

CHAPTER 1

Some days, a girl just can't get a break. I wanted to get married, have kids, and a career that I loved. Instead, I married Jeff, who had an affair with his secretary, and divorced me so he could marry the bimbo. As for the kids, he didn't want any. Of course, last week I got the news from his snide mother that his bimbo was pregnant. Of course, she'd always blamed me for us not having kids. As for that career—working a window at the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles wasn't quite what I'd dreamed about.

At age thirty-three my life was boring. Then the vortex opened.

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Friday at the DMV bulged with people. I took money for license renewals and fielded the same old questions I've always gotten about why some folks' licenses were revoked. "Next!" I called out, slumped over my counter, little devils jackhammering away at my brain into a growing tension headache.

My eye on the hands of the wall clock as they drew closer to five o'clock, I swore one more person who wanted to know why her little teenaged darling hadn't passed the road test, I would scream.

When five o'clock rolled around, I escaped to my car. I didn't know why I hurried; no doubt it would be another tedious weekend for me.

The cranky old junk heap did its usual old ritual of coughing and backfiring before finally the engine gave up and turned over. I just wanted to get home, soak in a hot bath, and order a chicken mushroom pizza from my favorite pizza delivery.

But just as I was about to turn into my driveway, a gigantic quadrilateral of swirling neon colors—reds, purples, and hot pinks—appeared out of nowhere right smack in the middle of the street. It created a gale that blasted the neighborhood. Trees uprooted and flew into it, along with a couple of cars, a bicycle, and one yodeling cat. People ducked into their homes. That's when my car decided right then and there to break down. My heart pounded so hard, I thought it might break through my chest. I tried to restart the engine, but it remained dead. I leaped out and bolted for my house. Unfortunately, that path happened to be in alignment with the destructive force. I never made it.

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I opened my eyes. A dull pain pounded on the right side of my head. Reaching up, I found an egg-sized bump underneath my tangled hair. Dizziness assaulted me and my stomach lurched. I leaned over to my right and threw up what remained of my snack from my afternoon break. Chocolate doesn't taste good coming back up. I squeezed my eyes shut as the pain and wooziness went the next level of crazy amusement park ride vertigo. A few seconds later, I popped one eye, then the other open. I still had the dizzy spell, but it'd lowered to passable lightheadedness.

"Great," I muttered, wincing, "just really great. I must have banged my head on the steering wheel or something. Heck, maybe I had a nasty nightmare and fell out of bed and smacked my head."

I combed the matted locks out of my face, but it didn't work. That only made my sore head hurt worse. "I'd like to know how I tangled my hair from a clout on my head. I need my brush. Where's my purse?"

I looked around. "Wait a minute, this isn't my bedroom. Not my car either." To tell the truth, it didn't look like I was anywhere on Earth. Okay, maybe the *Twilight Zone*. That's what the whole scene reminded me of. I saw nothing except a place filled with gray mist. A creepy, cobwebby kind of mist. I expected Rod Serling to come out of hiding and start his spiel.

"Hello!" I called out as I crawled to my knees and from there tottered to my feet. My voice echoed back.

In the distance, I saw something. Indistinct because of the mist, it grew more and more distinguishable as it drew nearer. As it drew nearer, I saw it was two separate beings. One was a single eyeball with a dark blue iris about the size of a miniature poodle. It hovered in mid-air. The other, a gigantic black wolf with red eyes.

Wolves don't get that big, do they? And what is the other thing? I almost pissed my pants. "Stay back, whatever the hell the both of you are," I said, stepping back and holding my fingers out in the sign of the cross.

"That only works with vampires, and to tell you the truth, it doesn't work well with them either," said the wolf, its voice deeply male. "At least, so the movies claim."

Oh God, the wolf talks.

"Wolves don't talk."

"Of course, they don't," snapped the wolf, "because I'm not a wolf. I'm a shapeshifter." He cocked his head to one side. "I see you don't understand what shapeshifter means. Try werewolf. That's what you humans named us in all those stories."

Run, just run! The whole place full of thick mist made it hard to see more than a few inches in front of me. Who knew what else I might have stumbled into? Besides, I found that what they say about freezing in terror happened to be true. I stood there, staring at both the werewolf and the floating eyeball, my heart drumming at ninety miles a minute.

The eyeball drifted nearer to me until we almost touched nose to . . . iris?

"Jesus!" I stumbled backwards and tripped. "Owww." I landed on a harder surface than I thought.

The wolf sighed. "Larry, get away from the lady. I don't think she likes anything of a supernatural bent."

'Larry' levitated back over to the wolf and floated by his side. Its movement reminded me of a cork attached to a fishing line, bobbing in the water.

A nervous giggle escaped me. I clapped both hands over my mouth as I realized how that might be interpreted by the monsters.

When I felt more in control of not letting any more titters escape, I asked, "Why would something like that be called Larry?"

The werewolf snorted. "His parents named him, just like I'm sure your parents named you."

"What kind of parents—? No, don't answer that. I don't even want to know."

I got off the ground and dusted off the seat of my pants. Not because of dirt, but from whatever else might be on lingering on the ground. "I assume that this place is inside that big swirling mass of colors that appeared in my neighborhood. Did you have it kidnap me or something?" I stared at the werewolf. "Sorry, but I didn't catch your name, Mr. Werewolf."

"I didn't give it, but it's Connor Rojas. And no, we didn't have you kidnapped, or anything else."

"Were you and Larry sucked into here the same as me?"

Connor sat down, his tail encircling his body to tuck neatly between his forepaws. "Larry has always been here, in this dimension. He's a demon. I ended up here about six months ago, when the vortex opened above my apartment in El Cajon, California. Unfortunately, that was the first night of the full moon and I had just changed. I've been stuck as a wolf ever since. Guess it has to do with whatever counts for the laws of this place."

Larry made a strange little squeaking noise and Connor stopped, his ears twitching toward the eyeball as if listening. "Thanks, Larry." He swept his gaze back at me. "Larry wanted me to tell you about this place. We're in a dimensional entrance, kinda like a foyer or lobby. There are doorways that lead to several different places. Places like Faerie, and worlds of the Norse gods, Greek Gods, and so forth. One doorway beyond this 'stopping place'—about twenty paces to our left—takes you into what you humans call Hell, or what passes for Hell, depending on your take on religion, of course. The opposite way leads to Heaven."

Hearing the word Hell jolted me. "You mean I'm in ... Hell?"

"No, like I said, not quite, just a lobby that leads to it, along with the other places I mentioned."

The werewolf stood up on his hind paws. I stepped back, staring up at the creature towering over me. I'm tall for a woman at five feet nine inches in my stocking feet, but as I bent my head back, I figured he had to be at least six feet three inches, and this was on his bare, uh, paws. I felt small and insignificant, a frightened Red Riding Hood cowering

before the big bad wolf. Thoughts of 'But Wolf, what a tall body you have! How tall are you?' flitted through my mind, with the rejoinder being 'The better to snap off your head, my dear.'

As if he knew what I was thinking, Connor spoke in a softer tone. "Don't be scared. I won't eat you."

That didn't reassure me. After all, he had; fangs, claws, and an intimidating height. I stared down at the swirling mist circling my shoes, feeling that was better than up into a pair of werewolfish eyes. I heard him sigh.

My heart thumped painfully in my chest. I snuck a glance at him. "How do I get out of here and back into my world?"

"With luck, the vortex is still open in your neighborhood and maybe if we all move together and leap about ten paces to your right, we'll end up there."

"What do you mean, if we all leap together we'll all end up back at my home? You're coming with me?" I frowned at the eyeball. "Along with . . . that Larry? I don't think so."

"I want to go home too, and I don't want to leave Larry here. I fell through the doorway to Hell after I got sucked up. If it hadn't been for Larry, I'd still be there, a plaything for demonic entities. And he's not exactly popular with Hell right now." His eyes lit up. "Oh, I get it. You think once I leap I'll remain as a werewolf?" A laugh—at least I thought it was a laugh—issued out from between his large, sharp fangs. "Nope. Once I'm back on Earth I change back into a man. Naked, but a man, nevertheless. I assumed the full moon just ended, right?"

"I guess. I don't look at my calendar to check if it's that time of the month. You know, is it a full moon, or is it a waxing crescent?" *That's it, Cat, smart off to the big furry with teeth almost long as your arm. Can't you keep your big mouth shut for once?* I heard sounds coming from him and with surprise, stared up at him.

Deep guffaws slipped out of his maw, his chest heaving in and out. Then he stopped and looked at me, a glint in his eyes. I hoped from interest and not with hunger. "I like you. What's your name?"

"Cat Viggolone. Cat's short for Cathleen, although my husband, Jack, always claimed it was because of the sharp claws I unsheathed whenever we had a fight."

"Husband?" Connor's voice seemed to hold a hint of disappointment to it, but I might have imagined it. "You're married?"

"Not anymore. We've been divorced for seven months now. He preferred his secretary. She's younger, something I'm not."

"He sounds like an idiot. I see a beautiful woman."

A tear slipped out of the corner of my left eye and I wiped it away. Being called beautiful was something I hadn't heard from Jack. But I couldn't afford a good cry now. I had more important things, like leaving this place. "You said we're able to get out of here?"

"Follow me."

Connor dropped down onto all four paws, and with Larry trailing like a floating balloon, we turned to my right. One moment I wandered among swirling gray mist, the next I was jerked off my feet and found myself deposited back in my front yard. I lay on browning grass and stared up at the vortex. It began to shrink and shrink until it. . . departed. But not before I heard something roar. I shivered and wondered if that might be Lucifer, or something just as bad. It sounded immense and terrifying, something I hoped never to meet face to face.

I turned my head to my right and saw Connor, no longer a wolf. Instead, a lot of nude male flesh obscured my view, which to my shame, I didn't mind. Well, okay, I'm lying. I enjoyed every bit of his nakedness. His eyes, no longer red, were a deep chocolate brown, framed by long soot-colored lashes. Maybe due to being a werewolf for six months, a thick beard covered his face. A lock of black hair fell over his forehead and I realized he must be Hispanic, or had some Hispanic in him. The man had a nice even tan everywhere. I swept my gaze lower, down his chest to— *Oh, my*. My face grew warm as I looked away.

He said, "I'm glad that my body meets with your approval, but can we get inside your house? I mean, a naked man and a floating eyeball are sure to cause some notice in your neighborhood."

"Yes, of course, uh—" I jumped to my feet and dash to my car, which still sat where it had broken down. I fetched my purse and the keys from inside, hurried to my house and unlocked the front door, whisking Connor and Larry inside. Thank goodness, the vortex had frightened people so much that they had stayed in their homes. With it gone, I felt sure that someone would call the police or fire department. I didn't feel like explaining about the nude man, but most especially about Larry. Floating eyeballs are not natural to this neighborhood. To be honest, I don't think Larry would be considered natural anywhere on Earth.

After I turned on the lights in the house to see if the electricity still worked, vortex or no vortex, I dug up some old clothing of Jeff's from a big bag in the laundry room that he hadn't taken with him when he'd left. I handed Connor a pair of jeans and a ragged T-shirt that Jeff had outgrown—in other words, it meant he'd grown too fat. But they fitted Connor nicely, and I saw that he filled them out in all the right places. A rip in the front of the T-shirt let me see a male nipple and black chest hair. I looked away from that and looked up into his face.

"Sorry, but Jeff didn't leave any shoes here. It wouldn't matter anyway; I think his feet are smaller than yours." Connor's bare feet peeped out from beneath the jeans and I noticed dirt on them. "I guess Hell, or wherever that place is, must be dirty."

Connor blushed, which I assumed must be rare, right? I mean, when you need to be naked to shift into a wolf there's not much point to it, is there? Embarrassment had to be lacking.

"When I change back into a man after wolfing around, I usually take a shower. It wasn't just from the being inside that vortex for six months, but from the roof of my apartment building where I made the change. It's fairly mucky up there." He added, "Sorry to soil your carpet."

I took his hands and peered at the dirt on his palms and crusted under his nails. I gestured at the hallway. "There's a bathroom at the end of the hall. It's the first door to the right. Why don't you go in and grab a shower? When you're done, redress in these clothes. While you're showering, if I can get my car to restart, I'll go and buy you some shoes. What's your size?"

"You don't have to. I mean, if I can get to a branch of my bank, I'm sure I still have a checking and savings account with them. There's plenty of money in both."

I shrugged. "Well, you can repay me later, but for now, go take that shower. Your shoe size, please?"

"Thirteen."

I watched as Connor walked down the hallway before I grabbed the TV remote to turn on the television, so Larry could watch it. Though why I thought he would want to, I couldn't imagine. But what else could an eye demon do? Besides, I didn't want him floating through my house peeping into places.

Thank God, my car's engine did turn over and I drove to a nearby Wal-Mart. When I returned home an hour later with a pair of men's black leather jogging shoes in a plastic bag, I found a showered and shaved Connor sitting on my threadbare couch. He was using the TV remote and flipping through the numerous channels. Larry hovered beside him and stared at the set. Did that eye ever blink? As for Connor, now that he'd sheared the beard off his face, his smooth cheeks were... Hold on! How did Connor shave? My moisturizing shave gel and pack of disposable shavers I kept for my legs came to mind. *Oh, yeah.* I made a mental note to see how he left the sink and shave gel. Jeff always made a mess after his morning absolutions.

Connor looked up. "So, we're still in Afghanistan? And Trump, a businessman, won the presidential election?"

"Yes, to both questions."

He sighed. "Damn, the news you miss when you've been trapped in Hell." He shut up when a special news bulletin came on.

Two news people sat behind a desk, one reporting about the vortex that had disappeared in my neighborhood. Now it had apparently materialized in another part of town—downtown Richmond. The newsman talked about creatures stampeding out of the vortex. Ghastly, terrible creatures.

Connor glanced at me. "This isn't good, not good at all."

He was right. Halloween looked to be arriving early this year, and giving tricks to everyone, not treats.

