

TOUCH OF DARKNESS

Chapter 1

Tiny needlepoints of pain dragged me up through layers of sleep. Increasingly insistent, the repeated punctures resisted my best attempts to drop back again into the warm and inviting dreams of my soon-to-occur wedding. I vaguely remembered rolling over beneath the heaps of down comforters. The resulting yowl of a startled and indignant cat pried open my eyes.

The room was pitch black—that enveloping depth of darkness you only get after a power outage. We forget how surrounded by light we are normally, even at night . . . from the soft glow of the clock to little dots and rectangles of hibernating electronics.

But I'd been prepared for this after watching the weather report before bed, so I reached to the nightstand, pushing aside the soft bulk of my cat who refused to stop digging claws into my arm. A click later, and the yellowish glow from a battery lantern pushed away the black. As my brain started to function a little better, I heard the wind howling outside. It's not completely unheard to get early-season blizzards in Colorado, and this one was going to be a doozy. Even in the dim light I could see icy patterns on the window edges high above the bed and driving snow that moved sideways across the glass. I groaned and curled deeper under the covers in response.

Again Blank jumped on my chest with a weight that pushed the air from my lungs hard and fast, like airplane turbulence. He was named *Blank* because of his unfinished appearance. A bare canvas that only required a splash of color to be real. But his whiteness had dulled to a dirty grey in the light, even while his pale, nearly clear eyes reflected it. They became headlights that made me squint. As I lifted his body off me, I thought he was purring, but then I realized it wasn't a purr that rumbled his chest.

It was a growl.

He combined the warning with claws digging deep into my wrists and I was suddenly fully awake. Adrenaline pounded my pulse as I listened for danger. I hadn't had any danger for awhile now—no women with knives or men with guns, or even Thrall vampires trying to slice open my veins. So it was probably time for them to appear again. Damn it. Just when life was going pretty good.

A little snow wouldn't bother the Thrall. They're not vampires of legend that slow down like reptiles in the cold—making them little threat before they've fed. No, they're ordinary humans, turned superhuman by sentient psychic parasites, but fully capable of shopping for winter clothes at the mall in broad daylight.

Even in flannel pajamas, the chill that hit me when I threw off the covers was enough to make me shiver. Apparently, the power had been out for longer than I'd thought. My feet found the slippers on the wooden floor by touch. Good thing, since I couldn't see that well yet. I picked up the handle of the lantern and walked to the dresser to turn on the second lantern. This one was bigger, an eight D-cell monster that with a flick of the switch, filled the bedroom with comforting fluorescent light.

Sometimes, just having a light turn on is enough to scare away an intruder, but I didn't hear any footsteps or panicked voices downstairs. No scents of unfamiliar cologne or sweat found my nose. A quick glance at the wind-up clock on the bookshelf showed it was two a.m. That's when I heard the sound . . . a rumbling, cracking sort of noise and sensation that I couldn't place. The cat hissed and leapt down from the bed to stand next to me. The guttural thrum reminded me of an approaching trash truck while sunning face down on the grass near the street. The sound faded away after a moment, leaving only the wind and beating of the snow against the windows. There's a lot of windows in my loft, formerly a factory in the lower downtown of Denver. I renovated the place so that the old thick industrial glass would rise above the floor on the west side for two full stories. Rain and snow hitting the wall of glass tends to set up a rhythmic vibration that becomes white noise after years of hearing it.

Blank stayed with me, crouched low next to my feet as I descended the staircase to the main level carrying my little circle of light. He was looking all around, taking in everything, as though he couldn't place the sound either, but didn't like it. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, while I was still surrounded by walls that gave some measure of defense, I opened up my senses. Being psychic has advantages at times, and this was one of them. I could touch minds that were nearby, could communicate telepathically with family and loved ones in danger. But mostly, as much as I hated it, I could sense where the Thrall were. They'd tried repeatedly to turn me into one of their own. They'd come so damned close to succeeding several times now that if one was in my apartment, I'd know.

But they weren't here, or even there. Though the whole Denver hive should be up and about at this time of night, I was met with a smooth, flat wall of . . . nothing. Either my ability to touch the hive was being blocked by the queens, or they were holed up, sleeping out the storm like sane people. Since a lot of the Thrall Hosts tend to be abnormally athletic people, hence slightly *insane* in my opinion, they're probably out in this mess. My fiancé Tom Bishop, would say I was the pot calling the kettle black, since I'm a former professional athlete. It's even part of why the Thrall has been trying to capture or kill me for years. But even I'm not nuts enough to be outside in a Colorado blizzard. I played volleyball . . . *beach* volleyball. Warm sun, soft sand.

So, I was betting it was option number one, which was a bad thing. They only block me when they don't want me to know what they're up to. It's an effort for them, because I'm pretty strong, so they don't do it for long.

But you know what they say—you're only paranoid if you're *wrong*. If you're right, they call you *proactive*, and in my many encounters with the Thrall, I've been exceedingly proactive.

The wind stopped for a few moments, the calm before the next blast of snow. In that brief silence, I heard the sound I'd been missing. A steady trickle of water that was like a dripping faucet, but more hollow. It seemed to come from ahead of me, but there was nothing along the wall of windows that had pipes, except the dripper lines in each of my potted plants for when I go on trips. I suppose the sudden cold could have split the plastic hoses. It made me sigh, because it would be a mess to clean up if it was in more than one place. The tension in my muscles was replaced with a weary resignation.

I have a *lot* of plants.

My brother Joe called me Jungle Kate for the sheer volume of greenery . . . well, he did back when he was speaking to me, anyway. The last time he spoke to me was at his wedding months ago.

It was just a tense *thank you* to my congratulations, and only after being prodded in the ribs by his new bride. Then he'd turned his back and walked away. He even returned the gift Tom and I had given them, unopened, which had brought on the first of many tears. But we're both stubborn, so I refuse to apologize for being psychic . . . for being a target of the Thrall. I hate that the vampires keep attacking my family because they're trying to kill or capture me. But I don't know what to do except keep trying to destroy them, and keep protecting those I love to the best of my ability.

The power chose that moment to flicker on. Both Joe and the Thrall were instantly purged from my brain by the horror that made me gasp and Blank hiss and dive for cover, almost simultaneously.

Chapter 2

My wall of windows was a waterfall—literally. Spiderweb cracks had appeared across the panes in a pattern that reminded me of a baseball line drive to a windshield. The inside was still warmer than outside, so the snow was melting as it hit the glass and was seeping through the cracks to drip on the floor. My gaze was pulled upward because no way should those windows be cracking. I'd been forced to heave a woman who was trying to kill me through the glass a year earlier and her body had only managed to break out a single pane. It had taken months for the glazier to find a sheet of quarter inch, blue tinted glass big enough to replace it. I'd had him check the integrity of the whole wall when he'd finally returned, and the panes were as solid as the bricks surrounding them.

But not anymore, and I could see why. Apparently, a *lot* more snow had fallen than they'd forecast, because the ceiling was bowed down nearly a foot where it met the windows. Either several tons of the white stuff, or a military transport plane, had crash landed on my roof.

A rapidly growing puddle was crossing the hardwood floor and seeping down into the pit area toward my sofa and entertainment center. But they were the least of my worries as the rumbling sounded again, this time accompanied by the very particular sort of squeaking that metal makes when it's being stretched beyond its limits. I instinctively ducked and Blank darted back under the coffee table when sizzling and popping came from above. One of the industrial sized ceiling fans that keep the loft warm or cool stuttered and began to smoke. The ceiling dipped further. There was no time to do anything but run for my life.

I dove for the floor and grabbed the cat, who responded by clinging to my chest with all four feet, claws extended. The cat carrier was already by the door because he was going to be staying downstairs with my tenant, Connie Duran, while I flew with Tom to Las Vegas for our wedding. My flight was supposed to be later today, and Tom planned to follow tomorrow at the end of his shift at the firehouse.

Those plans might be changing.

Another ominous series of creaks and groans hurried my feet, and I suddenly didn't care that I was wearing pink and yellow pajamas with fuzzy bunny slippers. I did care that it was snowing outside and I might freeze to death, though. Thankfully, Tom had left a pair of boots next to the couch, and my coat was hanging on the hook next to the kitchen. The cat went in the carrier without any fuss for a change and I snapped closed the metal gate just before slinging on my coat and tucking slipper-clad feet into the boots. I'd guessed right that they'd be darned close to a perfect fit that way.

The door to my apartment is one of the old fire doors from the original factory. It takes a pretty tough person to open it under normal circumstances. My shoulders are my strongest feature, so I can open it, as can Tom. Of course, he's a werewolf, so that helps. But I hadn't ever tried to open the door with weight on the door frame. I could already see the heavy steel beginning to flex down, and I wasn't sure what would happen if I yanked it open. Would the whole header collapse down on my head before I could get out? Would it start a chain reaction that would take out the windows and bring down the roof?

The only other option was the old freight elevator that would deliver me right into the basement where there's a small parking garage for the people who live here. Right now, the only car in the place should be Connie's—if she's not out on a call. She's a bail bondsman (or is that bail

bondswoman?) so she keeps odd hours.

My own truck was stolen a year ago, and I had to use the replacement money to pay bills instead of getting a new set of wheels, so that spot is vacant. As a werewolf, Tom isn't allowed to have a driver's license, much less own a car. Damned prejudice anyway.

But I had no way of knowing if the elevator frame had been damaged. Would I get inside it just to have it get stuck halfway down, where I wouldn't be able to get out? No, better to take my chances with the door. Tom had used the CAD program at work to make an escape plan for the building so that I could post it on the walls for future tenants. . . and it didn't include either elevator.

So, it would be me against my building. Well, I'd forced it to my will once when I renovated it from a mouse-infested dump—and I could do it again. After patting the top of the cat carrier for luck, I steadied my stance and grabbed the knob with both hands. As I'd expected, it didn't give on the first tug. Not only did it not give, but the rumbling increased ten-fold and the spider cracks sped up. *Well, shit.*

The second tug nearly pulled my arms from the sockets but I did get a hint of fresh air from the hallway that encouraged me. Blank mewled piteously from the back corner of the carrier as I bolted away from him to the kitchen where I keep the crowbar. Normal people don't keep crowbars in their kitchen, but normal people aren't the building manager and maintenance department rolled into one. And, I hate trudging to the basement every time I find some old rusted thing that needs a helping hand. It happens more than I like to think about. It's in the bottom drawer, right next to the WD-40 . . . another handy item for the task at hand.

A fine trembling was beginning in the floor, which was starting to panic me. People make mistakes when they're panicked, so I tried not to listen to the noises of the building that was threatening to collapse onto my head. My mind focused down to, *insert crowbar in doorway, throw weight against wall. Ignore big hole in drywall and move crowbar down a notch. Hose down hinges with lubricant. Repeat.*

Inch by inch, the steel door fought against the steel frame weighted down with bricks and snow. I was winning but it wasn't fast enough. A crash sounded behind me and I looked back to see that the bedroom where I'd been sleeping was now buried in what was probably a ton of steel supports, asphalt roofing and sizzling electric wires. A rush of cold wind and snow hit me in the face and the air stank of smouldering wood and hot metal.

Dear God. Is this what Tom feels like every time he goes in a burning building? My heart was pounding a mile a minute and my terrified cat yowling while ripping his claws and biting at the metal gate to the carrier to escape made my eyes burn. The crowbar was down to the floor and the doorway was still only open about three inches—not quite enough to get a good grip with my hands where I could brace myself. Blank got picked up and moved to the left and then I used every bit of my leg strength to kick those steel-toed boots into the crowbar. It hit the baseboard with a thunk and the door popped open so hard and fast that I would have gotten knocked out if I hadn't lost my footing and wound up on my butt. *Woo! Here's to clumsiness!*

More of the ceiling crashed to the floor, taking out Tom's relatively new flat screen television and the rocking chair that was one of the few things left from my mother. But the header over the door held. A pile of snow the size of a child's snowman from the new opening hit my back just as drywall dust coated me. I started coughing, both from the sudden blast of cold air, and the swirling dust.

Pinging, cracking and more screeching filled the air and a brick bounced off the wall about head height. I struggled to my feet and grabbed the carrier. I ran down the hallway toward the staircase. It's an old metal tread emergency stair and the fire inspector promised me it would outlast the building. I prayed he was right as I headed down to the second floor. Tom's old apartment is on that floor, but most of his stuff has been in my place since we got engaged. I didn't need to knock on the other tenant's door either. Rob Jameson and Dusty Quinn are members of Tom's pack but they're already in Las Vegas with—Saints be praised!—my luggage and wedding gown. Dusty had half-jokingly suggested I allow her to take my luggage since I hadn't had a very good track record of making it to the church on time. I originally objected, but something *had* come up time after time in the past ten months since Tom proposed. So, I dutifully packed my bags and sent them off with her, while Tom shook his head indulgently.

I'll bet this particular situation hadn't occurred to either of them.

I reached the main floor and bolted down the hallway. "*Connie!* Wake up! We have to get out of here." I yelled as I banged on the door with my fist. There was no time to check the garage to see if her car was there. Thankfully, I heard movement inside and a light flick on under the doorway.

She opened the door, rubbing eyes still bleary with sleep. Her hair was in curlers and a scarf. I didn't think *anyone* still did that. I always figured she had a perm. "What's wrong, Kate?" She yawned wide and then her eyes focused on me, widening as her jaw dropped a second time. "Oh, my God! Katie, you're *bleeding*. What's wrong? What's happening?" Connie was suddenly alert and reaching for her shoes. "No, never mind. If you say we get out—we get out. Talk later. Action now."

Was I bleeding? Probably. I tend to have that happen and not realize it in the heat of the moment. I didn't feel woozy, though, and all my limbs were working, so whatever damage could wait. Still, I checked what I could see of myself, but I didn't notice any blood. "The roof caved in from the snow. My apartment's gone. If the walls go—"

I didn't have to finish the thought. She did it for me. "The floors won't hold all that brick. No shit we need to get out of here." She was busily grabbing logical things, like her purse, cell phone charger and flashlight. Wish I would have thought of that before they got buried. "Is there time to get my car?"

"Don't know. This floor is pretty rock solid, but—" The lights went out again. Whether from the storm or the rest of the roof cutting the lines, I didn't know. Connie switched on her big Maglight, one of the four-cell models, and turned it my way.

She let out a frustrated growl. "Doesn't matter much now. We won't be able to get the gate to the drive open. Or is there a manual chain to open it?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but it's not an easy open. It'll take a ladder, and time, to switch the gate over to manual, and I don't know that we have either one right now. But the ladder's in the basement if you think it's worth giving it a try."

Connie shook her head. "No, we're not going down a floor if we don't need to. We'll hope for the best. C'mon, let's get moving. We can use my cell to call 9-1-1 when we get outside."

The rumbling started again overhead and I could see fear etch across Connie's face in the dim reflection from the flashlight beam. I was beginning to feel vibrations underfoot and when I placed the flat of my palm against the wall, it was moving . . . swaying from side to side slightly. This was an interior wall, so if *it* was moving—"Crap! The whole thing's coming down."

There was no more talk. Connie opened the closet door and pulled out a green vinyl gym bag.

It strained her arm muscles, so heaven only knew what was inside. She caught me looking and smiled . . . although it had grim overtones. “Overnight bag. I always keep one packed so I can look decent at odd hours. Clothes, toiletries, toothbrush. That sort of thing.”

A crash to my left turned both our heads. Something had collapsed inside the stairwell. Billowing smoke and dust poured out and chased us down the hallway as we bolted for the front door. As we crossed the stunning mosaic tile entry floor, I caught the eye of the woman who’d been lovingly immortalized in bits of glass by an unknown someone when the building was built. I’d spent weeks carefully uncovering the tiles and replacing the few bits that had been damaged by the cheap linoleum someone had put over it before I bought the place.

By the time we opened the door and exited the building, she’d been covered over by dust—lost again to view.

It was dark outside . . . no street lamps or headlights lit the snow that billowed and floated down between the skyscrapers. It was drifting across the sidewalk, but even the drifts were only up to my knees.

Odd—

“Yes, that’s right . . . the whole roof’s gone. I can see where part of it’s come down.” I couldn’t help but hear as Connie recited the address and flicked the phone closed. My eyes moved upward as Connie turned her beam toward the top of my building. Rough edges had replaced the smooth, straight brick lines of the old factory. Two of the panes of glass started to fall inward, pushed down by the wind coming off the mountains—they fell like a slow motion building implosion. I winced at the resulting crash as the panes shattered.

“We should get across the street, in case the wind shifts.” My voice sounded flat and emotionless to my ears. I changed the cat carrier to my other hand and flexed my fingers to get the feeling back. Blank’s no lightweight and the wind was making my skin raw. He let out a little *mmrrr* and moved to the other side of the carrier in response to the wind shift. Yeah, he’s got fur and he lived outdoors for a time, but it was still freaking cold outside.

Connie and I trudged across the unplowed street and found a place that was mostly sheltered against the opposite building. I put Blank in the most protected corner I could find and knelt down beside the cage to scratch his chin through the wire. After a long moment of both of us just staring at the collapsing building, she spoke. “So, what happened? Did you hear something, or did the whole thing just come down on top of you?”

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Lights, sirens and people filled the empty streets as the fire department arrived. One of the cops who’d responded to Connie’s call had caught sight of tendrils of smoke mixing with the snow and had called in an alarm.

The pumper truck didn’t have any problem negotiating the snowy street, but the police cruiser had slid around quite a bit when it first arrived. I’d never really thought much about the men and women who have to brave weather like this just to do their jobs until I’d met Tom. Now every time I hear about a rescue during a flood, or earthquake . . . or snowstorm, I offer a little prayer, asking for protection of those who choose to serve.

As the firefighters stepped out of the cab of the big truck and began to move around purposefully, I saw one helmet-clad man approach the Chief and speak to him. The Chief nodded and the man began to look around frantically. I raised my arm and he sprinted my way. He *sprinted*.

As bad as the day had been so far, I couldn't help but smile as Tom threw his arms around me and held me close. "God, Katie . . . when I heard the address of the call—" He turned my head from side to side with thick warm gloves that heated my frozen ears and wiped somewhere on the back of my scalp. His glove tips were smeared with red. What with the cold, I didn't even feel it and it didn't look like there was much blood. In a flash of movement, I was suddenly pressed against his chest in a nearly suffocating hug. "I love you so much."

My voice was a little muffled by his fire resistant jacket. I was a little surprised he was still in uniform, instead of in wolf form. Werewolves have a hard time holding their human form when they get an adrenaline rush. It's one of the reasons for the no-license thing. "I love you too, Tom. It's okay. Everybody's out and we're fine." I pulled away slightly, even though he didn't want to let me. His eyes were turning from golden wolf eyes back to their normal chocolate brown. "Go. Do your job. You don't need any more trouble from the guys."

The little chesty snarl and frown told me he didn't care what his peers thought of him. But he knew I was right. He's been taking a lot of shit from the guys he works with after he deserted his post to save Joe from a madwoman who was, coincidentally, also going to blow up one of the local hospitals. The fact that Tom managed to help take her down, save a mother and child *and* tell them where to find the bomb that was going to blow up the ICU ward were the only things that saved his job.

By the time they'd raised the cherry picker to look inside the building and pour down water to contain the small fire . . . since the Chief was smart enough not to send anyone inside, the snow had stopped and the news vans had arrived. *Them* I didn't say a prayer for, since I could do without any more coverage after the year I'd been having. I'd been brutalized by the press for my battle with the Thrall. They'd turned me into a media monster, without even asking my side. The only reason I hadn't been run out of Denver with sticky feathers was the Barbara Walters interview that put me in a good national light. But as for the local press . . . phooey. Let 'em slip off the road.

I was thankfully spared having to talk with any reporters, which now included news choppers that scanned the area with search lights, because I was spending my time with the cops and fire department. They were asking logical questions about what happened and I was doing my best to answer them. At one point, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It squeezed lightly, the touch of a friend or comrade, but by the time I turned my eyes, the person was gone. Or, at least, whoever had done the squeezing wasn't someone I recognized. Still, for that brief moment, it had been comforting, because the enormity of the situation had finally dawned on me.

Tom found me at the end of two long hours, as they were rolling up to speed toward the next problem. "Okay, so I'll see you in Vegas tomorrow night. Right?"

My jaw probably dropped. "Tom! The *building* just fell down. You can't possibly think that I can—"

He held up his hand, as though expecting my protest. "No. We're *doing* this, Katie. The building is *condemned*. The cops are putting up the tape now. You can't stay here. I can't stay here. The police will guard the building to prevent looting until we can get a fence company out here to secure it. We already have plane tickets and reservations in Vegas for the next three days. It would be stupid for us not to use the hotel room. And—" He held my shoulders firmly in those strong, glove-covered hands. "I *will* marry you. Even if I have to drag you to the altar. The day after tomorrow you're going to be Mrs. Kate Bishop."

Despite the snow, in the shadow of my destroyed building, his words still made me smile.
How could they not?