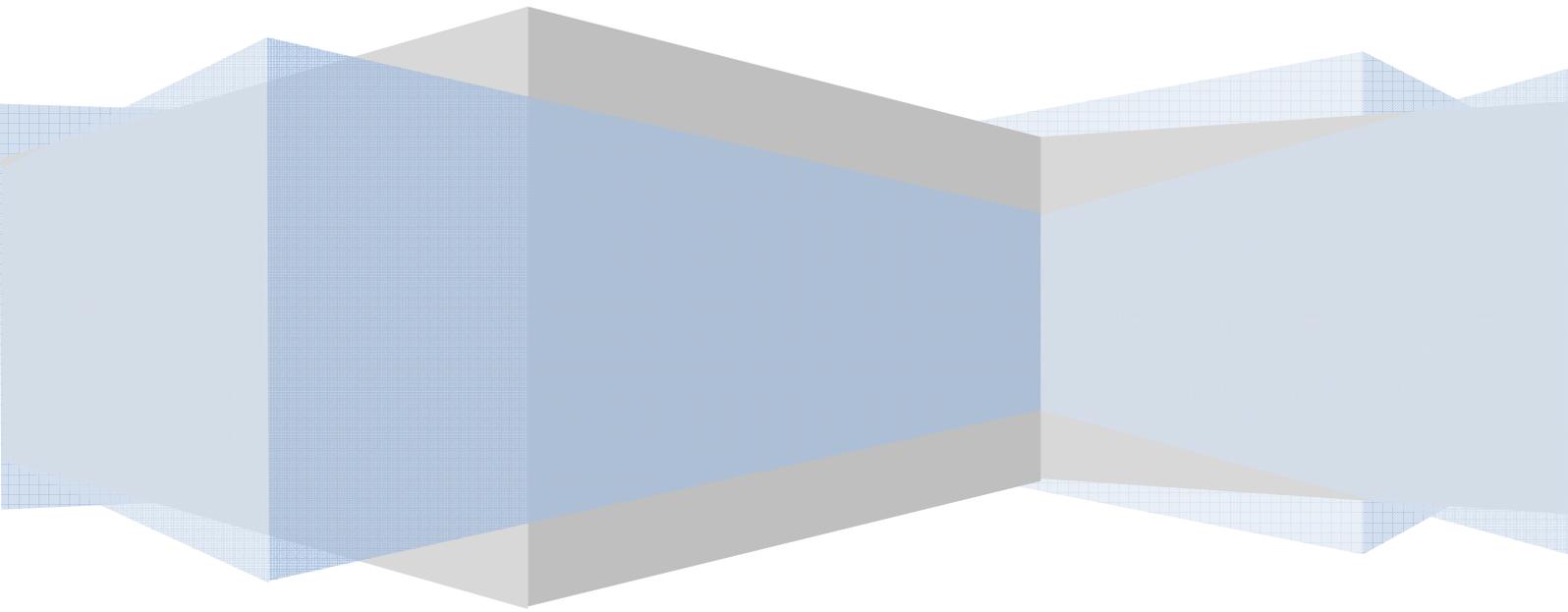


Voices in the Night

Laura Anne Ewald



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 Chapter 1

I can tell you the exact moment I began hearing the voices. In response to what I had erroneously believed to be my alarm clock hooting its usual morning cacophony, I had (also as usual) nearly broken the lamp fumbling for the blessed snooze button before I realized the clamor wasn't coming from my alarm clock at all. It was actually coming from inside my head, which was even more disconcerting than it sounds. I managed to open one eye far enough to see the bold red 2:17 glaring at me from my arch nemesis on the bedside table, and judging from the cool breeze coming from the direction of the window, I knew it couldn't be P.M., since it was the middle of August, when cool breezes only come off the water at night.

How could I be so sure it was the middle of August? Because it was oh-dark-seventeen on my birthday, exactly two hours shy of the time it was recorded I had taken my first breath. Not any birthday, mind you, but my thirtieth, which might explain why I had actually only been asleep for about an hour before I was so rudely awakened and went a long way in explaining my befuddled state. Never mind that one of the reasons I had been up so late was because I had been drinking heavily all evening, something which I had actually

done only once before in my life (and had always sworn I would never do again), but considering I was only a few short hours from that momentous big three-oh, I was alone, and I hadn't managed to achieve any of those vital goals I had set for myself the night of my college graduation (the first and only previous time I had imbibed so heavily), I felt I deserved it (both the drink and the oblivion that followed).

All those years ago, when my college roommates and I had been young and stupid, it had seemed reasonable to think such achievements could be had by the ripe old age of thirty. Of course we would all be happily married to Mr. Right (children optional), our respective professional goals well realized, and our living styles at the level of our (rather inflated) expectations. Well, on the eve of my thirtieth birthday, I hadn't even met Mr. Right, let alone married him. (Frankly, I hadn't even met Mr. Wrong, with whom I might have been able to positively compare Mr. Right when he came along some day.) While I was managing to make a meager living off my writing, thanks to a couple of steady magazine gigs and a fairly supportive literary agent who had turned out to be pretty good at peddling my somewhat off-the-wall fiction, my first best-seller hadn't been written, let alone published. And I could hardly consider my tiny, leaky, one-bedroom, rented shoebox and regular diet of peanut butter and pickle sandwiches and scrambled eggs to be comparable to anyone's lifestyle expectations let alone that of an idealistic twenty-two-year-old newly-minted college graduate. So feeling sorry for myself on the eve of that momentous birthday had seemed a reasonable thing at the time.

Fairly certain I was, indeed, awake and not in the throes of some bizarre nightmare, I moaned as I rolled into a sitting position and grabbed at my head, which I was also fairly certain would fall off, if I didn't hang on to it with both hands. The voices only seemed to

get louder as full consciousness kicked in, and my inexperience with hangovers made it impossible for me to know for sure whether or not this was an unusual event.

I struggled to my feet—not an easy thing to do, since I sleep on a futon, the frame of which is significantly closer to the floor than most beds—and stumbled toward the bathroom. Nude and with no idea of where my robe was, I shivered to the point of chattering teeth as I crossed the bare wood floor, my autopilot thankfully managing to keep my feet from shuffling lest I pick up a splinter from the long-overdue-for-a-refinish surface. Normally averse to turning on a light of any kind in the middle of the night, I nevertheless flipped on the overhead light of my tiny closet of a bathroom, almost as afraid of what I would see as I was coming to be of those incessant voices. The shriek I couldn't quite keep in had me slamming my eyelids tightly shut and fisting my hands in my hair, but after a moment, I managed to peek out to look at myself in the mirror.

How a bare, somewhat dim light bulb that had always made putting on makeup an adventure could suddenly shine like the spotlight from hell was a mystery for another time, I decided as I squinted into the small, tarnished mirror over the sink. My eyes, which are a peculiarly dark shade of blue even total strangers had been known to comment on, looked positively patriotic at the moment, with the dark red lines crisscrossing the white surrounding that deep blue. My normally straight, dark, auburn hair stuck up in weird and wacky ways, a result of both my fists and my latest hair cut. (I had cut it myself, again, which sounds cooler than it really is but saves me the twenty dollars plus gas it would cost me to have it done professionally.) My normally fair skin was positively white, leaving my mercifully few freckles far more noticeable than usual. God, what a scary sight!

I closed my eyes tightly once more, as much to block out the sight of me in the mirror as to dim the light. I fumbled blindly in the medicine cabinet for the large bottle of extra strength generic acetaminophen which, wonder of wonders, I managed to open without spilling into the sink, a considerable feat, I decided, since my hands were shaking so badly. I gulped down three with two glasses of water and held onto the edge of the counter, desperately praying for the medicine to kick in.

As I stood there, gripping my head with one hand and the edge of the sink with the other, I tried to make sense of the voices clamoring in my head. Mind you, it isn't all that unusual to have voices in my head. I am a writer, after all, and my characters spend a lot of time in my head, letting me know in no uncertain terms what they want to say and do on the page. But those voices are always *my* voices, the voices of characters *I* create. And even when a stranger appears among them from time to time, which they have been known to do, I can be pretty sure he or she came out of me, too.

This was different. For one thing, these voices weren't even speaking English. They weren't speaking French or Latin, either, which were the only two languages I had ever studied. I couldn't even figure out what the language they were speaking was, which just made it all the scarier.

Then suddenly it became scarier yet, because even though I didn't recognize the language, I began to realize that by focusing on one at a time I could somehow understand the meaning. It was a plea, simple in its message but laced with intertwining strands of terror, excruciating pain, hopelessness, and desperation. And what they were all screaming at me was "*HELP!*"

 Chapter 2

I have no idea exactly how long I stood there, shaking from the cold and the echo of those pleas ringing in my head. After a time, though, another sound finally got through to my jumbled brain. I heard a plaintive yowl coming from the living room, which was odd enough in itself since Cosmic Creepers always slept with me. Named for the cat in one of my favorite childhood movies, Creepers had shown up at my back door in the middle of a thunderstorm three years ago, soaking wet and bedraggled, his tail bent at a funny angle near the end as though it had once been slammed in a door. All black but for an occasional single white hair poking out here and there, his coat was mostly of a medium length, except for a few miscellaneous longer patches on his chest, belly and especially his tail, which was so bushy it looked as though it had originally belonged to someone else. He rarely left my side when I was in the house, following me from room to room and settling down next to me whenever I finally stopped. The only time he wasn't right next to me was when I got around to vacuuming, which I did rarely enough as to hardly count. Of course, I had been drunk as a skunk last night, which might have contributed to his sudden change of sleeping venue, but

that change, along with his present yowling, had me just worried enough to bring me back from the brink of despair and allow me to think about someone else's problems.

Tripping over my dropped raggedy sweats on the way to the bedroom door, I stopped long enough to pull them on, grateful not to have to go looking for something to cover my full-body goose bumps. Still barefooted, I padded into the living room.

"Creepers?" I called out softly.

My cat answered with another low, heartfelt yowl.

Anyone who owns a cat—or is owned by one, as is probably more accurate—will recognize that particular yowl as the prelude to an eruption usually followed by the abrupt appearance of a rather large hairball. I had to wonder about the timing, though, since Cosmic Creepers had just left me a giant hairball only two days ago, and I'd been dutifully combing him ever since in an attempt to waylay more of the same. Still, that yowl told me something was definitely wrong.

I flipped on the small, dim floor lamp that sat at the end of my saggy couch and looked around.

"Creepers?"

Another yowl brought my gaze to the far corner where he crouched shivering in the shadows.

"Here, baby," I called softly, tiptoeing carefully lest an abrupt movement send him under the couch where I couldn't possibly reach him. "What is it, sweetie?"

I gently lifted him into my arms. In spite of the amount he eats every day, Cosmic Creepers remains lean under that bulky coat. I can't quite pick him up with one hand anymore, but I think it unlikely he'll ever be much more than ten pounds. I rubbed his ears

gently as I moved back to the couch. His nose was cold and wet, which reassured me somewhat, but the odd little yowl in the back of his throat coupled with a serious case of trembling left me worried sick.

A glance at the wall clock showed it wasn't yet three a.m. I knew the vet's office had short hours on Saturday, and it would be a long wait until nine when I could take him in. I curled up on the end of the couch opposite the light, pulling my grandmother's flannel quilt off the back to wrap around us. The room air was cool, and I wished I had shut the bedroom window, but I didn't want to disturb Creepers to get up and do it. I tucked my icy feet under the edge of the quilt and stuffed one of my soft couch pillows under my head. As I relaxed against it, the voices in my head settled into a dull roar. Cosmic Creepers still wouldn't purr, but at least his strange growl seemed to be going the way of his trembles. I ran my fingers through his soft coat. Regular brushing and a healthy diet had left it thick and silky. Curled in my arms under the quilt, he soon became the fuzzy hot water bottle I needed to take away my own chill, and after a very few minutes we both slept.

My dreams were a kaleidoscope of images: masses of multicolored fur coats, warm, dry noses on faces of all shapes and sizes, cries of pain, grief, and fear. The voices took on a reality in those dreams, a clarity I hadn't been able to distinguish while awake. In spite of them, I managed to sleep on, wrapped in the warmth of my quilt and hugging Cosmic Creepers closely.

 Chapter 3

We finally pulled into the parking lot of Tucker Animal Hospital at eleven-forty-eight, only twelve minutes before their Saturday noon closure. I had been up early, but the voices had continued in my head, making it really hard to function, which stretched my normal half-hour morning routine to almost three hours, because I had to keep stopping to hold my head every time it threatened to fall off. As I stumbled around the car and lifted Cosmic Creeper's carrier out of the front passenger seat, I prayed Dr. Booker would be willing to hang around long enough to check my beloved cat. He hadn't stopped yowling since we awakened, which hadn't helped my headache any and had left me seriously frightened for him.

I had to struggle with the heavy glass front door and was swaying slightly by the time I reached the counter. The glare I received from the receptionist after she very deliberately looked at the clock on the wall told me she was reading "hung-over" when she looked at me rather than "sick" and wasn't pleased to see me at this late hour. The name plate on her desk said "Mrs. Freeman," and unfortunately I remembered her as well as she seemed to

remember me. Her attitude told me she knew very well I hadn't been able to afford to bring Cosmic Creepers in for his annual checkup and shots this year.

"I'm sorry, but we're closing," she told me in a tone of voice that was anything but apologetic.

"Oh, please," I begged—something I would never have done for myself but under the circumstances was willing to lower myself to do for poor Creepers. "Can't Dr. Booker at least look at him?"

Cosmic Creepers added his own pathetic yowl, and I was relieved to see Mrs. Freeman's expression soften just a bit. Apparently, it was only bedraggled people she didn't have time for.

"Dr. Booker isn't in today," Mrs. Freeman informed me. "She was kicked by a horse yesterday and will be out for several days."

Mrs. Freeman paused to glance at my cat carrier as Cosmic Creepers let out another yowl. Relenting, she sighed.

"Dr. Morgen is taking her patients today," she said. "I'll just ask if he can see you."

"Oh, but..." I began as the formidable woman stood to move back towards the examining rooms.

She stopped to glare at me over her shoulder.

"Cosmic Creepers doesn't like men very much," I tried to explain. The main reason I had chosen to bring him to Tucker's in the first place had been because Dr. Booker was a woman.

"He'll just have to adjust then, won't he?" was Mrs. Freeman's cryptic comment as she turned down the hall.

I stayed where I was, leaning heavily on the counter, wanting very much to sit down but genuinely afraid I wouldn't be able to get up again if succumbed to temptation. I closed my eyes tightly and willed those voices to go away. After some fierce concentration, they did dim somewhat, which helped, but I still had to focus really hard just to stay on my legs which had become as wobbly as a newborn giraffe's.

"Dr. Morgen will see you now," Mrs. Freeman announced.

I jumped, because I hadn't heard her coming over the noise in my head, and I had to keep a guiding hand on first the counter and then the wall as I moved to follow her direction down the hall to the first door on the left. I might have imagined it, but the look she was giving me now seemed more speculative than censorious. Maybe she was starting to see more "sick" than "hung-over" by this time and was starting to worry—about Cosmic Creepers, of course.

I slipped into the examining room and managed to shut the door softly behind me, leaning heavily against it to catch my balance. Then I opened my eyes and saw the man standing at the far counter. Even though his back was to me, all I could think was, *Wow!*

At least six-foot-four, I guessed, which made him a full foot taller than me, his thick wavy hair was the same inky black as my cat's and curled enticingly over the collar of a white jacket, which must have belonged to Dr. Booker, because its snug fit really accentuated Dr. Morgen's own broad shoulders. When he turned to face me, my suspicions were confirmed by the fact he had left the slightly undersized lab coat unbuttoned. He wore a heather gray t-shirt and snug, well-worn jeans beneath it, neither of which left anything to the imagination. His muscles had obviously not been built by a regular membership to a gym, however. His were the kind developed from hard physical labor, the kind you saw on the

docks when the fishing fleet came in for the day or out in the fields during harvest—the kind that had always made my mouth water, so I had to wonder why mine was suddenly so very dry.

Thankfully, a plaintive yowl from the cat carrier I held reminded me of why I was there.

“So, who do we have here?” Dr. Morgen asked. His voice was melodious, soft and smooth. It reminded me of someone, though I couldn’t quite place the accent.

“Cosmic Creepers,” I said, managing just barely to lift the carrier onto the examination table. I avoided looking at the good doctor out of simple self-defense. Anyone as screwed up as I was at the moment had no business thinking about sex, even if it was only window shopping on my part. “He’s usually hard to get out of the cage,” I warned, reaching for one of the bolts holding the top on. Dr. Booker and I had learned the least traumatic method of extracting Creepers from the carrier was to simply take it apart.

Much to my dismay, before I even got the first nut loosened, Dr. Morgen had opened the cage door and was gently lifting an unprotesting Cosmic Creepers out. I could only stare at the doctor in awe, before my jaw dropped for another reason entirely. His face was absolutely stunning. Not handsome, at least in any popular sense, because his facial bones were too angular, his cheeks too lean. Even with the deep tan he would not have been found on the cover of *GQ* or even within the pages of the Sears weekend sales flyer—unless of course it was in one of those underwear ads in which they cut off the heads. I could picture him playing Heathcliff, though, or even Lucifer. Then our eyes met for the first time, and I suddenly thought of The Beast and desperately—if highly uncharacteristically—wished I was one who could realistically play Beauty.

His eyes were an arresting shade of copper, almost the exact same color of Cosmic Creepers' in fact, except my cat's eyes had a pale sea green center and only the outer ring was copper-colored. Dr. Morgen's eyes were copper through and through except for scattered flecks of gold that made them really interesting. They narrowed slightly as they met mine briefly before lifting Creepers to eye level to stare into his.

"A bit more attractive than our namesake, aren't we?" he commented softly to the cat, stroking his sleek pelt.

Dr. Studly knew Bedknobs and Broomsticks? Wow. Another mark in his favor, since no one else I knew, even if they remembered the movie, remembered the name of the grungy black cat in it.

Before I could think of anything to say, though, I realized I might not even have been there in the room with them for all either man or cat seemed to notice me. Dr. Morgen stared into Creeper's eyes, and I could have sworn there was real communication going on. He murmured softly to my cat in something other than English, I thought, and Creepers began to purr in what seemed to me to be as much relief as pleasure. The whole time Dr. Morgen held my cat, his long, strong fingers moved, rubbing gently but firmly in obviously all the right places. I felt my face heat as I found myself envying my cat and wondering what those practiced fingers would feel like on me.

Luckily, no one noticed my dilemma, and soon I had something else entirely to worry about. The voices in my head were getting louder and harder to ignore the longer I stood there, and in the space of a few heartbeats, my vision began to waver.

"Hey!"

I have no idea how Dr. Morgen managed to get to me before I hit the floor, but his strong hands were on my shoulders, and he was gently lowering me to the bench against the wall behind me without my even realizing he had moved. The fact that he could support me as effortlessly as he had my cat was missed by me at the time, but it would come back to me later.

“Stay with me, Berti,” he commanded, his voice an odd combination of no-nonsense gentleness.

“I’m still here,” I managed, though my heart was racing and my breath was getting short.

I felt him take my wrist, feeling for my pulse.

“Hey,” I protested weakly. “Animal doctor? People doctor?”

“I might have become an M.D., if I hadn’t preferred animals to people,” he assured me.

“A real Doctor Doolittle,” I grumbled, remembering how he had been “talking” to my cat.

“Well, as Rex Harrison’s Doctor Doolittle pointed out to the magistrate,” he reminded me, “man is an animal, too.”

I smiled what must have been a ridiculously silly smile under the circumstances. *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* and *Doctor Doolittle*? How could I not fall in love with this man?

Seeming to be satisfied my pulse was slowing back to normal, he took my face with one hand as he gently but firmly began to knead my neck and shoulders with the other,

and I experienced for myself just why Cosmic Creepers had been purring so furiously. *Too bad I can't stay to enjoy it*, I thought briefly, as grayness threatened again.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Stay with me, Berti!”

I want to, I thought, wondering how he knew my nickname. I really did want to stay with him, but the darkness was more than I could fight. I felt his hands move on me, both of them taking my face in a firm grip as he shouted at me.

“Look at me, Berti!” he commanded sharply. “Look at me!”

I fought to do what he wanted, if only because he was starting to become really annoying. That gray darkness hadn't seemed so bad, but here was Dr. Studly insisting I hang around with him. Never having had the experience of any man wanting me to hang around with him, the novelty of it, in and of itself, was enough to make me want to please him. Struggling gamely with my uncooperative eyelids for what seemed like an exorbitantly long time, I finally managed to force them open.

And felt a painful punch deep in my skull as our eyes locked, and he was suddenly there, inside me! There was a cold otherness like a sharp needle as his mind touched mine, and I flinched from it, wanting desperately for it to be gone, but he wouldn't let me go! I felt genuine terror for the first time in my life at that moment as I stared into the copper depths of his eyes, seeing the gold specs flash and wondering if I were going mad, if the voices screaming in my head since two-seventeen that morning had only been a preview of coming attractions.

I felt my mind flailing wildly, struggling desperately to keep my identity intact. The otherness that was him held me almost claustrophobically close, and I felt panic building until I wanted to scream as wildly as those damned voices whose cries had risen to a painful

decibel. He wouldn't let me go, however. Tears ran unnoticed down my cheeks, while I fought with everything I had just to breathe.

Then with an almost audible "click," the cold otherness of his mind invading mine burst through the invisible barrier between us with a warmth that seemed to envelope me as gently as a summer breeze. The screaming cacophony of voices diminished abruptly, too, because *he asked them to!* The gray darkness threatening me only moments before had simply vanished, because *he had made it go away!* Don't ask me how I knew these things to be true. The only thing of which I *was* certain was that the warm glow of compassion enveloping me, the likes of which I had never known from another human being, was coming from him. The "other" was now a part of me almost like a warm breath filling my lungs. As I came back to myself, I found my hands clenched tightly in his shirt. My vision was somewhat blurry, but it was only the result of the tears I could now feel on my face. I shuddered once, hard, then felt his arms wrap themselves around me.

"I'm sorry," he murmured as he held me tightly. "I am so sorry..."

I clung to him, well beyond any embarrassment. I was shaking like a leaf but couldn't stop it.

"I don't understand," I murmured against his broad chest. For some inexplicable reason, I actually felt safe in his arms, even after all that had happened, but I was also still very much afraid.

He pulled back just far enough to see my face and gently brushed the tears from my cheeks with his fingertips.

"Can you really be so unaware of your Talent?" he asked softly. "How could you not know?"

I heard the capital “T” and could only stare at him in confusion. “I don’t understand,” I repeated, hearing the anxiety in my own voice but unable to control it.

Dr. Morgen studied my face carefully then sighed. By his expression and heartfelt apology, I had to believe he had not meant to hurt me, hadn’t expected whatever he had done to harm or frighten me. Looking back on it, I’m pretty sure he was as shaken by the encounter as I had been, though at the time I was too confused and shaken myself to see it.

“I’ll tell you everything I can,” he promised, “but not here. Let me take you home.”

“But...”

He laid his fingers gently on my lips, shaking his head. “Not here, Berti. I’ll tell you everything you need to know once I get you home.”

I wasn’t sure he meant everything I *wanted* to know, but I guessed whatever he thought I *needed* to know would have to do. It would certainly be better than nothing, so I nodded my acquiescence and allowed him to pull me to my feet.

“You’d best take Cosmic Creepers,” he said, handing me my cat and quickly shedding the lab coat, hanging it on one of the hooks behind the door.

“The cat carrier...” I began.

He shook his head. “He’ll feel better if you just carry him.”

“But he might get away from me,” I protested.

Dr. Morgen smiled. “No he won’t. Trust me.”

And I did. Why, I’ll never know, but as the man laid a gentle hand in the middle of my back to guide me towards the door, Cosmic Creepers clung to me, kneading my shoulder and purring madly, proving the good doctor had been right.

Mrs. Freeman had her purse on the counter and was slipping into a light-weight jacket when we emerged from the examination room. She gave me an odd look, but the enthusiasm with which my cat was purring must have reassured her somehow, even if I was a mess.

“Marla has finished up in back and headed out,” she told the doctor. “I’ll go ahead and lock up, if you’re on your way out.”

“We are,” he told her. “I’m going to take Miss Lindstrom home—she’s not feeling well.”

Surprisingly enough, Mrs. Freeman nodded as though in agreement. “She probably shouldn’t drive.”

“But my car...” I protested. I knew I really had to look pretty bad if even Mrs. Freeman thought I wasn’t up to driving myself home.

“Mrs. Freeman,” Dr. Morgen said, turning to the older woman, “would you please call the sheriff’s department before you head out and let them know it’s alright for Miss Lindstrom’s car to stay here in the parking lot overnight for the weekend?”

“Of course, Doctor,” she agreed readily enough, but I could feel her stare as a tangible thing.

“Thank you.”

Without another word, he took my arm and, holding the heavy door open for me, led me out and around the side of the building to his own car. It was a roomy, late model SUV, and he needed to lift me up into the passenger seat. When I let my head drop back on the seat, he reached over me to fasten my seatbelt snugly before closing my door. My eyes stayed open long enough to follow him as he came around the front and settled in beside me.

I felt his eyes on me as he fastened his own seatbelt and started the engine. Cosmic Creepers settled down on my lap, and the voices in my head, while still there, remained a dull murmur.

“Richard Burton,” I mumbled as we pulled out of the parking lot, though I didn’t think he heard me. My last thought as I drifted off to sleep was the satisfaction of finally identifying whose voice Dr. Morgen’s reminded me of. It was Richard Burton, and the good doctor’s accent—as well as the language I had been hearing in my head—was undeniably Welsh.