

Is a young girl possessed with the power to destroy?

Monster Child

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Monster Child

a novel by L. Lee Shaw

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To the young members of my family whose names I swiped
for this book...Brandy, Katie, Lacey, Nate, Jesse, Scott, Alix,
Johnathan, Taylor, and Dylan

Prologue

She curled into a tight little ball to quiet the hurt of her empty stomach. Her bruised back protested and she stretched out slowly trying to find the place where both would be eased.

Once again the monster dwelling within her had called down violent fury. She had no memory of its coming; she only knew it had shown itself by the pain left in its departure.

A tear escaped, rolling obliquely across her cheekbone and dropping onto the bare mattress. She clenched her eyes to stop any more. She must keep her horrible secret and tears were tattle tales.

Gingerly, she turned towards the wall. She slipped her hand under the thin mattress to touch her hidden companion. She dare not draw the tiny orca whale out. He survived because no one knew of his existence.

When her fingertips rested against his cool vinyl skin, she closed her eyes. She tried to travel to the safe world she had created in a corner of her mind but there was no strength to make the journey. As desolation consumed her, she begged to ride with her friend into a vast ocean of oblivion and sink to a place where she could never feel and never be found.

Her silent cry of hopelessness echoed through the rain swept January night, summoning those who mind the darkest hours. Invisible, they came to watch with her and intercede for her.

Chapter I

He sensed a child in great distress in his sleep. He struggled toward consciousness seeking to respond but was sucked back into the womb of dreams. There he floated down nearly forgotten passages to the place where whales breached.

It had been so long. Even when he was drowning in grief's riptide and had implored them, they resolutely kept their distance, swimming away beneath the surface of his memory.

But now they were there, their haunting song calling him back to the Sound. He was running...running over the rocky shore, pleading with them to stay.

The hollowness under his feet told him he was once more on the dock. "Wait, oh, please wait," his heart beseeched. "Forgive me and wait."

Her great black and white head rose above the water, majestically riding the waves, as her wise eye searched for him. Minowah, beloved matriarch, opened her mouth in pleased recognition. She clicked her greeting and dipped from sight.

He dropped to his knees, his upturned hands reaching after her in supplication.

With a roar of rending water, she rose, arcing her tremendous body against the sky. She left her message in the spume of her return to the sea. A face...a young face formed in the cascade of sunlit droplets; the spray falling like pale hair.

Drifting deeper than dreams, he clung to the image. Minowah had called for him. He would not betray her a second time.

The face was waiting for him as he edged into wakefulness. He lay still, gathering the remnants of his dream. It had the feel of a mandate. He breathed slowly seeking clarity. None was forthcoming.

Noises from downstairs began to seep into his awareness. He heard water running, youthful voices in escalating volume and the rattle of pans in the kitchen. Spirit Wind Ranch was waking.

As he opened his eyes to the early morning darkness, Boomer felt the itch of irritation rising in him. He wondered why if the Universe wanted him to act on something, it couldn't just come out and say so in plain terms instead of sending him on some blamed abstruse scavenger hunt. It seemed a damned inefficient way to get things done. He thrust the covers back and grumbled off to the bathroom.

Showered and shaved, he came downstairs, automatically tracking the smell of freshly brewed coffee. He sidestepped young bodies shambling toward the dining area in various degrees of wakefulness.

Harley was at the stove flipping French toast on the large griddle while shaking a huge cast iron skillet filled with sizzling sausage when he entered the kitchen.

Boomer filled the mug waiting by the coffeemaker. Sipping, he stared unseeingly out the window. Who, where, when, why? The questions circled the image remaining stubbornly at the center of his thoughts.

He was only peripherally aware of Carlita thrusting her pottery teapot under the instant hot water tap and turning it on. When the pot filled to overflowing he noticed she, too, was staring out the window, her lips pressed into a thin line. He reached out and shut the water off. The action startled her back into the present. She stared at the forgotten teapot.

"Something on your mind?" Boomer asked.

Carlita sat the pot on the counter. "Mal sueños. Bad dreams. I hear a niño crying in them. My heart hurts at the sadness in the tears."

It felt as though a celestial finger flicked him on the head. "Did you catch that?"

"Yeah, I caught it," he mentally answered. "We're on a mission here. We're going to do some unknown thing for someone we haven't met who is someplace we haven't found for reasons we don't know at a time we haven't a clue about. Sum it up?"

The thought flashed into his mind he would be farther along the path of intuiting guidance if he wasn't quite such a smart ass.

Escalating giggles from the dining area snagged his attention and he moved to the doorway of the kitchen. The kids were watching two chrome topped syrup pitchers moving fitfully down the long table apparently of their own accord.

"Come on, Katy, don't let Ralph beat you," Brandy squealed as one of the pitchers moved slightly ahead.

“Are we playing with our food again, people?” he asked.

Instantly, the pitchers stopped moving. Then one of them began to nudge forward until it was a spout past the other.

“Yea!! Katy wins,” Brandy said.

“Hey, that’s not fair. Boomer said stop,” Ralph whined.

Boomer shook his head. “No. I asked if you were playing with your food again. Katy listened correctly and used the fact that I didn’t specifically say stop to win.”

Ralph reached across the table and speared a sausage link on Brandy’s plate, eliciting a sharp “Jerk!”

“I listened,” he said around the sausage he stuffed in his mouth.

“Maybe, but you didn’t process it. Remember, it takes total integration of all your senses to support your abilities,” Boomer answered.

“Ralph’s still operating on a 286 chip while everyone else is up to a Pentium,” Jesse said as he maneuvered off the bench with his used plate and utensils.

“Eat my shorts,” Ralph shot back.

“I think we’re going to get some more kids, Boomer,” Dylan said as he followed Jesse to drop his dishes in the tub. “I saw them last night in my sleep.”

“It’s too late in the year for anybody new to come,” Alix said.

The boy shrugged as he rolled up the sleeves on the man-sized Oregon Ducks sweatshirt he adored. They bunched like manacles around his young wrists. “I know but I saw ‘em. I think one’s a boy. I couldn’t really see the other too well. It was kinda like they were in a shadow or something but I know someone’s coming so you better get Jesse to clear his junk off the empty bed in our room.”

“Like I’m the only one with stuff on it,” Jesse said.

Boomer stared at Dylan. It was quite obvious someone or something had been very busy during Spirit Wind’s nocturnal hours. Three tollings in, he glanced at his watch, less than an hour. The significance of whatever they were being called into was very clear.

He refilled his coffee cup and headed to his office. It was time to tune in to Channel Universe.

Aimee was already seated in front of the ranch’s business computer inputting numbers from a pile of bills stacked beside the keyboard.

Boomer went around his desk and shoved debris aside to set his cup down as she finished and clicked off the program. She stacked the papers together, slipped them into a manila folder and, standing, placed them in the file drawer.

“Done your card yet?” Boomer asked.

Aimee shook her head. “Just getting to it.”

Boomer watched Aimee pull the binder she used to record her tarot readings out of the small bookcase next to the desk. With her notebook open and pen at ready, she opened the left hand drawer of her desk to retrieve the small silk bag she kept her cards in.

“Oh, that’s weird,” she said as she stared into the drawer. “That’s totally weird.”

The tone of her voice brought Boomer out of his chair to look. All he saw was a single card lying face down on top of the bag. He looked at her questioningly.

“A card has been pulled from the deck,” she said.

He shrugged. “So?”

“So I didn’t pull it. In fact, I decided it was time to clean my cards last night. I put them in order and put a crystal in the bag to clear them. I haven’t touched them since.”

“Maybe one of the kids was fooling around.”

“If so, I’m ripping their arm out and beating them with it. They know the rule of nobody touching anyone’s personal tools.”

Aimee reached in and carefully slipped the bag out from under the card. The top was still tied shut. “That’s my knot,” she said as she studied the bag. She untied it and turning it down, she shook out a small crystal. She held it up for Boomer to see then set it aside. She pulled out the deck, fanning them out. “In order just like I left them.” Setting them next to the crystal, she picked up the single card.

She placed it on the desk; then turned it over. The Justice card stared up at them. She retrieved her deck and quickly flipped through the major arcana. “It’s mine. But how?”

Boomer straightened up. “Maybe the question isn’t just how but why.”

“Okay, why?”

“Don’t know.”

“Want to hazard a guess?”

“Nope.”

“Yet another enlightening conversation,” she said as she picked up the deck to replace the card.

“Mind leaving that out?”

She glanced at him then carefully centered it on her desk before slipping the rest back into the bag and returning them to the drawer.

“Do not touch it,” she said sternly. “I do not need your disorganized vibrations messing up my cards.” She shot a meaningful glance towards his desk as she left.

Boomer stood staring at the card letting all the concepts and ideations of the term justice play through his mind. They triggered nothing. Sighing, he went back to his chair and picked up his coffee.

When his hip tickled, he realized he hadn’t turned his cell phone ringer on yet. He hitched it off his belt.

“Boomer. It’s Meredith.”

“Easy Rider, how’s it going?”

“I got new wheelchair. Zero to three miles in a heartbeat.”

“Oh, oh. There’s a speeding ticket in your future now, girl.”

“Speaking of futures, how about me seeing another kid in yours?”

His senses pushed up a notch. “What you got?”

“A kid who talks to animals.”

“Lots of kids talk to animals. Since when is that a juvenile offense?”

“It is when you steal the animals.”

“You know our stand on delinquency issues, Meredith.”

“The kid’s not a delinquent. He’s a good kid, top student, bright as all get out, and, except for the incident before me now, he’s never been in trouble of any kind...not even getting sent to the principal’s office.”

“So give him a scolding and ground him for a couple of weeks.”

“Let me give you some of the background. One of the teachers at his school had a couple of iguanas and a turtle in the classroom. She assigns students to care for the animals. Unfortunately, she injured her back and has been out. The substitutes weren’t monitoring the situation. Our boy claims he heard the iguanas crying because they were hungry and thirsty from two classrooms away. The turtle also had a cough from dehydration which he hears. He tries to tell the sub but she blows him off. So after a week or so of listening to the animals suffer, he stays behind one day, sneaks into the room and grabs them.”

“And gets caught.”

“Not exactly. He takes them to a pet store specializing in reptiles. They confirm their neglected state, turn it over to the Humane Society which, then cites the school.”

“And all hell breaks loose.”

“You’re good at this psychic stuff, you know.”

“So what do you want from me?”

“I want you to be at Juvenile Court three weeks from tomorrow to talk with the kid’s parents about him coming to Spirit Wind. If they agree, we send him home with you and expunge his record.”

The silence stretched as Boomer thought about Dylan’s words. Meredith broke it.

“Boomer, I know it isn’t your customary method of accepting students, but I’ll vouch for this kid. He’s got some pretty special abilities but right now the school thinks they’ve been harboring a covert delinquent who’s bogusing up the animal talk thing to get out of trouble. They have told me an incident like this will not happen again...heavy on the not. It is their plan to require counseling and so on to convince him he really can’t talk to animals, ergo crush his abilities. The alternative is we pitch him to you and give him a safe haven to develop his unusual communication skills. So what do you say?”

“Three weeks is just about enough time for the boys to uncover the extra bed. I’ll be there.”

“Thanks, Boomer. See you February 8, 8:30 a.m.”

He flipped his phone shut and hooked it back on his belt. As he rose from his desk to refill his coffee cup, he caught sight of the Justice card on Aimee’s desk. “Okay, now who’s being a smart ass?” he asked it.

A whisper came back. “He’s not the one.”

Chapter 2

Boomer pushed back into the waiting area of the Clackamas County Juvenile Court. The meeting had gone quickly and well. Meredith had done an excellent job of explaining the recommendation for Domingo's placement at Spirit Wind. The Chivaras had not only immediately agreed but beamed with pride that their son had earned this special honor. While Meredith was getting the judge's signature on the court order, Domingo and his parents left to pack his things. They were to meet back at the juvenile court at 11:00 o'clock.

Boomer glanced at the clock over the reception counter. That gave them about two hours to kill. Maybe Carlita would like to go to that fabric shop she loved. It was her tradition to make a special quilt for each student and she would want to do the same for Domingo.

Maneuvering across the room, he dropped into the vacant chair next to her. "It's a done deal but we need to meet the Chivaras back here at 11 to collect Domingo. So want to hit Starbucks and go to that sewing shop of yours for a while?"

She shook her head vigorously. "No, we are to wait."

"Why?"

"Because it is here, now, we find that we have been looking for."

Boomer glanced at Carlita's round face. She was determinedly watching the comings and goings in the area. He leaned back and stretched out his legs. "Been hanging out at Heaven's gate again, huh?"

Raised in a tiny Mexican village, she had grown up where life centered on the Church. The priest had been a man who escaped seminary with his simple, direct faith intact. He had passed it along to his parishioners, including a young Carlita.

Ask, seek and knock weren't just words in the Good Book to her. They were actions for which results were expected. She was relentless when there was a need and it was, with gentle amusement, the rest of the staff observed her stalwartly at the Gates of the Universe, pounding away until she got what she sought. Harley claimed it was the only way Heaven could get some peace.

But the staff also knew that if Carlita had a message from on High or through one of her revered 'Santos', they best listen up. Boomer resigned himself to wait.

He was just thinking about going back to beg a cup of coffee from Meredith when the outside door opened and a woman came through guiding a young girl with waist-length light blonde hair.

The shock of recognition brought Boomer to his feet.

"Sí, es ella," Carlita said softly beside him.

The child was pulled in on herself as far as she could and still remain upright. Her face was a study in terror as the woman guided her to a chair. She said something to the girl and then vanished through the doors leading back to the courtrooms.

The girl sat frozen with her head ducked down, clenching white-knuckled hands. She reminded Boomer of a small animal feeling the hot breath of annihilation.

"Watch her," he said to Carlita and chased after the woman who had brought her. He caught up with her as she entered Meredith's office.

"What's the story on the girl you just brought?" he asked the woman who was pulling a folder out of her briefcase. She looked at him in alarm and stepped back.

"It's okay, Sonia. This socially graceless person is one of our resources. Boomer is the director of Spirit Wind Ranch in Molalla."

The alarm was replaced with the amused skepticism he had become accustomed to seeing whenever the ranch's name came up.

Meredith stretched across the desk and held out her hand for the folder Sonia was holding. "I assume you are referring to Alyson," she said as she opened the file and began to glance through papers. "We took her into custody a week ago."

"She passed out at school. When the school tried to get a hold of her mother, they discovered she's in New York. Poor kid's been left alone...no food, no money. She fainted because she hadn't eaten in over two days. That's when we caught the call," Sonia said. "At the hospital, we find out the mother not only is starving her but has also been physically abusing her. So here we are."

“What’s going to happen to her?”

Meredith leaned back. “I don’t know. Momma’s got clout.”

Boomer raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Alyson is a Maguire, as in own half the state of Oregon Maguires.”

“Then what is she doing being starved? It sure isn’t the standard case of mom selling the food stamps to pay for a drug habit while the kid goes hungry.”

“That is just one of about two thousand questions we’d like answers to but we’re getting stonewalled by the lawyers who seem to have the only pipeline to the woman,” Meredith said.

“What does the girl say?” Boomer asked.

“I don’t suppose it would surprise anyone that she hasn’t said much,” Sonia responded. “And what she has said hasn’t made much sense, at least not to me.”

“Tell us anyway,” Meredith instructed.

“Well, you know how these situations are, the kids frequently try to justify the parent’s actions. She said her mother hits her because she says things. When we pressed to find out what she said, she told us she didn’t know. Her statement was,” Sonia retrieved the folder and riffled through the pages before pulling one out. “ ‘It’s like it gets all white in my head and I don’t know what I say.’ The doctor thinks she’s blocking out the memories, hence the white.”

Boomer began to nod his head slowly. “Or she really doesn’t know what she said because she’s slipped into another place.”

Meredith and Sonia looked at him blankly.

He continued. “Alyson’s grandmother was Meri Maguire, right?”

“So?” Meredith asked.

“So Meri Maguire was well known for being clairvoyant. Maybe, just maybe, Alyson has inherited some of her grandmother’s ability and she doesn’t remember because she’s speaking while in a trance.”

Meredith’s expression sharpened. “You’re not here because you wanted to know the story behind a sad, scared kid, are you? You already knew about Alyson.”

“Let’s just say we had some information we followed and it led here.”

Meredith stared silently into space for a long moment, then began to ask rapid-fire questions. “Although you have state certification, Spirit Wind is private, right?”

“Right,” Boomer answered.

“Any reliance on the Maguire money or power in any way?”

“Nope.”

“Any plans of needing it in the future?”

“No.”

“Scared of Rhonda Maguire?”

“Hell, no.”

“Wanna make it two for two today? Then go watch over her while Sonia and I talk to the judge.”

Boomer pushed back into the waiting area. The girl was still sitting exactly as she had been when he had left. He took up position next to her.

Alyson sensed someone looming beside her and chanced a quick peek. It was a tall man, wearing a shirt, tie and jacket like a lot of the men in the room. But instead of slacks, he had on jeans, worn white at the seams, and cowboy boots. She quickly looked back down to avoid his notice and missed seeing another man advancing on her.

“Well, Alyson, you have made a fine little mess for your mother, haven’t you?” It was the lawyer who had been at the house when they had gone to get her things.

Alyson hunched over even further, trying to become invisible.

“Your actions are totally unconscionable; something I intend to rectify today,” the man continued, snapping his words at her like little projectiles. “Now your mother told me you know exactly what you are supposed to say and you better say it, is that understood?”

Someone stepped in front of Alyson, blocking her from the lawyer. She recognized the jeans. He folded his arms over his chest and tilted his head back slightly. Alyson couldn’t see the look on his face but she saw the muscles in his jaw bunching.

The lawyer looked him over slowly and distaste swept his face. “Excuse me but you are interfering with my client’s instructions to her daughter.”

“Since the circumstances place your client in an adversarial role with her daughter, it could be construed that you are attempting to intimidate a minor who is at present under the protection of the court.”

A scarlet flush spread up the lawyer’s face. The girl was intrigued to see it even rise beyond his forehead to meet his receding hairline. “I don’t know who you are....”

“No, you don’t.” Menace rumbled in the words.

The lawyer caught it and, after opening his mouth, closed it into a tight little line and headed towards the doors leading to the inner area. Boomer turned slowly keeping a fixed look on the lawyer until he had pushed through, knocking into the girl’s caseworker.

Rubbing her arm, the woman crouched down beside the chair. “In a few minutes, Alyson, we will be going before the judge. She is going to remove you from your mother’s care.”

Alyson’s eyes widened. Conflicting emotions roiled through her. She knew the price she would pay if sent back to her mother but would they now send her to someplace worse? “I’ll be good. I promise. I’ll be...”

“Alyson, you are not bad. You don’t deserve what you’re mother does to you. It is wrong...very, very wrong. No one should be beaten like you’ve been or abandoned to starve.”

The wheeze in Alyson’s breathing was becoming more audible with each exhalation. She twisted her hands together in her lap. The woman put her hand over Alyson’s. “It’s going to be alright, sweetie. Trust me.”

A man stepped through the door and called out “In the matter of Alyson Christine Maguire. The Court is ready.”

Boomer followed the caseworker and girl to the tiny courtroom.

Within minutes, it became clear the judge was not impressed with either the Maguire name or the wealth inherent in it. The lawyer had begun by apologizing for Mrs. Maguire’s inability to attend the hearing, citing the extreme need for her presence in New York City. He then launched into an itemization of all the charitable projects funded by the Maguire Foundation, providing statistics on the number of children helped by the donations.

The judge cut him off. “We are here for no other purpose than to determine if Rhonda Maguire is fit to retain custody of her daughter. You will keep your remarks directed exclusively to that end.”

He was less sure of himself as he rendered an explanation for the circumstances that had brought them to the courtroom.

The black-robed woman looked over the top of her half-moon glasses and fixed hard blue eyes on the man. “So your explanation to this court is that a 13-year-old 7th grader was deemed old enough to care for herself without any adult supervision or protection while her mother traipses off to New York.”

“You have to understand, Alyson is a very capable, mature young woman,” he said.

The woman held up a sheaf of photos. “This is the Maguire kitchen. I do not see one scrap of available food in any of these pictures. There is nothing in the refrigerator. The pantry and freezer are padlocked. What exactly was the child to eat in her mother’s absence?”

“Well, I’m sure she was left money to eat on. You know how kids are; they take off to the mall and blow it on clothes, CDs, makeup with no thought about tomorrow.”

The judge shuffled through the pictures in the file in front of her and held up another group. “I don’t see anything in these pictures of her room to indicate Alyson has ever been in possession of any money to blow.”

There was a heavy silence as the judge studied the photos and then laid them down.

“What I do see here, Mr. Lithauer, is extreme child neglect.” She picked up other papers. “Extreme child neglect combined with evidence of prolonged physical abuse according to the medical examination. And since they go hand in glove, I can only assume mental abuse as well.”

“But, Your Honor, don’t you think you ought to let Alyson tell her story?” the lawyer protested.

“What story? The one drilled into her? The one she told the doctor at the hospital? The one you were coercing her to tell in the waiting room where my bailiff heard your exchange with Boomer?”

The lawyer went white.

She leaned back in her chair. “Boomer, approach the bench, please.”

The tall man came from the back of the room. He spoke quietly to the judge. No one could hear what was being said, but in a few minutes, they were both nodding their heads in agreement.

He stepped back. The woman pounded her gavel loudly. “In the matter of Alyson Christine Maguire, it is the decision of this court she should be entered into the custody and protection of Spirit Wind Ranch.”

“But, your Honor, please....” the lawyer pleaded. “I’m sure we can work out whatever arrangements are necessary for Alyson without removing her from her mother’s care. There are ramifications to that decision the Court is unaware of.”

“Mr. Lithauer, I don’t believe the woman is fit to care for a rabid wolverine, let alone this child. The only way I can safeguard Alyson is to put her far beyond the reach of her mother. Whatever ramifications Rhonda Maguire may face because of my decision are not my concern.”

The judge nodded to Boomer and the caseworker. “You are free to take Alyson with you now. And, Boomer, you will have the full support of this Court to do whatever you need to protect her. That woman is not to be seen within 10 miles of this child without a court order, understand?” She looked back to the lawyer. “I believe it is only fair to tell you, I plan to turn the case over to the District Attorney’s office with the

recommendation they proceed with criminal charges. Have a good day, Mr. Lithauer.”

When they were back in the waiting area, the woman led Alyson back to a chair. Squatting down once more, she brushed Alyson’s pale hair back behind her ear. “This is where I leave you. You are going to go to Spirit Wind. It is a very special place for very special people, Alyson. You don’t know it yet but in time I hope you learn just how special you are. Good luck and Godspeed, dear.” Alyson was startled when the woman kissed her on the cheek before getting up and moving toward Boomer.

Just then the doors opened and the attorney came out busily talking on his cell phone. He stopped in front of Alyson and thrust his phone at her. “I believe Virginia has some words for you.”

Alyson stared at the phone.

“Take it, girl,” the lawyer said shaking the phone.

Wordlessly, Boomer crossed and grabbed the phone out of the lawyer’s hand. He put it to his ear for a moment. He could hear a woman’s shrieks mixed in the static. He pulled it away from his ear, clicked it off and handed it back to the lawyer. He then jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the outside doors. The lawyer scuttled in their direction.

He practically ran over a short heavy-set woman bustling in from the outside. She looked like a plump parrot with her gathered skirt in a jungle of brilliant colors and green shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her grey-streaked hair was braided and coiled around her head while silver ear hoops swung brightly with every move. She stopped to talk to Boomer, her arms wrapped around a huge woven straw purse. He nodded in Alyson’s direction. She came over to sit down beside the girl, and reaching for her hand, let loose a cascade of accented words. “Ahh, I am so excited that you are at last coming to us, Alyson. I am Carlita. I am la mamacita to las chicas at Spirit Wind.”

Carlita felt the child brace herself. She maintained her hold on Alyson’s hand as she studied the scared girl’s pallid energy field. The child’s aura was like a limp grey shroud surrounding her. Oddly, it was not as damaged as she would have anticipated. Somewhere inside the thin body was a fierce will to survive.

Carlita caught a faint shimmer in the air to Alyson’s left. Someone was making their presence known to her. Alyson had an unseen guardian. She nodded slightly to the air and mentally acknowledged it.

“Come, mi Alyson, we should go to the baño, sí?”

She tugged Alyson from her chair and prodded her toward the ladies’ room.

As Carlita and the girl disappeared down the hall, Boomer followed the caseworker out to the parking lot. Sonia opened the trunk of her car. “Her things are here.”

There was only one cardboard box and it wasn’t full. He looked at the woman in surprise.

“Unbelievable, isn’t it? Look at this.” She moved aside a small pile of clothing. Underneath were old spiral notebooks and sheets of paper. “She retrieved these from the school wastebaskets so she would have something to draw on at home.” Silently, she held up a small bundle of stubby pencils. Then she lifted up what looked like the sleeve of a man’s dress shirt, once white but now yellow with age and grimy from much handling. “It was her father’s. It’s the only thing of his she has.”

Boomer nodded grimly as he lifted the box out.

* * *

Inside the bathroom, Carlita locked the door and, balancing her bag on the edge of the sink, she began to pull things from it. She handed Alyson new underwear, a new long sleeved pink tee-shirt, jeans, socks and shoes.

Alyson shyly took the items and went into the larger handicapped stall to change. As her old clothes dropped to the floor and she replaced them, she felt strange, like this was happening to someone else.

When she emerged, Carlita took the discarded clothes and pushed them through the top of the garbage can. “It is a vida nuevo,” she said as they disappeared from sight. She touched Alyson’s cheek. “Today prayers are being answered.”

Carlita dug in her bag once more; this time pulling out a soft blue coat lined with snowy pile. “You are to be warm now.”

Boomer was not in the waiting area when they returned. They pushed out of the building with Carlita leading the way to the parking lot. The worn jeans, along with a shorter pair of jeaned legs, were visible below the open back door of a van. Several suitcases and a couple of boxes, including her own, were stacked on the asphalt.

When everything was stored in the back and the door was shut, Alyson saw a boy with Boomer. “Domingo, this is Alyson. She’s also starting with us today. Alyson, this is Domingo.” He pulled open the side door. “In you go. Next stop Spirit Wind.”

As the two youngsters climbed in, he opened the front door for Carlita and gave her a hand as she hefted her weight into the van.

Alyson fastened the seatbelt and cast a side glance at Domingo who was fussing with his sweatshirt.

Boomer hoisted himself in and turned to look at the kids.

“Now?” Domingo asked excitedly.

Boomer nodded, “Now.”

Domingo carefully slipped his hand under his sweatshirt and pulled out a small kitten. “Do you like him? We got him over there,” he said, pointing to the Animal Control building located across the road from the Juvenile Court.

Tears sprang to Alyson’s eyes. Black and white with large yellow eyes, he looked like the kitten she had drawn over and over to keep her company during the long hours in her room. She reached out a hand to touch him and then withdrew it.

Suddenly she couldn’t get her breath. She had just received more in the last few minutes than she had in her remembered life. She was overwhelmed and afraid. “You want, you pay,” her mother’s voice hissed in her ear and the cost was always pain.

Boomer and Carlita exchanged glances as they sensed the degree of Alyson’s trauma. Domingo looked at both of them in bewilderment.

Boomer took the kitten from Domingo and placed it in Alyson’s lap. She opened her eyes and for a moment they were blank. But the kitten’s weight was real as were the tiny claws catching in her shirt. He looked up at her and mewed.

Boomer lifted her hands and placed them over the kitten; then he tilted her chin up so he could look into her eyes. “You are safe, Alyson. I give you my word.”

Chapter 3

Alyson didn't remember the drive to the ranch. The events of the morning caught up with her and she fell asleep. The kitten spent only a moment washing his face before he crawled up under her chin and, giving off a purr bigger than his body, slept as well. When the van stopped, Alyson awoke with a start.

Gates hanging from two tall totem poles were slowly swinging open. Once they passed through, Boomer leaned out his window and aimed the control at them. They began to close and the van continued up a long, narrow gravel road.

"You promise me I will get to see the ghosts, won't you?" Domingo said.

"Actually, they're not ghosts. They're spirits. There's a difference," Boomer answered. "But, yeah, sooner or later you'll get to meet Helga and Canute."

The road curved around an area dense with old growth Douglas firs, bare vine maples, and sprawling sword ferns. It widened into a graveled parking area. A huge ramshackle house sat against the rising rim of foothills. It was surrounded by a number of outbuildings, some which looked ready to fall down.

As the van stopped and Boomer turned off the engine, Domingo elbowed Alyson and pointed up a small rise. Coming out of another building half-buried in the earth was a man in a buckskin jacket, his long graying hair blowing back in the wind.

"Is he a real Indian?" Domingo asked as he stretched between the front seats to see.

"Sí, he is of the Molallas. This once was their land."

"Too cool. What does he do here?"

“Chayote is the Keeper of Ancient Traditions at Spirit Wind. He also teaches history and shamanic customs so you will have him for classes soon,” Boomer said as swung his door open. “Welcome to Spirit Wind Ranch.”

Domingo nearly tumbled out of the van in his excitement. Alyson was slower in joining him. Gazing around, everything she saw was starkly alien to her frightened eyes.

A gangling youth with bleached hair standing up in spikes was carrying on an animated discussion with what appeared to be a scarecrow beside a raised garden bed. His arms flailed about in the falling rain as he gestured to the house, the trees, and the rise of the land behind them.

Another boy was hanging by his knees from a rope strung between two of the posts supporting the wide porch roof, the hood of his red sweatshirt dangling like a second head. A girl was seated on the railing. She had a large set of cards in her hand and was holding one up, staring at it intently. The boy swung gently and, just as Alyson and Domingo stepped up on the porch, shouted “Wavy lines.” Alyson jumped and clutched her kitten so tight it cried out.

Carlita herded them across the porch as though she saw nothing unusual.

They stopped inside the front door. Immediately to the right was a room lit by computer monitors. Shelves held small televisions and other electronic paraphernalia. A second doorway opened off the foot of a worn staircase climbing the wall to the upstairs. A massive living room stretched around a great stone fireplace on the left. It was filled with shabby furniture, stacks of books and a scattering of coats and shoes. Straight ahead, through an archway, were long wooden tables and benches.

Somewhere out of sight, a man’s voice began to chant in a long, low sing-song when there was an explosive noise like a giant farting. Wild giggles erupted from under the staircase. When it was again silent, the voice began to chant again; only this time there were words. “I will hunt you down and I will kill you.”

Two older teenagers came into the dining room. The boy had a spoon stuck to his nose and one on each ear. The girl held several spoons which she waved at the boy as she talked. “If we concentrated on the molecular structure, we might actually be able to effect a transmutation.”

Carlita grabbed the red-haired boy by the collar as he sauntered by. She hung on as she snatched the spoons from his ears and nose. She held out her hand for the spoons the girl was carrying, wagging her fingers

impatiently. "I tole you before. You want to bend things, you get junk. No usa las cucharas."

She stomped off as they slunk away muttering to each other.

Boomer came in with an armload of suitcases and a box from the van, stacking them by the door. "Well, what do you think?"

Domingo's eyes were shining as he looked around. "This place is just wizard."

"That's a good thing, right? What about you, Alyson?"

Alyson had backed up until she was stopped by the stairs. Her mother's voice was snarling in her ear. "You're going to be locked up one of these days. That's where they put freaks like you." And it had happened. She had been brought to a loony bin. Her chest was getting tight and she started fighting for her breath.

Boomer squatted in front of her. "Whoa, whoa, baby. What's wrong?" The lines and creases of his lived-in face softened. His brown eyes were warm with concern. He gently pushed a wisp of her hair back. "You don't understand, do you? It's just feels like more of an ugly dream that won't end, doesn't it?"

Domingo touched Alyson's shoulder. "This is not a bad place. This is a good place. It is for people like us. They don't understand us in the other places," he said jerking his thumb toward the door. "Here they do and they help us grow better at what we are."

Confusion now swirled in the fear. Boomer and Domingo exchanged looks. Alyson was as lost as the kitten she held.

Boomer stood up. "Harley! Yo, Harley!"

A framed painting flew away from the wall in the living room wall and a man's head poked out of the opening behind it. "You bellowed?"

"Need a coffee and one of your special cocoas."

"And his lordship wants his ass served where?"

"Any reason I shouldn't use my office?"

"How should I know? I'm only let out during the full moon when it's time to grow fur and fangs."

"You go look around, Domingo. We'll get you set up in your room in a while."

Boomer guided Alyson through the dining room. A second arched entrance opened into another area of the house with what looked like classrooms.

Boomer turned left toward a door where a flip of the light switch revealed an office. He motioned her in and pointed to a dilapidated overstuffed chair sitting beside an overflowing desk. "Sit there, Alyson."

As Alyson sat down, she saw two glossy black eyes peeking out of a wooden file box. A wet little black nose followed and sniffed the air. It looked like a skunk.

Boomer was leafing through a stack of mail when he, too, spotted the face. “Ah, geez, Ruby, what are you doing in here again? You’re supposed to be out eating grubs and earning your keep, not lazing around and getting hair in my files.”

He scooped her out just as a man came through the door with a tray holding two cups and a small bowl.

Harley looked like he had just walked in from some distant time. His long red hair was pulled back in a ponytail tied with a cord. A dark green shirt with full sleeves and a wide collar was leather thong-laced at the neck and pulled over heavy canvas pants with fringe running down each side. He wore stained and shabby moccasins. The wide bead-worked belt buckled around his lean middle supported a flapped leather pouch on one side and a huge knife in a buckskin sheath on the other. His bearded face was scowling.

Boomer held out his empty hand to take the tray as he thrust the skunk at the cook.

“Do I look like a pet carrier?” Harley snarled looking at the creature straining out of Boomer’s hand, her nose pointed eagerly in the direction of the pouch.

He took the skunk. “You are one disgusting beast. And bone-lazy to boot,” he said. But there was gentleness in his tone and his hand dipped into the pouch to pull out a small piece of food which the skunk immediately grabbed.

“Alyson, this is Harley, our resident grouch. He is head of the kitchen and between meals, he teaches geology and a class in the special properties of stones and gems.”

Harley reached out to give Alyson’s hair a light tug. His eyes narrowed when the girl shrank back. Scratching the skunk’s head, he covertly studied her. She had the pinched look of someone seldom fed adequately and the automatic protective responses of the abused.

Dropping to one knee, he leaned in conspiratorially. “I’m going to let you in on a secret,” he said. “I am also in charge of the secret goodie stash. You want anything, you just come see old Har, understand?”

Although her eyes were fearful, she managed a small nod.

“Now I’m taking that as a promise,” Harley said as he stood up. “See you keep it.”

She nodded again solemnly and risked a quick look at him. He winked at her as he left.

Boomer handed Alyson a cup, then placed the kitten on his desk to lap at the small saucer of milk. Pulling a chair over, he dropped onto it and swung his feet up on the desk. He reached for the coffee and was just taking a sip when the scarecrow appeared in the door.

“Boomer, it happened again,” she said.

Alyson saw the scarecrow was actually a very pretty young woman dressed in bib overalls over a thermal undershirt. The raggedy brown barn coat topping her ensemble hung over her hands while a shapeless felt hat shadowed her face.

The scarecrow pulled off the hat and blonde hair fell over her shoulders. She jammed a hand in the jacket pocket and began pacing the room. “I tell you someone is stealing herbs, and some pretty potent ones at that, out of the medicinal bed.”

“Are you sure it isn’t just some of the critters sneaking in at night for a nibble?”

“No way. The motion sensor lights would come on and scare them away for one. For two, they would leave signs; footprints, crushed plants, plants that were chewed or torn up. No, it’s definitely not an animal.”

“Maybe you need to get Jesse to put out a couple of his spy cameras.”

“He has and....” She hesitated.

Boomer gave her a questioning look.

“And all he has been able to catch is a dark shadow that seems to float over the medicinal bed and then disappears.”

“Are you telling me you think we have a discarnate raiding the herb beds? What would a spook want with herbs?”

“I’m not saying it is a spirit but if it’s not then there’s someone out there with some very powerful abilities.”

“Someone that has no business being on the ranch,” Boomer responded softly.

Alyson shifted uncomfortably in the chair. An unpleasant sensation crept up her spine.

Boomer caught the movement and mentally smacked himself upside the head. This conversation wasn’t going to help calm the girl’s fears. He abruptly changed topics.

“Alyson, this is Aimee Justice. She’s our herbalist. She also teaches botany and is in charge of the gardens among other things.”

Aimee swung around and noticed Alyson for the first time. She held out a grubby hand. “Are you into plants?” she asked brightly.

Alyson hesitated before touching the hand proffered her but said nothing, only shot a scared look towards Boomer.

Aimee's eyes widened as she grasped the thin hand. It was like holding a wraith. The girl barely made an impression on the air surrounding her.

Boomer cleared his throat meaningfully.

"So how about we finish this discussion at the staff meeting tonight?" she said giving a reassuring smile to Alyson.

"Good plan."

Aimee left, closing the door behind her. Boomer took another swallow of his coffee, then brought his feet to the floor and leaned forward to rest his forearms on his knees so he could look directly into Alyson's eyes.

"How much do you remember about your grandmother?"

Alyson looked up at him in surprise. Somewhere she felt a very dim recollection of sheltering arms, warm laughter and feeling safe. It had been so long ago she didn't know if it had really happened or if she pretended it. But that was not the litany instilled in her with each swing of the belt; each strike of the hand. "Grandma was an evil person who did awful things. That's why she gets so mad at me. She says I'm just like her," she whispered.

"Your grandmother was not an evil person. Nor did she do bad things. She and your grandfather did many wonderful things to help people. Your grandmother was, also, what we call a clairvoyant. Do you know what that is?"

Alyson faintly shook her head.

"A clairvoyant is someone who sees through time. Sometimes they can look into the past; see things from a time which once was. Sometimes they can look ahead and see things that haven't happened yet. It is an exceptional talent and your grandmother was extremely gifted. She had an unusually high percentage of accuracy in her readings and was respected even by people who don't exactly believe in that sort of thing."

Alyson's eyes widened. She couldn't remember ever hearing anyone talk about her grandmother like this. She unconsciously leaned toward him seeking affirmation in his words.

"From what you told the caseworker, it sounds like you have inherited a similar ability, Alyson. It could be the reason why it feels like 'your head gets white' and you don't remember saying things."

"Can you make it go away ...?" A silent plea underlined her question.

He shook his head. "You weren't sent to be with us so we could make it go away. That's not what we do here at Spirit Wind Ranch. Our purpose is to provide a supportive environment for young people, like yourself, to

explore and learn to handle your unique abilities. Every kid on the ranch is here for that reason. Each can do something most other people can't."

"Brandy and Dylan can read thoughts. Taylor can hear way beyond the normal range. Scott sees places far away while Katy and Ralph can move things and even change an object's shape," he held up a bent letter opener, "just by thinking it. Domingo's come because he is an animal intuitive. He can hear and talk to animals with his mind."

He gave her a moment to absorb the information before continuing. "Your gift is part of you, Alyson. If we made it go away, we would be interfering with a Higher Power who gave it to you. And, although it is probably hard for you to understand after what you have had to endure, that Power knows more than we do and we must trust Its wisdom."

As her mind grappled with his words, she unconsciously drew a small orca whale hanging on a shoestring leash from under her shirt. She stroked it with her thumb as it lay in her curled fingers.

The sight of the little black and white figure jolted Boomer. The memory of his dream collided with the immediate moment, again sparking awareness of the forces at work beyond his comprehension. He stared at Alyson for a moment.

Alyson drew back as she felt the intensity of his gaze. He shifted his eyes to the whale. He slowly reached out and cradled her hand holding it.

"I once knew an orca like this. Her name was Minowah. I'll tell you about her sometime."

He looked back at her with quiet gravity. "Before we go find Domingo and look around, I want you to remember you are under our protection now. Spirit Wind will not let the nightmares find you or touch you again." As he spoke, something loomed at the back of his neck and he felt its shadow fall over his words.

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