional awareness. "Kendie, kiddo, you okay in there?" he called.

"Y-yeah, I'm fine. Just washing my face!"

I soaked my face again; I rinsed each eye with both water

and the Visine from the medicine cabinet. It didn't help. Neither did frenetically wiping down the mirror with a washcloth to try to make the reflection revert to what should have been normal. Nothing else was wrong with me, aside from weariness and bruises—I checked that, too. But my eyes remained an unrelenting yellow.

Hallucinating, it's shock and I'm hallucinating, got to be!

Right on the verge of bolting back out into the living room to corner Jake and have him look me over, I stopped dead. Christopher's last confused words looped through my head, muddled at first then snapping into clarity as my overloaded brain parsed his accent: Are they supposed to be that color?

If I was hallucinating, what was up with him?

If I wasn't hallucinating, why hadn't Jake or Carson said anything? I mean, yeah, busy and all with the hurt guy on my couch—but shouldn't one of them have noticed?

What the hell was going on?

My doorbell, the front door opening, and new voices in the living room alerted me that the ambulance had arrived—and that pushed me into the next impulse decision of the evening. I catapulted back out to rejoin the others before I could get another glimpse of the eyes that didn't belong in my reflection. As I emerged, I yelled out to the pair of EMTs carefully settling a dazed-eyed Christopher onto a stretcher, "Don't leave without me—I want to come with him!"

One of the EMTs, a white woman with short dark hair, glanced up and nodded briskly at me. She had the same look of immediate, focused business I'd seen Jake wear a lot before he'd retired. "We'll have room in the back, but you'll have to come right now. We're about to take him on out." That was all the attention she spared me, as she and her partner got Christopher secure and hoisted the stretcher up.

"You sure about this?" Carson asked me, his iron-colored brows knitting together. He got the door for the EMTs, holding it open while they carried their burden outside.

"We'll follow in my car," Jake said. Though he didn't echo his partner's question out loud it practically shone right out of his eyes, turning them luminous with anxiety. "You'll need a ride back here."

After what I'd just seen in my mirror, I dodged both their gazes under the cover of dashing out the door after the EMTs—and the man who'd attacked a monster on my behalf. "I'm sure," I blurted, "and I will. Thanks, guys!"

They flashed me reassuring smiles, and neither one missed a beat as they followed me out of the house. Jake swept up his first aid kit as Carson closed and locked after us, only now finally bothering with the niceties of keys. As he did I got a glimpse of Fortissimo in the kitchen, face down in his food dish and inhaling the cat food one of the boys must have fetched him while I was in the bathroom.

Jake and Carson: my housemates. My surrogate brothers. And right then, as far as my cat was concerned, gods among men.

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The ambulance ride to the University of Washington Medical Center was too quick to make more than a fleeting impact on my memory. But I recall the speed, and the siren, and the evening's earlier twilight gloom turning into a full-blown shower. Later I'd realize the rain was out of season for August, but right then all I noticed was the noise of heavy raindrops on the roof of the ambulance, noticeable even as we zoomed down Sand Point Way and swung around onto 45th. I remember Christopher staring at me in agitation just before passing out again, and the other EMT, riding in back with us, assuring me 'my boyfriend' was going to be okay.

Distracted as I was, I could still catch the trace of uncertainty in the EMT's voice. He was a young guy with a blond buzz cut, and a soul patch on his chin; he couldn't have been much older than me, and he had that earnest, worried look I see sometimes in white people's eyes as they try to figure me out. "Thanks, but he's not my boyfriend," I explained. My tone was flat, but I didn't have the energy to care. Nor did I reach for Christopher's hand, though I thought about it. I didn't want to give the EMT the wrong idea, and besides, my shoulder and

fingertips kept prickling, making me hold back.

Once we reached the ER, everything scrambled in my awareness, jumbled into a chaotic mishmash of sight and sound by adrenaline and barely restrained panic. I navigated through it all on autopilot. I don't remember how long Carson and Jake took to catch up with me at the medical center, or who gave the 'accident on the Burke-Gilman trail' story to the clerk at the front desk. Or which of the boys got me sitting down in the waiting area with a styrofoam cup of hot cocoa in my hands. Numbly I stared after the gurney as it carried off Christopher's slack, inert form. The sight of his pale face seared itself into my mind, leaving an afterimage that distracted me from all else.

The ER staff questioned me, of course. Jake reported what he'd done in the way of first aid, but neither he nor Carson had clue one about how the bleeding, concussed stranger in our living room had gotten that way. Granted, I didn't know much more about Christopher than they did, but I at least knew his name even if I wasn't entirely certain how to pronounce it.

And I knew he wasn't afraid of using that big carved staff as a weapon, and that he knew an honest-to-God, real live troll when he saw one.

And that he'd seen what happened to my eyes.

Oh God, I thought, for what had to be the hundredth time that evening. I wondered when I would be able to stop.

The nurse taking down my information, a skeletally tall

young man from India with a soft, soothing voice, must have realized I was unfit to coherently relay what had happened to Christopher. He switched tactics, asking instead if I was all right. Had I been hurt in any way in the accident? Was I in any kind of pain at all?

I almost burst into wild giggles on the spot, but oddly specific hallucinations didn't count as injury or pain. So I blurted out something about being severely freaked, which had the extra benefit of being true, and got a prescription for Xanax for my trouble. The admission must have made me sound more plausible; no one looked askance at anything else I said, though I made scarcely any conscious sense of either the questions or my answers. Eventually the nurse seemed satisfied and whisked off to take care of another incoming patient, leaving my housemates to take turns patting my shoulders.

Carson broke through the haze of incomprehensibility around my surroundings when he asked, "Do you want to stay and wait for word on your friend, kid?"

"We're good either way," Jake appended. Now that he was no longer on tap to attend to Christopher himself, he'd shifted modes from 'EMT at work' to 'worried housemate'. "We'll wait with you, however long it takes."

"Thanks, guys," I mumbled, struggling to keep from sobbing all over again at the fact that they were just there. But I still couldn't bring myself to look either of them in the eye,

lest insane-sounding questions start bursting out of me. 'Do you guys notice anything weird about me?' would be bad enough. But 'So, did you know there were monsters on Burke-Gilman?' was a set of words I didn't want to be overheard uttering in a hospital. Instead I huddled in my chair, sipped at the hot cocoa, and tried to let its warmth soothe my nerves. "I do want to hang out a little while. Just to make sure he's okay, you know?"

A little while turned out to be half an hour, during which Jake procured us sandwiches and cookies from the medical center's cafe and Carson made faces at the toddler sitting across from us, next to an older sister who looked as wrung out and exhausted as I felt. Jake shared his cookies with the kid and her sister, but before long another nurse arrived with the news that their brother's fractured knee was stabilized and that they could come on back.

Hard on the heels of that, a third nurse came out through the double doors that led back to the examination rooms. "Kendis Thompson?" she called out inquiringly. When I snapped my head up, she beckoned me over. "The young man you brought in is asking for you," she said, a maternal smile on her round freckled face. "Follow me and I'll take you back to him."

"He's awake?" I cried, springing out of my chair. "Is he going to be okay?"

The nurse bobbed her graying red head, gesturing for me to

accompany her while Carson and Jake waved me off. "He's awake but just a bit disoriented, so go easy on him. He's getting stitches now, and we'll need to keep him here overnight thanks to that nasty pair of bumps on his noggin. What happened to him?"

"Accident on the Burke-Gilman trail. I was biking." By the third or fourth telling (I'd lost track) the story had gotten fractionally more solid, and it was the best story I had. So I stuck with it. I wasn't about to explain that the accident in question was a rampaging troll. Not until I could talk to Christopher—and nail down whether I hadn't dreamed the whole damned thing. I wasn't convinced I hadn't, though my presence in a real hospital, on my way to check on a man who'd gotten real injuries trying to defend me, was a mighty strong argument against the dream theory.

I hadn't set foot in an emergency ward in five years. But I had vivid memories of when I'd broken my arm (falling off a high stool changing a light bulb of all things), memories of hours of pain in a ward like this one. I shivered a little as I followed the nurse down one long hallway, around a corner to another, and to the open door of a treatment room. My escort, clearly accustomed to ushering nervous visitors to patients, gave me another friendly pat on the shoulder to go with the ones I'd been getting from Carson and Jake. "You can go right on in, sweetie," she said, and bustled off.

Just inside were three people. Christopher lay half-propped up on an examination table between a doctor and a nurse. The blood was gone from his face and hair; the latter looked damp, sponged clean. His black flannel shirt was gone too, presumably because he'd bled all over it, though he still had on his jeans and hiking boots.

To his right the doctor, a blonde woman in powder-blue medical scrubs, squinted through round glasses as she worked at the delicate task of sewing stitches into his scalp. Her long, agile hands caught my eye, and I bit my lip at the sight of the needle glinting between her fingers. On the opposite side of the table, the fresh-faced, gangly young nurse held Christopher's head steady while the doctor worked. Apparently the nurse was also handling the requisite friendly bedside—or in this case, table-side—manner, for as I slipped into their presence he was saying amiably, "Kind of far from home, you sound like. We don't get many Scotsmen in this corner of the country." He glanced up as I approached, adding, "Ah, somebody here to see you."

"Not Scotland. Newfoundland," Christopher muttered in a hollow, toneless voice. "I'm from..."

He trailed off as he saw me. Though it was still dimmed by pain and wooziness, his gaze nevertheless gave me the spooky feeling that he was seeing past my skin and flesh, straight into my blood and bones. The moment I was in range his hand snaked out to capture mine, an extra, physical hold on my attention to

go along with the intangible pull of his stare.

"You've got to tell 'em," he pleaded, his voice turning rough with desperation. "You saw it—you know. I've got to go!"

"Whoa there," the doctor chided while she tied off the last of the stitches. "You're in no condition to go anywhere but to bed. Nathan, about that bed?"

"Already prepped, Dr. Weigner," the nurse replied.

"Good. He's not terribly rational, I'm afraid. Go easy on him." This last was clearly to me, pitched too low for Christopher's ears. I scarcely noticed, for Christopher's terrified eyes and his hand gripping mine trumped everything else for my attention.

To him, I ventured, "You can go tomorrow, okay? They, um, really ought to keep an eye on you tonight."

His head and shoulders jerked up, but if he was trying to rise he immediately changed his mind—or else his injured body overruled him. He fell back to the pillow even before Dr. Weigner and Nathan had to press him down again. But he hung onto my hand, croaking at me, "You don't understand, lass.. if I stay, I'll never leave! Got to go, got to go before I'm claimed..."

"Mister, ah, MacSimidh, you've got a serious concussion and you've lost a considerable amount of blood," the doctor said, leaning down a bit to double-check her handiwork before taping a thin gauze pad over Christopher's brow. From her his last name came out 'macsimmith', and she sounded no more certain of the

pronunciation than I'd been. "If you're bent on going out that door I can't stop you, but I strongly advise you to stay put. Be a sport and don't make me sue myself for malpractice, what do you say?"

"Listen to her, Christopher," I entreated, aiming for a soft, steady tone. Both the nurse who'd brought me to the ward and Dr. Weigner had said to go easy on him, but his inexplicable panic somehow seemed more important a reason for comfort than any medical advice. An urge to smooth a few strands of damp hair away from his forehead welled up in me, but I tamped it down; the doctor was securing the last side of the gauze pad and I didn't want to get in her way. "You've already gotten your head cracked open twice on my account. If you do it again, I'm not sure I'll be able to cope, okay?"

That seemed to perplex him. Christopher couldn't furrow his bandaged brow, but his eyes sort of crinkled up as he looked up at me, the panic in them ebbing a little—though that just might have been his vision going out of focus. "Had to," he whispered. "She'd have done..."

She? What 'she'? "Christopher, listen, is there somebody you need me to call?" I asked. "Somebody I should let know where you are?"

"No, no one, I've no one this far west..." His head tossed a little, restlessness fighting its way out through his fog. "I've got to go, I've got to go..."

With long-suffering mock resignation, the doctor sighed and gestured Nathan at a hypodermic. "Why do the big rugged ones never want to stay put?" she inquired of no one in particular as the nurse deftly pulled Christopher's jeans away from his hip and administered a shot.

"Is that safe?" My attention swiveled to the nurse, some half-formed recollection about keeping people with concussions awake flashing across my head. "I mean, putting him to sleep?"

"Don't worry," Nathan said. "This is just an analgesic to get his pain under control."

"We will need to wake him up periodically tonight," Dr. Weigner explained. "Once his head stops hurting so much, he'll be better able to rest."

Christopher stirred again as if in protest, but his eyes grew drowsier as the doctor spoke. Still disquieted by his frightened stare, I squeezed his hand even as I bobbed my head at the doctor. "Just rest, okay?" I murmured. And since he seemed to need to hear it, I added, "You can go tomorrow." Wherever it was he was so dead set on going.

He pulled in a shuddering breath, his head turning to the side and staying there, his focus starting to drift. But he didn't let go of my fingers. As if suddenly remembering he held them, he renewed his grip and pulled insistently at my hand.

"You can see 'em," he breathed, his words thickened by his accent and his pain, but still unnervingly clear. "See 'em with

your shinin' eyes. Look sharp, girl. Watch your back."