

OF DREAMS AND
DRAGONS

KARPOV KINRADE
Chapters 1 -3

This is a rough draft subject to change.

Chapter 1

TWO WORDS

"And if she fails?"

"She will not. Not if she's ready. Not if we make her ready."

"And if she doesn't listen?"

"Everyone listens. You just need the right words."

—SKY—

Everyone has a word. That one word that encapsulates and articulates so much of who you are, that on a Venn diagram there would only be a sliver that falls outside the scope of that word. Most people never learn their word, but it's out there, waiting to be found. Waiting to be called forth.

I... I have two words. My first word, only because I learned it first, is *hiraeth*. It's not even English—though the best words seldom are, so that should hardly be counted against it. I initially discovered *hiraeth* on social media, and it made me suck in my breath as something stirred deep within me. It's Welsh, and there's no direct translation into English, but it's defined as a kind of homesickness tinged

with grief or sadness over a person or place that is lost to you. It carries with it a sense of longing, nostalgia and wistfulness, and it's an emotion that has weighed on me every day of my life that I can remember. Discovering there is a word for what I've always felt does help ease the sorrow some, but only in the way that identifying the monster helps ease the fear. It's still a monster. It still hunts you. But now you know its name.

My second word is so closely aligned with my first that it maybe doesn't count. *Saudade*—originating in Portuguese and Galician—takes *hiraeth* another step, though. It is often defined as "the love that remains" after someone or someplace is gone—or even if that person or place is still in your life, but it has changed so much that you mourn the past or future.

These words are my ghosts. They haunt me, teasing at my mind as I go about my day. And they are directly tied to a life I can't remember, because I never lived it. A life that could have been.

If my father hadn't died before I was born.

If my mother hadn't married Pat.

If fate had taken a swing at someone else the day I was born, instead of setting its sights on me.

And today, my ghosts are more active than usual as I count the change for my groceries.

I try to shop early in the morning usually, when the crowds at Safeway are shorter. But today couldn't be helped. We're out of too many things and the kids are hungry, so I came after running other errands, when the lines are long and people are tired and impatient and ready to get home to their families.

Women are trained from childhood to be polite, accommodating and docile. To make others happy before themselves. To be self-sacrificing and humble. Which is why, as the line behind me lengthens, and tired shoppers check their phones for the time and sigh dramatically, I feel guilt. Guilt that I have to count out the quarters and nickels and pennies I found in the couch to pay for groceries for the three hungry children at home. Guilt that I have to keep putting back items that push my total too high. Guilt that I couldn't do all the math and taxes and weights of produce in my head, thus saving everyone the hassle of waiting on me. Guilt that I have to use food stamps to cover what my couch change can't.

Guilt.

Even though they aren't my children I'm feeding.

Because I'm making the people behind me wait too long.

The cashier, Martha, is a middle-aged woman who's worked here as long as I can remember. She's always been kind, and fast, and I try to pick her line whenever I can. She doesn't shame me with silent looks and frowns that others sometimes do, even without realizing it. She gives me a small, sympathetic smile as I help bag my groceries in reusable bags that have seen better days. One is so frayed I'm not sure it will survive this trip. While I appreciate the efforts California is making for the environment, having to buy bags has hurt low-income families more than anyone realizes.

"You sure you don't need another bag?" Martha asks.

"Gotta make these work till payday," I say, loading up my cart.

She nods in understanding. "Hang in there, Sky. You know what they say... this too shall pass."

I give her the best smile I can muster and nod. "Thanks, Martha. Sorry about this."

She's already scanning the next customer's food though, so I leave quickly, hoping I don't bump into anyone I made wait on my way out.

Fall has settled into the bones of the little city of Ukiah, and today is colder than usual. Winter is indeed coming, though we feel less of a sting two hours north of San Francisco than most of the country. The wind whips around my face, freezing my nose and ears, as I push my cart through the expansive parking lot to my car.

I can smell the rain before it falls, but I have no way of covering myself or my groceries, and the deluge of water soaks me to the skin by the time I pop open the trunk. I make quick work of getting the groceries into the car, but the last bag doesn't survive the experience and rips apart in my hand, depositing my food onto the wet asphalt.

At least the rain is cover for the tears threatening to fall. I'm exhausted, overwhelmed and so very tempted to leave the food there and get home, but some of it's still salvageable. And this was our grocery budget for the week. A few eggs are still in one piece, and the fruit is only slightly bruised. If I cut it up for a salad, the kids will eat it without complaint. Probably.

I grab whatever looks edible and deposit it on top of the remaining bags, then finally slide into my car, where I'm marginally more sheltered from the rain. When the engine starts on the first try, I offer a prayer of thanks to whoever's listening. The car's an old beater I got off Craigslist. It's missing a window, the heater doesn't work, the engine looks like someone tried to repair it by blasting it with fire and hoping for the best. I taped now-soggy cardboard over the missing

window, and that was the extent of my repair budget. Now I use the powers of manifestation and luck to keep the thing running.

One perk of living in a city that's only about five square miles, despite it being the largest city in Mendocino County, is everything is under ten minutes away.

I drive past the 101 onramp, past the Starbucks I can never afford but always look at with longing, and turn at the corner gas station. Our house is across the street from a park, near an elementary school. On the outside, it looks like every other house on the block. Remarkable only in how ordinary it is. The lower middle class dream, minus the white picket fence.

It's when I unlock the door and walk inside that the truth of my home life hits the hardest. That's where the shadows live, behind the closed doors and draped windows of houses that look like everyone else's. Skulk past the white-washed exterior and you'll find the rot fast enough. But most don't care to dig even that deep. They may smell the decay, but they don't want to deal with the reality.

The groceries are nearly put away when Caleb sprints down the stairs at full speed, nearly breaking his neck as he trips over the last step.

I don't know how I get from the kitchen to the living room so fast. Sometimes it's like I blink and am standing where I want to be.

I catch the six-year-old mayhem-maker before he kills himself, and nearly sob from relief when he looks up wide-eyed, and then grins like a little idiot. "That was amazing, Sky! Let's do it again."

I grip him harder before he escapes my arms, his black hair flopping over eyes almost as dark. "Oh no, kiddo. Not again. I need your help in the kitchen. Where's Pat?"

Caleb shrugs and runs back upstairs before I can stop him. I sigh and stand, my body feeling a lot older than its twenty-four years. I trudge upstairs and check Caleb's room. He's sitting on his disheveled bed playing with his toy fire truck and another toy car flipped over on its side. The fire truck races across pillows and blankets, as Caleb shrieks in a high pitched squeal meant to mimic the sound of a siren.

"Look, Sky, it's you and Blake saving people," he says as the fire truck arrives to help the turned over car. He pulls out two dolls dressed in nursing outfits and mimics them helping another doll who was thrown out of the truck. "This one's you," he says, holding up a female doll with brown hair.

I ruffle his head. "She looks just like me."

Caleb grins, putting his attention back on his truck as I look around the room.

Caleb shares the room with his teen brother, Kyle, and little sister Kara. I expected to see her in the crib under Kyle's bunk bed, but it's empty. "Caleb, where's Kara? And where's Pat?"

Caleb looks up from his truck. "Gone."

"What? Where? When?" I'm trying to stay calm, but my voice is rising in pitch and volume. How long was Caleb left alone? And why did Pat take Kara?

"I dunno. Just gone. They left when I got home from school."

I grip the doorframe so hard my fingers turn white, then take a calming breath. "Thanks, buddy." I ruffle his hair and leave him to his toys as I run downstairs.

The living room is a mess. Pat left empty beer cans on the coffee table, and cigarette butts on the ground. The litter box in the corner stinks to high heaven and the cat's food and water bowl are empty. "Marshmallow? You around, kitty?"

I pull out a toy and dangle it, hoping the bell will entice the white fur ball from her hiding place, but nope. She's not interested in humans right now. I give up and clean out her litter box, refill her food and water, then grab a trash bag to clean up after the man who calls himself head of this family.

The kids are his.

I'm not part of this family.

Not really.

Pat makes that abundantly clear.

I rub at a bruise on my arm and stretch my sore back.

The dishes are done and the house is as clean as I can make it by the time Pat returns with Kara. Kyle trails behind them and drops his backpack by the front door.

I don't bother telling him to put it away. Not today.

I storm over to Pat. "Where were you? How could you leave Caleb alone?" The anger has been boiling in me for hours, and I can't contain it anymore.

"Back off, you free-loader." Pat slurs the drunken words, but I don't need to hear him speak to know he's been hitting the bottle. Hard. His dark eyes are glazed over and there's a vagueness about his expression that is familiar. He sneers at me, his lip curling. "I knew you'd be home soon. He's old enough to look after himself."

"He's six, Pat! That's not old enough, that's child endangerment. And where did you take Kara?" When she hears her name she reaches for me, and I take the toddler from her father. She has snot all over her face, her cheeks are red from the cold, and she's not wearing a coat.

"She's helping me make a little cash. At least someone does." Spittle flies out of his mouth, hitting me in the face. "I swear, the only reason I still let you live here is because of the debt I owe your mother, God rest her soul. But the dead aren't much good to the living, are they?"

I hand Kara to Kyle and tell him to take her upstairs. Kara's face crinkles into a cry as she calls my name, her arms held out to me. Kyle frowns, wanting to stay and help, but I shoo him away with Caleb following behind. I don't want them around when Pat's like this.

"You let me live here because without me running this house and raising these kids, you'd lose everything, including the extra money you get from your social security for them."

I should have kept my mouth shut. I know better, especially when he's like this. Hard liquor rather than beer, was his poison of choice today. I can smell it on him. And I know what that means.

But knowing changes nothing. I seem pathologically incapable of biting my tongue. A character flaw I would be happier without.

Sometimes, the anticipation of pain is worse than the pain itself.

When his fist flies at me, I feel the pain of its impact on my jaw before it lands. And then my whole face is on fire.

I fall to the ground, hitting my head on the sharp edge of the staircase as I fall. But I don't cry or scream. I've learned not to. The last time I did, Kyle heard and came to help, and ended up in the ER due to a 'terrible fall' that broke two bones. I won't let that happen again.

When I was a child, I always wondered why I never saw stars when I was hit. In cartoons they always saw stars, but I only ever saw darkness as my vision blurred and shrunk in on itself until there was nothing.

I always wished for the stars.

Pat stands over me, waiting. He knows I'll get up, despite conventional wisdom telling me I should stay put and wait for him to grow bored and walk away.

Another character flaw.

I get up.

And in that moment, something happens.

A light ignites in me, burning my skin from the inside out. Energy rushes through my body.

Pat takes an unstable step backwards. "What the—"

I take advantage of the moment and step forward. He dwarfs me in girth and height, but somehow I feel bigger, stronger, taller right now. "You will never hit me again," I say, my voice sounding foreign, distant, like someone else talking through me.

Pat stumbles back. "Get away, you freak. You creature. You're not of my blood. You're not of my kin." His face turns ashen, all color draining from him as he stares at me in horror. I know what he's seeing behind my eyes. I have seen it in his too often.

I point to the front door. "Get out. Now."

And to my utter shock, he listens. His drunk ass flees the house, the door slamming so hard behind him it rattles the walls. When it's clear he's not coming

back anytime soon, I slump to the ground, hugging myself. I think of the power that just overcame me, and I tremble. Not because I don't know what happened.

But because I do.

Chapter 2

FROM THE GRAVE

"She'll be our weapon."

"That's what you said last time."

"Last time was a mistake. Too many uncontrolled variables."

"So you think you can control her?"

"Perhaps. At least unleash her in the right direction."

"That's your plan?"

"You have a better one? It's not like we have many options."

"Well, I suppose the world is at stake. Multiple ones, really. Fine. Take her."

—SKY—

The surge of adrenaline I had is gone, leaving in its wake a shaken shell of a girl with a crashing headache. Viscous liquid drips into my eyes, stinging, and I wipe at it, leaving a crimson stain on the brown leather wristband I always wear on my left arm. I rub at it with my shirt, but the stain persists, the crevices of the engraved vine soaking up the blood. This had been a gift. A reminder. Protection, of a kind.

My eyes fill with tears, whether from the pain, the confrontation with Pat, or long buried grief, I don't know, and I'm too weary at a deep soul level to parse it out just now.

Kyle creeps down the stairs holding a washcloth. "Is he gone?" he asks in a whisper.

I nod, and Kyle speeds up, taking the stairs two at a time with his long, gangly teen legs until he's next to me, pressing the wet cloth against my head. "You might need stitches this time," he says softly.

"Grab my bag," I say.

He nods and runs back up the stairs to my bedroom. He comes down with the first aid kit I keep at home.

He opens the canvas bag and rummages around. "What do you need?"

"I have to wash it first," I say, trying to stand, but a wave of dizziness lands me back on my ass, and I groan at the impact.

Kyle puts a hand on my arm. "Let me help you."

I hate that he has to do this, but he's right, it's bad this time. I could walk him through the steps, but I don't want more on his shoulders than there already is. Instead, I pull out my phone and text the one person I know will help without question.

Can you come home? Urgent. Bring med supplies.

Blood is stinging my eyes, and I don't bother waiting for a response. I know he'll come. He always comes.

I touch Kyle's shoulder. "Thank you for your help, but I'll be fine. Blake will be here soon."

At the mention of Blake, Kyle relaxes, though the stress around his brown eyes doesn't ease. I must look even worse than I feel. "Remember, head wounds always bleed more. There are a lot of blood vessels close to the surface, so it looks worse than it is. I promise." My words seem to reassure him some. "Where are the littles? Are they okay?"

He frowns. "They're in the closet."

I close my eyes and sigh. "I'll check on them soon. Go do your homework."

He's about to argue, but the front door opens and Kyle runs to greet Blake.

"How's our girl?" I hear Blake ask.

"Not good," Kyle says, his voice so broken I feel my heart break a little too.

"I'll take good care of her."

I open my eyes enough to look at Blake, and he whistles as he takes the wash cloth from me and examines the cut on my head. "Sky Knightly, you are a mess. This will leave a scar. Stitches would help."

"I can't afford the ER bill."

There's pain etched on his perfect face as he nods. "I'll do what I can."

He makes quick work of it, cleaning it first, then applying pressure to stop the bleeding. "I'll give it 15 minutes. If we can't get the bleeding to stop, I'm taking you in whether you like it or not."

He lifts my head gently and sits on the couch, then places my head on his lap as he holds sterile bandages against my wound. "What happened this time?" he asks.

"The usual. Just Pat being Pat."

"This isn't normal, Sky," he says softly and without judgment. Only love. Compassion. Kindness. All the things that make me feel weak right now.

"I know," I say. "But I can't leave the kids alone with him."

"There has to be a better way. You could still try to get custody."

"A single 24-year old who couldn't even make rent without her best friend paying half the bills and has the kind of work schedule we do? In what universe would a judge give me custody of three kids? Steve barely got custody of his own."

Forty-eight hour work shifts that often become longer don't impress in custody cases. And Pat doesn't have a record, he's just an asshole."

"An abusive asshole," Blake says.

"Yes," I agree.

"Maybe the kids, and you, would be better off if you report—"

"Don't say it," I say. "They have no one else. No other family. With Pat gone, they'd be separated. Kyle would end up in a group home for teens. It would ruin them. Who knows what kind of abuse they would endure if the system got ahold of them? At least here I can protect them. *We* can protect them."

We've had this conversation before. Many times. The facts never change.

"And who will protect you?" Blake asks softly, as he strokes my long hair.

I don't have an answer for him. I will have to protect myself. That's always been my life, especially since my mother died giving birth to Kara.

"He's escalating," Blake says.

"I know."

And I do. I know Pat is getting worse. I know it's only a matter of time before this gets really bad. We get a lot of domestic violence calls at the station. And they're often the ugliest. I've seen my future with Pat, and it isn't pretty. So I know the risk. What I don't know is what to do about it. How to fix it. How to stop him. How to keep our family together and keep these kids safe. And stay alive.

After fifteen minutes, Blake checks my head. "Looking better. I'm putting butterfly bandages on it... though you really should get stitches. You'll need to ice it when I'm done."

"Yeah, I know the drill." Blake and I have known each other since we were kids. Fun fact, he was my first husband. Of course, we were in kindergarten at the

time, so it wasn't legally binding. Then around puberty he realized he was gay, and all romantic notions between us ended. Now he's like a brother. A ridiculously gorgeous brother with perfect black hair and a perfect physique. And he's my roommate and surrogate uncle to the three kids I call my own. I don't know how we'd make it without him.

Blake hands me two pills and I pop them in my mouth without asking what they are. Pain relief of some kind, and that's all I care about.

When I can finally sit up, I realize he's dressed for work. "Our shift isn't until Saturday," I say, hoping I didn't screw up my schedule somehow. I don't have childcare lined up until the weekend.

"Steve called in," he says.

"Kid sick again?"

Blake nods.

"Poor guy. Single parenting sucks."

Blake laughs. "You would know. But I'm going to call and tell them to find someone else. I need to stay here with you, in case you have a concussion."

"No, I'm fine. Kyle's here if anything happens. You go."

He stands reluctantly, grabbing his bag. "You sure?"

I nod, but regret the movement as pain lances through my head. "I'm sure."

He doesn't look convinced, but I know he needs the money and there aren't many who can cover the shift. We're too understaffed and dependent on volunteers as it is. So I stand and walk him to the door. "See? I'm fine. Just a headache. I'll be right as rain tomorrow."

He snickers at that. "Tomorrow you'll have a black eye and feel like something that exited the back end of a sick dog."

"Thanks for the optimistic prognosis, doc."

He kisses the side of my head that isn't a bloody mess. "Be careful. Don't let that drunk asshole back in. And call if you need me. I'll be home in minutes. With backup."

"Thanks, Blake. For everything."

He nods and steps out to the porch. "I'll come straight home after my shift."

Once he's gone, I shut the front door and lean against it, closing my eyes as I collect my thoughts. I need a better plan than wait and hope I don't die at Pat's hands. But right now, I need to check on the kids.

I find Caleb huddled in the back of the closet in their bedroom, with Kara sleeping next to him on a pile of dirty laundry, her black hair stuck to her head with sweat. This used to be my room, so I know every nook and cranny and hiding place. I crawl in with them and he snuggles into my arms, his nose dripping snot onto my shirt as his tears swell his big brown eyes.

"He hurt you," he says.

I don't want to lie to him, so I say nothing for a while, and just hold him. Minutes later, his tears dry up and he sighs deeply into the crook of my arm.

I lean down, whispering in his ear. "Did you know this was my closet before you were born?" I ask him.

He shakes his head no.

I smile. "It was. And did you know there's a secret to this closet?"

Now his eyes widen, all fears forgotten as his young mind is gripped with the mystery. "A secret?"

I nod. "A hidden treasure. Want to see?"

He bobs his head eagerly, and I grin as I move clothes, toys and old shoes away from the corner. I pull up the edge of the carpet and show Caleb how to loosen the board to access the secret hiding place. "Go ahead and see what's in there," I tell him.

With all the eagerness of a curious six-year-old he reaches in and pulls out everything he finds. There's a box of dusty crayons that smell like childhood and summers and wax and imagination. A coloring book that's mostly colored in, but there are still some blank pages left. A metal box full of odds and ends I collected as a child: dried leaves, stones, loose change, a matchbook, some old Halloween candy that could probably survive the apocalypse, and a journal.

I take the journal from him and open it, my hands shaking. It's pink and green, with a dragon on the cover that used to be covered in glitter that's mostly faded now. Inside is my childhood scrawl filling up page after page with dates, times and the exact things that happened in the most boring and mundane detail. What I ate, what I wore, what so-and-so said that was completely awful and ruined our friendship. But somewhere in the middle my hands pause, and I slow my breathing as I try to make sense of what I'm seeing.

There's a shift in my writing. Not just a different pen or different hand, but a different language. Words turn to symbols. Glyphs. I don't recognize them, but seeing them sends shivers through my body, because as foreign as they are, they feel familiar. Like I should know what they mean. And it brings me back to my words. *Hiraeth. Saudade.* The homesickness and loss and nostalgia hit me hard, rocking me back until I'm pressed against the wall.

I slam the book closed and clutch it in my hands. Caleb has forgotten all about me as he scribbles in the coloring book. Kara is just about to wake from her nap

and will need changed and fed. I ruffle his hair and plaster a fake smile on my face. "Now you'll always have something to do when you're in here," I say.

He nods, content with the small treasure of a child.

I pick up Kara and crawl out of the closet, still clutching my old journal, my head pounding from the movement. "What do you want for dinner tonight? Fish sticks or... fish sticks?" I try to hide my pain under a smile.

He looks up at me, a goofy grin splashed across his face. One that isn't fake or forced. Children are so resilient. It's the only explanation for how any of them survive to adulthood.

"Pasgetti!" he says.

I frown dramatically and put a finger to my mouth as if thinking about it. "That didn't sound like fish sticks. But I'll see if we have any noodles and pasta sauce, okay?"

He nods. "Okay!"

"Will you settle for fish sticks if that's all we have?" As if he has a choice. But he's a good boy and he knows how this game works, so he nods.

I'm about to walk away, when I pause, remembering the cat. "Have you seen Marshmallow around?" I ask.

Caleb doesn't look up from his drawing; he just shakes his head no.

I leave him to his closet and crayons and take Kara to the couch downstairs to change her. She looks up at me with large dark eyes, blinking slowly, as if she's trying to figure out the human words for all the deep thoughts she holds in her mind. I wonder if babies come to this world knowing all the secrets, but forget them when they learn how to speak.

I kiss her forehead and she smiles and wraps her pudgy fingers around my index finger. "Sky!" she says in her baby voice. The fact that my name was her first word still makes me weepy. She may not be my child biologically, but I've been raising her since she was born, and couldn't love her more.

Once she's changed, I put her in a high chair with a sippy cup and some cut grapes to snack on while I set about making dinner.

We do indeed have the makings for 'pasgetti', and a few hours later the littles are fed and happy and in bed, and the kitchen is cleaned up of Kara's attempts at using spaghetti as art. Only Kyle remains awake, watching me with worried eyes. "Some day he'll go too far," Kyle says, not looking up from the math book he's pretending to study.

"I'll be okay," I assure him.

Now he looks up, setting his book aside. "What happens when you and Blake aren't here anymore? What will happen to us?"

My heart breaks a little as I walk over to him and kneel so that we're eye to eye. "I'm not going anywhere. You're my kids and I'll always be here to protect you."

I can tell he's about to cry, and that he doesn't want to do it in front of me, so I let him go without a word as he runs upstairs to get ready for bed.

I stay downstairs, enjoying the peace and quiet. While Pat technically lives here on paper, he spends most nights elsewhere. With women. At bars. Drunk in alleys. When it's just me, Blake and the kids, it feels like a real home. Pat could be gone for the night, or for the week. We won't know until he comes back. So I've learned to take advantage of the moments without him whenever possible.

I get comfy on the living room couch and turn on the TV, flipping through channels until I find something semi-decent. Some kind of soap opera western fantasy thing. When I finally fall asleep, dreams haunt me. Dreams of faceless men taking the children away.

I wake in a cold sweat on the couch, the TV still on, my head pounding from a horrid headache. I check the time: 3:48 a.m. Too early to be up, too late to try to go back to sleep.

So I put on a pot of coffee, pop a few more pills Blake left me, and prepare a breakfast of oatmeal for the kids. As I sip my coffee and stir the oatmeal, I hear a thump at the front door. Probably Blake coming home after his shift. He really needs to work on being quieter in the middle of the night, though.

It's still dark out, and when I open the door, the cold mist of morning washes over me. The porch is empty—no Blake. Maybe it was the cat. I'm just about to go back inside when something catches my eye. A stained leather bag—cracked and old—sits at my feet. There is something unnatural to its shape. Something wrong. I lean down, and a rancid smell hits my nose. My stomach turns. I try not gag as I use the edge of my shirt to cover my hand and pull the bag closer. There is something. A piece of paper sticking out. I clutch it and read.

"I told you there will be consequences. This is but the first."

And then I see what's in the bag. And my stomach cramps and vomit spews from my mouth. I try to aim it at the potted plant to my right, but only half meet my mark.

I just found Marshmallow. Or part of her, at least.

Chapter 3

A POUND OF FLESH

"I must be off then."

"You mean, you intend to do this yourself?"

"Only way to do it right. I was a warrior once, you know. We all were."

—SKY—

My eyes fill with tears, and I force myself to look around, to look for the person who did this in case they haven't disappeared. I find something, *someone*, in the shadows. A man steps forward. A man in a dark cloak wearing a dark hat. His cane clicking against the concrete path. His short, grey beard neat against his chin. Thick silver buttons run down the front of his coat, and black boots cleaned to a shine cover his feet. When he speaks, his voice is old and thin like withered paper. "Hello, Ms. Knightly. It appears you have found my message."

My throat goes dry and I clench my fists, assessing the man standing before me. His composed expression hides whatever he might be feeling or thinking. His dark tailored suit and finely stitched trench coat speak of wealth. His tone is that of a man accustomed to getting his way.

But there's something more about him. Something that gives me pause, and prevents me from responding as I might otherwise. He just killed my cat and seems entirely unconcerned. He could be armed, and likely is. I'm not. Pat's gun is locked upstairs, with the bullets secured in a separate locked case—at my insistence if he was going to persist in his desire to have the weapon in the house with children. All I have on me is an old cell phone, hardly a worthy weapon, my lightsaber app notwithstanding.

I need more information. I need to know what—and who—I'm dealing with before I let myself react. I need to stay calm as I think of a plan. If he attacks me, I'll run into the house and bar the door and call 911.

"How do you know me?" I ask, my voice only wavering a small amount.

His gray eyes bore into me as he speaks. "I know your family. There is a long history there. I am... an old friend, you might say. Call me Mr. Pike." He tips his short top hat towards me while partially bowing, a conciliatory smile on his aged face.

My voice remains steady as I slowly move my hand towards my pocket, to reach my phone. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Pike. I'm curious, why are you visiting?"

"It was time," he says. "This meeting was scheduled long ago, you see, between Pat and myself. Yet, he is not here and you are." He smiles warmly. "Oh and you needn't bother about hiding your phone. You may use it, but I'm afraid it won't perform as you wish."

I'm baffled by his remarks, but I pull my phone out of my pocket slowly as he nods in approval. I look down, seeing the numbers that I need to dial. I move my finger over the nine, but it slips off the phone screen. I try again, but it's as if I'm trying to climb a wall of ice. My finger can't connect. It slips off each time I attempt to dial.

Panic wells in my gut, and Mr. Pike clears his throat. "As I said, it won't do as you wish tonight. So let us continue as we were."

My voice is no longer calm, as fear settles into my bones. "What do you want?" Whatever game he's playing, or trick he's managing, it's preventing me from calling for help. I need another plan. Maybe I can scream. Get a neighbor's attention. Or maybe I can run back into the house before he can stop me.

Or maybe... I glance down at my wristband as I weigh the cost of such a choice. No. I can't. It's too high a risk. Even for this. Not yet, at any rate.

"Pat and I made an agreement," Mr. Pike says, "a long time ago. I have honored my side of the bargain, but he has yet to honor his."

"So you killed my cat?" I ask, too harshly. With too much anger. I cringe, expecting him to attack me for my insolence.

But he doesn't look the least bit aggravated. If anything, his eyes turn sad. "Yes. Yes, I did. You see, I arrived in this town a week ago. It was a week ago that the deal should have been honored. It was not, and so I am back here again, as Pat knew I would be, with a reminder." He pauses. "I am truly sorry it was you who found my message. It was meant for Pat and no one else."

He seems sorry I found the cat, but not sorry he killed an innocent animal; I need to get away from this man. He's most likely a sociopath, perhaps even a psychopath, and if so he would have no qualms about taking another life... maybe even a human one.

Perhaps if I can get him talking—distract him with the sound of his own voice—I can creep back into the house. Get the kids somewhere safe. Call the police, if my phone will work.

"What deal did you and Pat make?" I ask, as a feeling of rage for my bastard step-father surges in me. Of course this would be his doing.

"That is between Pat and myself," Mr. Pike says. "But, in essence, I helped him with a problem, and now he must help me with mine."

My eyes narrow. "What kind of problem? Pat isn't very good at helping himself out of trouble, let alone anyone else."

He cocks his head. "It is not a problem you would understand. Not yet, at any rate. Oh, and don't bother trying to creep back into the house while distracting me. You may leave at any time. It is Pat I came for, not you. But perhaps you could help me find him? As a friendly courtesy?"

Beads of sweat break out on my forehead despite the frost in the air. I nod, willing to say anything this man wants to hear to get him off my porch. "Yes. I'll let him know you were here."

"Very well. I will return once again tomorrow at this hour. And if Pat has not honored his side of the bargain, then I will bring another message. One far more personally painful."

He turns to leave, the moonlight glinting off the opal tip of his walking cane. As soon as his eyes are off me, I dash into the house, slamming the door shut behind me. I latch the deadbolt, my hands shaking in terror. My thin cotton shirt is

soaked in cold sweat, and I can't stop the tears that flood my eyes.

I take a deep breath and once again attempt to dial 911. This time, my fingers don't slip off the phone.

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