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FAITH HUNTER

HAVE STAKES WILL TRAVEL

Four Stories
from the
World of Jane
Yellowrock



Have Stakes Will Travel

Stories from the World of Jane Yellowrock

Faith Hunter

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A NOTE TO READERS

Hi, everyone,

With the last short story compilation, *Cat Tales*, I wrote a letter to you all, and frankly, except when it comes to making up stories, there isn't a lot left to say (grinning). So today I want to talk a little (very little) about the new shorts.

I've always said that when I first envisioned Jane, I "wanted a character who had no past, with seemingly only the future open to her. I wanted a character who was a bit repressed socially, sexually, and emotionally. I wanted a character who was a singularity—the only one of her kind in the world. I wanted a loner in the truest sense of the word." (Yes, I just quoted myself.)

But seeing Jane from the inside, from her point of view (POV), leaves us seeing Jane only as she sees herself. I wanted to explore how Jane is viewed by those outside her own head, her friends and lovers, and that is what so many of these shorts, some from her past, allow me to do.

For *Have Stakes Will Travel*, I wrote a piece from Beast's POV from the years just before the Hunger Times, a piece I titled "*We Sa and the Lumber King*." *WeSa* is Cherokee for bobcat. The Appalachian Mountains were heavily deforested in the late 1880s to the early 1920s, resulting in severe erosion, loss of habitat, horrible flooding with tremendous loss of life, and destruction of the lifestyles of the hardy farmers and the few Cherokee who still lived there. I wanted to show how Beast felt about the men who came in and destroyed her world. "*We Sa and the Lumber King*" gives you a short-short from Beast's perspective, with her values and honor system.

"Haints" is a story from Molly Everhart Trueblood's perspective, which allows us to see Jane as Molly saw her, early in their relationship. Molly, being the earth mother type, feels sorry for Jane in a lot of ways, which was a surprise to me! Until I wrote this story, I had no idea how deep her worry for Jane went. "Haints" allowed me to let their relationship grow a pace or two.

"Signatures of the Dead" was previously published in the anthology *Strange Brew*, headlining Charlene Harris, so if you missed it then, you get the chance to read it now. And if you read it then, here is your chance to reread and get a taste of Jane, now that you know her better.

"Cajun with Fangs" was a total blast! It's from Jane's point of view and takes place shortly after the ending of *Raven Cursed* and before the start of *Death's Rival*, which is out in October 2012.

Following the shorts, you'll get a special extra-long preview of *Death's Rival*, only available here. Yes, it will be out on October! (Cue the flashing lights and the pom-poms. If you feel like dancing, I suggest a merengue beat and—for the ladies—a full skirt to swish around! For the guys, I have to say, you will look splendid in a tux.) Okay, blatant plug is done.

If I have totally confused you, I've also included an updated timeline of stories in Jane's world to help. I hope you enjoy all the shorts. I thank you for being fans of Jane and Beast.

—Faith

www.faithhunter.net

[facebook.com/officialfaithhunter](https://www.facebook.com/officialfaithhunter)

P.S.—Don't miss Beast's Advice Column to humans, which is at her Facebook Fan Page: <https://www.facebook.com/faith.hunter#!/pages/Beast/135860763157310> or do a Facebook search for Beast.

TIMELINE OF STORIES IN JANE YELLOWROCK'S WORLD

“We Sa and the Lumber King”

A brand-new short story from Beast's POV, set in the Hunger Times.

“The Early Years”

Short story about Jane just after she left the children's home. Available as part of the *Cat Tales* e-book.

“Cat Tats”

Short story about Rick LaFleur. Available as part of the *Cat Tales* e-book.

“Kits”

Short story about Jane Yellowrock with Molly Everhart Trueblood as a secondary character. Available as part of the *Cat Tales* e-book.

“Haints”

Short story from Molly Everhart Trueblood's POV, with Jane Yellowrock as a secondary character. Available as part of the *Have Stakes Will Travel* e-book.

“Signatures of the Dead”

Originally published in the anthology *Strange Brew*, “Signatures of the Dead” is reprinted in *Have Stakes Will Travel*. It is a short story about Molly Everhart Trueblood, with Jane Yellowrock as a secondary character.

Skinwalker

The first Jane Yellowrock novel.

Blood Curse

The second Jane Yellowrock novel.

Mercy Blade

The third Jane Yellowrock novel.

“Blood, Fangs, and Going Furry”

Short story about Rick LaFleur, with Jane Yellowrock as a secondary character. It picks up just after the ending of *Mercy Blade*. Available as part of the *Cat Tales* e-book.

Raven Cursed

The fourth Jane Yellowrock novel, available January 2012.

Easy Pickings

The crossover novella written by C.E. Murphy and Faith Hunter. Jane Yellowrock and Joanne Walker are pulled into a different reality where they have to fight a big bad ugly. This novella stands outside of the *Skinwalker* series, but

slides nicely into this spot. Available as an e-book.

“Cajun with Fangs”

A short story from Jane Yellowrock’s POV, set soon after *Raven Cursed* and before *Death’s Rival*. Available in *Have Stakes Will Travel* e-book.

Death’s Rival

The fifth Jane Yellowrock novel, available October 2012.

Blood Trade

The sixth Jane Yellowrock novel, available 2013.

Author's note: This story takes place in the Hunger Times of the late 1800s–early 1900s.

We Sa and the Lumber King

I/We climbed stunted tree, sat in twisted limb. High on ledge at top of gorge. Hidden by smoke from man-fire far below. Man-fire burned limbs, leaves cut from trees. Smoke filled air. Sound of axes echoed across gorge. Sound of train whistle split air. Hurt ears. Bad sound. All sound of man was bad sound, but sound of white man was worst sound. No sound of birds. No sound of prey on ground. No good sounds anywhere since white man came to mountains. Below, in gorge, limbs and trees and branches were dropped into water, dropped there by human men. White men.

We sa, little bobcat, said into back of mind, *Yunega tsiluga tala tlugvi, tsiluga totsi tlugvi*. White man kill white pine trees, kill white oak trees. *Asgina*. Devils.

Alpha devil is there, I thought at her. *White man in gray pelt. Do you understand his words?*

Yunega talk is not Tsalagi talk, she said in mind speech. *I do not understand*.

I flicked ears, twitched tail, and said to her, *Alpha devil points with paw to other white men which trees to cut. With paws and tongue, tells them to load dead trees onto flat thing that moves, flat place called train car. Tells them to throw dead limbs and branches into river below. River is full of trees and does not run. Fish die. Animals run away and die. Birds fly away and die. Smoke fills air and I cannot breathe*.

I/we had talked in mind-den about this. I said to *We sa* again, *White devils must die. If white alpha devil dies, then all white men will stop killing earth. Yes?*

We sa did not answer. *We sa* shivered in back of mind, in cave-den of mind, in place she had made her own. We watched white men in gorge. We had watched them for two days. We knew where the den of the alpha devil was. We knew he went there at night, always by the same path. Just as deer once used to take same path to water in gorge below, alpha devil took same path to his train-car-den. I had been ambush hunter even before *We sa* came to me. I knew to study prey.

After long time, shadows began to stretch upon ground. *We sa* stirred and asked, *We will kill yunega asgina? We sa* knew this, but still she thought, silent in mind as we watched white man. *I do not like to kill humans*.

White humans are devils. They kill the earth. I/we will kill them.

But not eat them, We sa said. *Elisi*, grandmother, say man-flesh makes us sick.

We will not eat him. But I/we will kill killer of hunting territory. Killer of trees and killer of prey.

Man was not good hunter, man was stupid. But man was winning and I/we were losing. After killing alpha male human, I/we would leave this place for deep gorge, many days walk away. *We sa* knew this. She did not like it, but she understood. *We sa* had once been human, but not white man human. *Tsalagi* human—*Cherokee*. *Tsalagi* understood how to live with earth and not kill it. Some *Tsalagi* did not protect the

earth, some killed her, but not most. All white men killed earth. White man was evil.

I stood up on paws on tree limb and watched as night dropped darkness over all of earth. When shadows were long and human men left from killing trees to go eat food, I leaped to ground. *We sa* hid in dark of mind-den, afraid.

I raced down from ledge and trees on sheer part of gorge, place where white man could not get to easily, place of stunted trees and snakes and rock. I leaped straight down, thick tail whirling for balance. Half way down gorge-fall, I twisted like snake, and whipped tail. Changed direction, and landed on tiny ledge. There was small cave in back of ledge. Had once used this place for den to have kits. Liked this place long ago. White man had ruined it. Killed it. I did not go to den now, but pawpawpaw down across tiny ledges, leaping from ledge to ledge, which white men called *outcropping*, until I reached bottom of gorge. Then I moved in shadows for train car of white man, den of white alpha devil.

Night vision came as sunlight left. Earth turned into silvers and greens and grays. Liked this time of day/night. *We sa* called it beautiful. I called it safe. Shadows were dark and deep and *We sa* had explained that humans could not see in dark. I padded through dark over rutted bare earth to den of alpha devil. Curled into darker shadow beneath train car. I waited. I/we are good at waiting. Time passed. Night was dark. No moon stood in sky. Moon had died and would be reborn as kit-moon in one night, tiny and shaped like thin claw. I/we had chosen this night for this reason. *We sa* closed her eyes, afraid.

When night was full, I alone crept up stairs and leaped high, onto roof of train car. It was warm from sun of day. Was good place to ambush hunt. Looked over edge of train car, to path white man took for food. Was like ambush hunting on ledge in high hills before white man came and sent prey away.

Heard man-paws on earth, loud and scuffling inside dried skin of cow—boots. Man was not balanced and graceful and should not walk on two legs. Would be more quiet and graceful on four legs. But I was happy that white man was stupid and noisy. Listened and watched as he came closer. He carried in one paw much meat. It was cooked, which was bad, but it was meat and I/we had not eaten in two days. We hungered. White man came closer.

I gathered paws close under belly, balanced and steady as rock on flat land. White man came closer. He put one foot on step, one foot still on ground. Was unbalanced on one foot. I leaped. Landed on white man. *Hard!* Tumbled to ground, tangled in his upper legs. Landed on top of white man. With killing teeth, I ripped out his throat. Then held him by throat as he thrashed. He died. His blood was hot in my mouth. It did not taste good, but I hungered! Wanted to drink!

But *We sa* put her mind on top of my mind. *Tlano!* She said. *Do not eat!*

I snarled but I did not drink blood or eat white man meat. *We sa* was smart. Blood tasted like blood of buzzard, full of dead things. I took his cooked meat and carried it into night. In shadows, I ate. And listened to sounds of white men when they found my enemy. They gathered together like wolf pack. Like pack hunters. They shouted into night, many white man words. They grabbed white man sticks and made loud noises.

Guns, We sa whispered.

When all the white man's cooked meat was in my belly, I turned and walked into hills. But that night, the foolish white man pack let man-fire go free. The hills began to

burn and burn and burn. Hunger Times were upon us.

I would not come back to my old hunting grounds for many, many years.

Author's note: This story takes place after the short story "Kits" and before the short story "Signatures of the Dead." Molly Everhart Trueblood is the narrator.

Haints

"Nothing unusual here, Molly," she said.

I watched Jane Yellowrock as she crawled across the floor of the old house on all fours. Most adults looked foolish or ungainly when crawling, but Jane was graceful, her arms lifting and moving forward with feline balance, her legs raising and lowering, toes pointed like a dancer, even in her western boots. My friend moved silently in the hot, sweaty room, easily avoiding the bird and mouse droppings, the holes in the old linoleum, and avoiding the signs of recent reconstruction—the broken plaster walls, large holes in the floor, and the shattered remains of the toilet, tub, and kitchen sink in the corner. Her shoulder blades lifted up high with each crawling step, visible beneath her thin T-shirt, her head lowered on the thin stem of her neck, moving catlike. I envied her the grace and the slenderness, but little else. Jane was more alone than anyone I had ever known.

Now she breathed in with a strange sucking hiss. Flehmen behavior, she called it, using her hypersensitive senses to smell things the way a cat would, the way a mountain lion would, sucking air in over her tongue and the roof of her mouth, her lips pulled back and mouth open. Mostly, she did it only when she was alone, because it sounded weird and looked weirder—not a human action at all. But because I had asked her for help, and because no one but me would see her, she did it now, scenting for the smell of . . . of whatever.

As I watched, Jane crawled out of the half-renovated kitchen and into the dining room beyond. We were both dressed in old jeans and T-shirts, clothes that could get filthy and be tossed into the washer, and already Jane looked like something the cat dragged in, which was funny in all sorts of ways. Jane Yellowrock was a Cherokee skinwalker, and her favorite animal form was a mountain lion. She called it her inner beast, which I still didn't understand, but I figured she'd tell me someday.

I'd met Jane in the Ingles grocery store, when a group of witch haters caught me in the frozen foods section and harassed me. None of us Everharts were officially out of the closet then but most townspeople were okay with my family maybe carrying the witch gene. It was the out-of-towners who had the problem—a group that wasn't from the religious right, but were just as rabid. I still don't know what Jane did—she stepped in front of me so all I saw was her back—but the haters departed. Fast. I gave her my thanks and a card to my family café and we parted ways.

The next morning Jane came into the Seven Sassy Sister's Herb Shop and Café, and nearly cleaned us out of bacon, sausage, and pancakes. The appetite of that morning was because she had just changed back from an animal form and needed calories to make up for the shift, but I didn't know that then. I just thought it was a crying shame that a woman who was so skinny could eat like that. If I tried to shovel

in that much food, even half that much food, I'd weigh four hundred pounds. I think I gained three pounds just watching her eat, that first day.

And then the group of witch haters from the day before started picketing out front. I guess they were in town and figured they should make the most of it. They were carrying signs about not suffering a witch to live—the usual crappola—and chanting, “Save our children! Save our children!” Two cars pulled by and slowed, as if to turn in, and then pulled on away. Such attention was going to be damaging to business.

Jane paid her bill, went outside, and revved up her bike. And revved up her bike. And revved up her bike again. At which point I realized she was doing it on purpose. Then she did something to the engine, and revved it up again. And black smoke came out. So Jane rode in circles around the parking lot, shouting to the witch haters, “So sorry about the noise! I have engine problems!” After about ten minutes of noise, the witch haters left. It was so cool. I thought the twins, Boadacia and Elizabeth, were going to have twin cows.

That's Jane. A loner with a cause. Any cause, as long as it's protecting someone.

She sneezed, bringing me back from my daydreams to my friend crawling around on the floor of a deserted, possibly haunted house.

The dining room had little floor left, and I could see the ground and the foundation beneath the house, between the struts. Still on her hands and knees, Jane moved into the foyer, circled its perimeter once, ignored the stairs leading to the second story, and crawled into the parlor beyond. I followed, watching from the foyer, which had been exposed when the construction crew pulled off the old boards covering the entrance. Oddly enough, though every other room in the house showed the results of men with mallets and hammers and crowbars, the parlor had still not been touched. The finish of the original handmade woodwork below the chair railing and the moldings at the ceiling were dark and filthy, the plaster between was cracked and split with water damage, and the last bits of old, red wallpaper curled, hanging loose, covered with spiderwebs and the dust of decades.

I stood in the six-foot-wide opening, watching my best friend track through the dust. The flooring beneath the accumulated filth was wood parquet, probably cut from the land the house stood on, milled by the lumber baron who built the house in the previous century. He had died a gruesome death, killed by a bear beside his train car, or so the old story went. His son had married a witch, and their daughter had inherited, and so had her daughter. However, the old house hadn't been occupied in decades, not since Monique Ravencroft, the most powerful witch in the Appalachians, had disappeared without a trace.

The family had died out except for a son who no longer wanted the property, and the old house had been sold to a local lawyer for his business offices. Construction had begun quickly thereafter. The workers, however, had abandoned the project two days ago, after a flying mallet attacked a plumber standing in an empty room. The construction company owner had asked the local coven in the little township of Hainbridge to investigate, but the women had had no luck identifying the spiritual miscreant. They had called me in to discover if the troublemaker was a ghost, demon, or haint—haint being a term applied, in this part of the woods, to a form of poltergeist, or supernatural energy that usually manifests around a person instead of around a

place. Whatever had attacked the plumber, it needed to be identified so the coven could coerce or force it to vacate the premises. Unfortunately, all I'd found was a sense of something dead in the house, and I'd had no luck calling to or talking to any non-corporeal would-be-killer. I hoped Jane, with her hyper senses, might discover something I had missed.

Jane sniffed around the fireplace on the far side of the room, the interior walls black with wood or coal smoke, the old grate rusted through and coated with spider webs. She seemed to find the opening uninteresting, and moved on to the corner. She paused there, repeating the openmouthed sniffing, and looked up, puzzled. "Molly, are you sure there's something dead here?"

I nodded. I'm from a long family of witches, all of us pretty much in the witch-closet, and while I'm an earth witch, with the gift of growing plants, healing bodies, and restoring balance to nature, I'm a little unusual for an earth witch, in that I can sense dead things. And there was definitely something dead in this house somewhere.

"I smell witch and vamp," Jane said.

The little hairs on the back of my neck stood up in alarm. "Vampire? There shouldn't be a vampire here."

"It's been years, but I think . . ." She put her nose back to the dust covered floor, sniffed delicately, and started sneezing. She rolled to her feet and crossed the room, sneezing all the way, her nose buried in the crook of her elbow to keep her filthy hands away from her face. I counted twelve sneezes before she stopped and her face was red from the sneeze effort. "I think I smell vamp and witch together," she said, the back of a wrist to her nose, pressing against more sneezes, "and both of them were bleeding." She stood beside me and turned to face the room. The evidence of her crawling progression was a clear trail through the layers of dust.

"Moll," she said, "I dropped a stake." She pointed to the fourteen-inch-long stake in the corner. "Would you go get it, please?"

"No," I said instantly.

"Why not? You chicken?"

Anger shot through me. "I'm not going—" I stopped, and the anger filtered out of me. Around me the house seemed to wait, expectant, and I turned in a slow circle, standing in the doorway, letting my senses flow out, seeing the hand-carved woodwork, the once-elegant stairs leading up to the second floor, the carpenter's ladder against the wall. Smelling the dust, the fresh wood, the dirt under the house, and the sweat of the workers from two days past. Hearing the small sounds an old house makes, the pops and quiet groans. Feeling the breath of the house as air moved through it, cool and moist from the open floor and up the stairs, a faint trickle of breeze. I opened my mouth, as Jane did, and breathed, almost tasting the house, its age, elegance, and history.

Midway around, I closed my eyes and took a cleansing breath. The magic I hadn't noted pricked against my skin, cool and light, old, old, old magic, a spell frayed around the edges, one that hadn't been renewed in decades. "A ward," I muttered, "combined with something else. Maybe a keep-away spell. Yeah. I can feel it, feel them both, combined. It was a really good one to have lasted this long." I opened my eyes and studied Jane. "How'd you sense it when I didn't?"

"Dust," she said succinctly. At my puzzled expression, she said, "Every room in

this place has been walked over, beaten on, knocked down, and partially renovated except this one. The footsteps all go right up to the entrance,” she pointed down to the floor at our feet, “where they removed whatever had been covering the room. And here they stop. I was the first person to so much as step into the room.”

A small smile pulled at her lips, half-proud, half-embarrassed. “I’m guessing the spell treated me like a big-cat. And since hanging around you and Big Evan so much, I’ve realized that sometimes I can feel witch magics. Cool and sparkly on my skin.”

That was a surprise. Humans can only feel magics when the spell is directed at them, as in a keep-away spell that shocks anyone who touches the spelled item. But then, Jane Yellowrock isn’t human. I can do magic—it’s in my very genes, passed along on the X-chromosome from parent to child—but Jane *is* magic. And scary sometimes.

“Okay.” I sat on the floor in the foyer, outside the opening to the parlor, and reached out with my magics. Immediately I saw the spell. It was mostly green, smelling of pine and hemlock and holly, marking the caster as an earth witch, like me. I held out my hands and touched the edges of the conjure; it flashed against my fingertips painfully, hot and cold together, with minute darker green flashes of deeper pain. Once I concentrated, I could see the parameters of the incantation and the place it was protecting, the far corner of the room where the dust was deepest. A bit of cloth was in the corner, like a man’s old-fashioned handkerchief, and an old newspaper, the rubber band disintegrated into blue goo from the heat and moisture of the long-sealed room. A curl of wallpaper had fallen across it too. I guessed that the spell was tied to an amulet, probably hidden beneath the trash. I stood and brushed the dirt off my jeans.

“So,” I said, “I guess I need to push through the spell and get a feel for what is causing the problem.” The instant I said the words, a sense of dread fell on me. I *knew*, completely and totally, that if I went into the room, *I was going to die*. Worse, *my child would die*. I sucked in a breath, and it burned my throat. *My husband would die*. Tears stared in the corners of my eyes. And *the deaths would be horrible, painful, tortured deaths*. It was illogical and stupid and clearly the results of the spell. But it was also *real*. I backed away, three unsteady steps. And the spell faded.

“Son of a witch on a switch,” I cursed.

Jane was leaning against the molding in the opening, arms crossed, watching me. “Bad?”

“Totally and completely sucky.” I described what I had been made to feel by the spell. “Whoever created that spell was good. Really, *really* good. And frighteningly inventive.”

Jane nodded, only her head and the tip of her long braid moving. “The worker who nearly got brained by the magical, flying hammer, was he getting ready to go in here?” she asked.

“Yes. Why?” I asked.

“Because that ladder,” she tilted her head to the metal step ladder, “wiggled when you decided to go in. I figured it was going to fly across the room and hit you if you didn’t back off.” Her lips pulled again in that half smile that was uniquely hers. “I was going to catch it before it hit you, of course.”

“Thanks,” I said, eyeing the ladder. “Like I said. That is a really good spell.” I

pointed to the corner. “I have a feeling that the original incantation is tied to something in that corner. Maybe an amulet hidden under the trash.”

Jane nodded and uncrossed her arms. Stepping close, she pushed me farther away from the parlor opening and into the dining room opening on the other side of the foyer. Out of the way of flying carpenter tools, I realized. It was an odd dance-step-of-a-move and Jane grinned down at me. She was a dancer, and I had three left feet and couldn’t follow her; I nearly fell. “Careful,” she said, holding me steady.

“Don’t get hurt,” I blurted.

Jane chuckled softly. “My reflexes are fast.”

“Yeah,” I said hesitantly. “Still . . .”

Jane shook her head in amusement and dropped to her knees again. She crawled into and around the parlor, one shoulder and hip brushing against the walls, just the way a cat would explore a room, around the outer edges first. When she reached the wallpaper and cloth on the far side, she batted the paper away in a move so catlike I covered my face to stifle a giggle. Then Jane grabbed up the cloth in two hands, held like paws, and rolled over with it, sending up clouds of dust. When her sneezing fit subsided, she batted the cloth away too, revealing a snake.

I lifted my hand to warn Jane, which was stupid as she had already lifted the snake to expose it as dry, cracked rubber tubing and small pieces of corroded metal. Jane said, “It looks like some weird kind of stethoscope. And this is the amulet, for sure. My hand is stinging, and some kind of green magic is running all over my skin.” She crawled across the room on three limbs, the stethoscope in her left hand.

It was a weird design, with two earpieces and two flat chest pieces. Near where a doctor’s chin might go, the two pieces were connected with a metal tube that had been wrapped in a circle, like a trumpet’s body, and, like a trumpet, the connecting part was clearly designed to increase and maybe modulate sound waves. The dangling pieces seemed longer than most stethoscopes, and the little circular chest pieces were decidedly old fashioned.

Green magics emanated from them and were climbing Jane’s arm and wrapping around her body. Before she reached the doorway, and before the magic reached her head, she dropped the device and swatted it, just like an irritated cat. The spell instantly went still, into stasis, and Jane crawled out of the room, shaking her head, muttering, “I know. I know. I don’t like it either.” She crossed the entry to the room and stood, brushing off her clothes, scowling. But with Jane a scowl meant nothing; an expressionless face meant even less. At her best, Jane was inscrutable, and I’d always put that down to her being found in the mountains by park rangers, with no memory of anything, no language, no people, no nothing, and then being raised in a children’s home and learning how to socialize—or not socialize—in an artificial “family.”

Now that the amulet was closer, I knelt and studied it. From upstairs the creaks of the old house increased, but when I looked up, nothing had changed. Outside the windows, the wind picked up, and buffeted the house. I shrugged and went back to studying. The chest-pieces were made of some kind of plastic, maybe like that Bakelite stuff that was so popular in the early nineteen hundreds. If so, then that dated the device to that era. My grandmother had Bakelite jewelry and it was quite collectable. The stethoscope was in fairly good repair, even the rubber parts, which one might have expected to disintegrate.

I heard clicks to my side and looked up to see that Jane had pulled a small digital camera out of her boot and was taking pictures of the house and the amulet. I made a small *mmm* of approval, but the photos might be blurred. Magics did that to photos sometimes.

From upstairs the creaks of the old house increased again, and developed a distinct rhythm. “Molly!” Jane shouted. Suddenly she was standing over me, her arms lifting high. She caught a wooden headboard as it roared down the stairs and slammed at me. “Out!” she shouted again, as she tossed the headboard and caught the flying footboard, using it to deflect a flying drawer or three from a bedroom upstairs.

Crouching to make a smaller target of myself, I raced for the front door, which flung itself open to allow me passage. Jane followed and the door slammed behind her. She pulled me to the street fast, the winds I had noted only moments before dying when we reached the curb.

“Is that the spell or is the house alive?” she demanded.

It might be a dumb or bizarre question to most people, but not to me, and clearly not to Jane. “I don’t know,” I said. I needed to ask Evangelina, my older sister and our new coven mistress since mama retired and moved two towns over to take care of grandma.

“Great. Just ducky.” Jane scowled as she brushed more dust off her clothes. “Fine. One thing I can tell you. A vamp owned that stethoscope. I could smell him all over it.”

* * *

Back in Spruce Pine, I picked up my daughter, Angelina, from the family café where my younger sisters were watching her and arrived home, to our new house, before Big Evan did. My girl was worn out after playing with my wholly human sisters, Regan and Amelia, which meant she went down for a nap while I fixed supper. I put Angie Baby in her bed and covered her with the blankie that Evangelina had crocheted while Angie was still kicking my insides out in the last horrible month of pregnancy.

When we painted the new house—after we lost the mobile home—I had chosen the soft sage-green color for Angie’s room based on the blankie, which my daughter loved. Darker green leprechauns and brown brownies sat on huge calla lily leaves beneath a magical spreading oak tree. Unicorns pranced in the background and rainbows crossed the horizon beyond the tree, all painted by Regan and Amelia. What they hadn’t gotten in magical abilities they had made up for in artistic ability and talent. It was a room of love.

In the kitchen, I turned up the Aga, stirred the stew I had left bubbling on the stove, and put a loaf of bread in the oven. I also started a pot of brown rice, to stretch the stew so that Jane could join us. I couldn’t pay her for the work this afternoon, so the least I could do was feed her supper.

I knew Evan was home before he even turned into the drive. The wards we had put up around the house warned me, identifying his signature. He came in, work boots clomping, and put his arms around me. Evan is a huge bear of a man, easily six-foot-

six, with red hair and beard, lightly streaked with gray. He is older than I am but with witches' expanded life spans, that matters less to us than to humans. When we met it was love at first sight. Lust at first sight too, but that was definitely the lesser of our earth-shattering reactions to one another. Evan was a witch, one of the rare male witches to survive to adulthood, and we were pretty certain that was why Angie Baby's gift had awakened so early—she had a witch gene from each of her parents, making her the most powerful witch on earth at this time.

"Who's magics you been playing around with?" he mumbled into my hair, which tumbled over my eyes and tangled with his beard. Mine was not nearly as bright red as his. "Do I need to worry that another witch caught your eye?"

"Absolutely." I turned in his arms and wrapped mine around him. They didn't quite reach around his shoulders, but the fit was perfect around his chest and I clasped my hands together in the middle of his back. "I think you need to remind me that I have the perfect man at home and shouldn't be playing the field anymore."

"Is Angie in her room?" His voice turned up hopefully on the end.

I buried my face in the crook of his shoulder. "Napping very deeply. She's making those little puffs of breath that she does when we just can't wake her."

"There is a God." Big Evan picked me up and carried me to the bathroom instead of the bed, which worked out quite well to remove the sweat of the day from him and the construction dust and stink of vamp and unfamiliar magics off of me.

* * *

When Jane got to the house my hair was still damp, but I was clean—very, very clean—and I was dressed in a T-shirt and a fitted denim shift with full skirt and deep, tucked pockets. I don't think Big Evan and I fooled her any, because she shook her head and smiled that small smile while looking back and forth between us. I had the feeling she thought we were cute, but at least she wasn't the teasing type.

She woke Angie Baby and kept her busy in her room while I finished up the evening meal, and then carried my girl to the table. Angie usually fought being put into the high chair, wanting to sit in a regular chair like a big girl, though the table came only to her nose that way and I didn't trust a stack of catalogues the way my own mother had. But tonight Jane surprised us all with a bright pink booster seat with Angie's name painted on the back. It had little suction cups on the bottom and a strap that attached it to the chair; another strap attached around Angie's waist, with an additional strap that looked special-made for Angie's current baby doll. Angie squealed and chattered and was enchanted with her big-girl chair. And Jane's face softened at Angie's obvious delight.

Over stew—heavy on the veggies, light on the beef—Jane told us what she had discovered about the strange stethoscope. "It's called a Kerr Symballophone, and it was designed in 1940 with two diaphragm chest pieces to allow doctors to hear different parts of the chest in both ears so they could differentiate the sounds from either lung, or from the top and bottom of a single lung, or from the heart and a lung. Kinda neat, really."

I leaned into my husband and said, “She’s showing off her brand-new emergency medical training.”

“You took an EMT course?” he said, surprised.

Jane gave a minuscule shrug and tore off a hunk of bread. “Finished last month. I figured it might come in handy,” she said, her eyes on the bread and a smile tugging at her mouth, “for the day you finally give in to temptation and shoot Evangelina.”

Evan coughed and turned red. I laughed. I guess it was possible that he didn’t think his feelings about my eldest sister were quite so obvious. “You can’t choose your family,” I said sweetly. “More stew?” Evan nodded and Jane went on as I dipped up another humongous portion for my hubby. The man had to burn ten thousand calories a day.

“Anyway, I went to the Hainbridge Historical Society and did some research.”

“I didn’t even know Hainbridge *had* a history,” I said.

Evan chuckled, shoveled in a mouthful, and gestured for Jane to go on.

“There was a doctor by the name of Hainbridge living in the city in 1840.” She went back to the bread and dipped it into her stew, watching as the bread soaked up the thick broth. “And in 1870. And in 1910. And in 1940.”

“A family of doctors?” Evan asked.

I remembered the smell of vamp and said, “No way. He wasn’t—”

“Way,” Jane said. “I’ve seen two small portraits, hand painted, seventy years apart, and except for the beard, it’s the same guy.”

“I’ll be,” I said. “I know we have a lair in Asheville. Word is that the head vampire wants to start a barbeque joint in town.” When Evan paused with his spoon in midair, I said, “Down boy. So far, it’s just a rumor.” To Jane I said, “Barbequed ribs are his favorite. So. We had a lair here, way back when.”

She nodded and glanced at Angelina, her look saying there was more to tell but not in front of tender ears. So I had to wait for details, and waiting never sat well with me. I have red hair. Some form of impatience is surely bred into me.

* * *

When Angie Baby was finally down again for the night, and Jane and Evan and I were all stretched out in the tiny living room, Jane finally dished. “Hainbridge was a vamp with a human son. The kid came down with what sounds like leukemia, when he was a child in 1845.”

“Vamps can have kids? I mean, human kids?” Evan said.

“Sounds like it, but it must be really rare.,” Jane said. “According to the records, the doctor tried everything to cure the kid, and instead of curing him, the kid went crazy. The local newspaper called him a lunatic. He was seven.”

“The father tried to turn his son to cure him of the leukemia,” I whispered.

“Yeah. That’s what I got out of it. And from what I’ve read, that’s not permissible, to turn a child. And just as bad, Hainbridge didn’t chain his child up.”

I looked across the room to Angie’s door. It was half closed and I suddenly couldn’t stand it. I stood and crossed to the opening and looked in. Angie was curled

on her side, her thumb in her mouth. She didn't sleep with her thumb in her mouth often, only when she needed comfort, and I had to wonder if she had heard us talking, even in her sleep, and become distressed. I studied the wards on the room and tightened them here and there where they had grown a bit frayed. And I prayed too. I wasn't much of a prayer, not like Jane. She was a true believer and she prayed religiously—a small joke we shared. I was less . . . confident, less sanguine, about who and what God was, and about why He would give a rat's behind about any of us. But I prayed anyway—*God keep my baby safe*. Just in case. And oddly, when I finished, Angie pulled her thumb out of her mouth, sighed, and rolled over. Coincidence was a strange mistress. When I settled in my chair and picked up my tea, Jane went on.

“He was accused of having rabies. The kid was,” she clarified. “He bit several people, tried to chew off the arm of a little girl in town. No one got turned, but the kid disappeared and the doctor stopped practicing and went into seclusion. He wasn't seen by the townspeople often, but when the war started in 1861, he totally disappeared.”

“The Civil War?” Evan asked.

“Yeah. And when he reappeared in Hainbridge in 1870, several years after the war ended, there weren't enough people there to remember him. Sherman did a number on the town.”

“Is it true that Sherman was a werewolf?” I asked.

“No such thing as werewolves,” Evan said firmly, raising up the foot of his oversized recliner and pushing back. “No such thing as weres at all.”

Jane and I looked at each other and said nothing. There were witches and vampires and at least one skinwalker. Who can say about werewolves? “Anyway,” Jane said, “when he came back to town, he was all into treatments for lunatics and research.”

“His son was still alive,” I guessed.

Jane shrugged and curled her legs under her. She was long and lean, dressed in a T-shirt and worn-out, skin-tight jeans, her boots left at the door and striped socks on her feet in shades of fuchsia and emerald; the socks were a gift from me. I doubted that she ever wore them unless she came here. Jane Yellowrock didn't have the most jocular of natures, but she was desperately appreciative of any small gift, which made my heart ache for her.

I shook my head as I remembered the storm that destroyed the mobile home we had lived in until a few months past when Angie's power awakened way too early and ripped the place apart. Jane had saved us all that night by turning into a mountain lion and calming Angie long enough for Evan and me to bind Angie's powers tightly to her. As if she knew what I was thinking Jane met my eyes, glanced at Angie's room, and shrugged as if it had been nothing. It hadn't been nothing. If I believed in miracles, I'd say that was one.

“So, then he involved some witches who had come over from Ireland—a woman by the name of Ester Wilkins, her daughter Luran, and her sister Ruth. They'd started a coven, under the covers, so to speak, out of sight, but they provided the doctor with herbal tinctures, decoctions, and concoctions.” She tilted her head. “There's a difference between decoctions and concoctions?”

“Big difference,” Evan said. I had thought he was asleep, sitting in his big chair, fingers laced over his middle, ankles crossed, and eyes closed. I laughed and he