



*It's always darkest before the dawn...especially on the night of a skinwalker moon.*

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# Chapter One

*She was dancing in the sun.*

Sara Sawyer frolicked around the edge of a woodland glade at midday, as unaware of the passage of time and as innocent of weighty concerns as the butterfly that touched down lightly on a golden flower nearby. Her peasant-style skirt of white cotton flared from her hips as she pirouetted high on her toes. Strands of vibrantly colored beads graced breasts as unencumbered beneath her off-shoulder blouse as were her dance movements. Brown hair cut in a rough shag and streaked with blonde brushed against skin the color of honey as she swayed back and forth.

She spun and twirled around the glade with eyes half-closed and dreaming. The corners of her lips curled into a smile as she breathed the spicy fragrance of meadow grass. Tiny yellow wildflowers tickled her bare feet, and the wind-chime she'd hung from the limb of a nearby tree tinkled delicately in the breeze. It was an utterly perfect day, and Sara Sawyer had never been so happy.

The skirt swirled back down around her legs as she came to a stop. Eyes of a bright, startling blue flew open, and she caught her breath at the sight of the man watching her from the edge of the glade.

As dark as she was fair, he was dressed in a sleeveless leather jerkin and buckskin pants, both of which had been bleached white and were as supple as satin. A choker of polished quill had been tied around his neck. An eagle feather had been fastened in midnight hair that fell nearly to his waist. He stood motionless in the shade, a battered leather knapsack slung over one shoulder, and watched her out of eyes almost as dark as his hair.

For a long stretch of moments neither of them moved. Birds continued to chirp unconcerned in the treetops. The butterfly fluttered from one golden flower to the next. Sara remembered to breathe and realized she was glistening with sweat and the exuberance of her dance. Her smile returned, a joyous, irrepressible smile that lit her entire face. She started across the clearing toward him.

He met her halfway. Shrugging off the knapsack, he lowered it to the ground and stooped to open it. She bit her lip and clasped her hands behind her shyly, the toes of one bare foot curling into the carpet of soft grass that covered the glade from one end to the other. Untying the leather thong that held the knapsack shut, he lifted the flap and carefully removed something. Standing upright again, he presented her with a strand of iridescent, downy-green feathers. The shaft of each had been threaded through hand-carved beads brightly colored with natural dyes, then woven together with strips of dried sinew as thin and light as thread. With solemn care, he tied them to a length of her hair. When he was done, she shook her head slightly, making the strand bounce and sway as if caught in the breeze. They felt secure there; they felt good. They felt *right*.

Reaching into a pocket hidden in a fold of her skirt, she removed her gift for him—a sturdy bracelet of braided hemp tied with beads the same amazing blue as her

eyes. The bracelet was well-made to withstand to the rigors of an ancient way of life, and she could tell by his gentle smile that he was well pleased with it. He offered his wrist so she could tie it on.

With the exchange of gifts completed, they clasped hands. Sara's smile faded and she lifted her face to his, her expression that of a woman hopelessly in love. Together, they spoke the vows that pledged them to each other for eternity.

And then, as all couples do, they kissed. Arms entwined around each other, they sank to the ground in the center of the glade, suspended in the buttery warmth of the afternoon sun, laughing breathlessly when the kiss finally ended and their lips parted. Sara sighed, content with his arms around her, and laid her head against his shoulder. His name was Hawk, and he was hers forever.

Scanning the treetops around the glade, Hawk's smile quickened as his eyes lit on something. He raised a hand, holding a finger outstretched, and gave series of short, lyrical whistles. A moment later there was a flutter of yellow in the air. With tiny wings spread like sails to catch the wind, a goldfinch landed on his finger. At his murmur of encouragement, she reached out ever so slowly to stroke the bird's soft plumage. Surprised by her touch, it flew away. She gasped and then laughed with wonder, and raised her face to his. He lowered his lips to hers and she closed her eyes, feeling their souls merge as their lips touched and his hands began to work a different kind of magic...

"Hel-lo, Earth to Sara, are you IN today?" Knuckles rapped sharply on the desktop in Sara's work cube, jarring her out of the past. Startled, she swiveled around in her chair to see Ed Ritchie, co-worker and sports writer for the Barrettsville Times, standing in her cube. She frowned, annoyed by the way he'd crept up on her.

“I should think that would be obvious, Ed, even to you.”

“I called your name three times, Sara Jane. You were somewhere out in the stratosphere.”

“Well, I’m back now. What is it you want?”

Ed Ritchie. Stocky build, lightly freckled, brown hair cut short and neat somewhere just this side of a crew cut. Boy next door. She and Ed had been engaged once, but that had been before...

*Stop it! Just stop it.*

Sara flinched inwardly and shut off that particular train of thought. What good did it do to dwell on it, anyway? After all, the past was dead and reliving it through memories only made for an empty shell of a life. Nevertheless, her hand rose unconsciously to the beaded feathers she wore braided into her hair.

Ed’s gaze traveled from her face to her ankles and back up, pausing to spend some quality time with her breasts. Sara shifted in her seat, uncomfortable with the attention. It made her feel tired. It made her feel old.

“Ed, HR regulations declare, ‘Thou shalt not leer.’”

Her words jump-started his eyes, returning them guiltily to her face. His cheeks reddened and he grinned sheepishly. Sara waited to see if he’d shuffle a foot, too.

“Sorry, Sara. I didn’t mean to stare. I just can’t help but wonder—”

“Don’t go there, Ed. There’s no point in it.”

He held up an appeasing hand.

“Okay. I get it. I’m just the errand boy, anyway. Boss has an assignment for you. A good one. Go see the man.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the

general direction of Max Gilberton's corner office and grinned, perhaps seeking to make amends for his roving eyes and one-track mind. "And congratulations, Sara. You've earned it."

*Congratulations. You've earned it. A juicy assignment—in this town? Oh, what I wouldn't give to be able to leave here,* she thought sourly.

Sara could never leave though, because to leave the small town of Barrettsville, South Carolina would be to bury the past completely, and if there was ever a chance...that things might change...and return to the way they'd once been...

*Dammit.* Wishful, wasteful thinking once again. She picked up a pad and pen and rose from her seat. As she made to leave her cube, Ed stepped before her and barred her way, his eyes searching her face for something she wouldn't give him.

"Sara, what do you want from me? What do I have to do to get you back?"

She stared at him in disbelief. Why, after all this time, was Ed Ritchie still interested in her? It didn't make sense.

"You really don't get it, do you? It's over, Ed. After two years, you haven't been able to figure that out?"

Ed gestured haplessly and stared off into the distance as if seeking the words he needed to convince her. They came out of his mouth sounding almost like a moan.

"But Sara, if you only knew—"

Sara's patience chose that moment to run thin.

"I'm sorry, Ed," she snapped. "I wish I could, okay? But I can't. It just wouldn't be fair to you, would it?"

She shouldered past him out of the cube. His eyes followed her as she left, and there was an odd little gleam in them. Strangely enough, it wasn't the light of his love for Sara—if such a thing could even be said to exist. It was something else; something that went beyond her. It was the glint of unrequited greed.

## Chapter Two

If Sara could have seen the look in Ed Ritchie's eyes as she walked away, it would have startled her every bit as much as the look of pity in Max Gilberton's when he asked her to follow up on a lead of a possible murder out at the river.

"You deserve this opportunity, Sara," her boss had said, in the false spirit of a rah-rah speech. "Now go get me that story."

Deserved it? She *deserved* it? Why not "earned"? Hadn't she worked as hard as any other junior staff reporter? Did he feel sorry for her for some reason? Perhaps he thought she *deserved* it because she'd grown up in Barrettsville as an abandoned child, dropped off on the doorsteps of the orphanage as a newborn. Maybe he pitied her because no family, no one at all in that lousy, ingrown little town had ever opened their hearts—much less their homes—to the little orphan girl.

Or maybe he felt sorry for her because she'd lost the only man she would ever love.

Sara shook her head impatiently and set the feathers in her hair to swinging. Never mind. She'd worked hard, caught a few lucky breaks, and had done all right for herself in spite of the odds stacked against her. She'd return with a story she'd *earned*

the right to go after—regardless of whether or not Max Gilberton thought she “deserved” it.

Sara Jane Sawyer (whose name had come to her courtesy of the state; she supposed it was a better name than “Baby Jane Doe”) slid behind the wheel of her Toyota Camry, oblivious to the rising heat of the day. She cranked the engine, set the air-conditioner on high, fastened her seatbelt, and settled a pair of sunglasses on her nose.

Not so very long ago Sara had been an attractive young woman. But that had been before the event two years prior that had wrecked her life and left her devastated, while leaving her no answers as to the *why* of it.

Now she was too thin, her eyes by turns either dull or filled with baffled hurt, her laughter nonexistent. Pain, she’d noticed—especially soul-pain—had a way of doing that to a person, just tearing them up inside and leaving nothing but a hollow space where their heart used to be. Now she ate without tasting, slept but never rested, moved mechanically through the motions of living without ever feeling alive. An emotional zombie with a hollow space inside the size of the moon. She checked the view in her rearview mirror, shifted the Camry into reverse (one of those lucky breaks, she’d gotten it from Barrettsville Motor Company for a song) and backed out of her parking spot.

It wasn’t hard for Sara to find what she was looking for. In fact, it would’ve been impossible to miss. Fully visible from Highway 9, cars lined the shoulders of a neglected and seldom used dirt road that branched off from it and led down to the river. She turned off and pulled in behind a string of vehicles that included an ambulance, two squad cars belonging to the Barrettsville Police Department, and a Crown Victoria she thought she recognized as belonging to the chief of police himself. Whatever had happened, it must

be bad if J.T. Andrews was out here. Switching off the engine, she slung her purse over her shoulder and climbed out of the car.

The morning sun had already started to simmer the moisture in the air into atmospheric soup. Moving from the cool of her car's air-conditioning into the rising heat of the day, Sara's sunglasses fogged over. She took them off, wiped them dry on the hem of her cotton blouse, then settled them back on her nose for a look around.

Here on the outskirts of town, the land was primarily undeveloped woodland that had so far managed to avoid the butchering chainsaws and bulldozers of greedy land developers. Years ago there had been an old covered bridge over the river but it had been condemned and eventually torn down after a diving accident killed a teenager. The rutted remains of a narrow track, almost overgrown by roadside stands of sumac and snarls of blackberry, led the way back through the woods to where the bridge used to be.

Shouldering her purse, Sara picked her way around the vehicles parked in the grass (which, by the way, smelled as cinnamon sweet as the grass in that woodland glade two summers ago) to the edge of a drainage ditch still marshy from recent rainfall. She wrinkled her nose in disgust at the stagnant water that pooled in footprints left by booted feet, noting the gnats that crawled along the edges of the dark liquid like tourists at the beach. She stepped gingerly over the ditch and pushed aside the branch of a small tree, peering down the trail into the woods.

A shadow seemed to flit over the sun. Suddenly, a new emotion bloomed in the hollow place inside her: terror. Dry-mouthed, puke-inducing, heart-throbbing terror. Sara jerked her hand away from the branch as if it had stung her. It whipped back into

place as she staggered back a step. The heel of her shoe splashed in the muddy water behind her, sending clouds of gnats spiraling to safety.

Gasping for breath beneath the weight of irrational fear, she spun around wildly, half-expecting see some malformed creature creeping up behind her. One hand at her throat, she stared at her surroundings. The world seemed to have become edged with an invisible filth, glinting with a dark intensity that hurt her eyes. She flinched from the sunbursts of light that crisscrossed chrome bumpers. Wildflowers she hadn't noticed before peppered the landscape with petals of sulfurous yellow. The stinking puddle in the ditch roiled with oily rainbows that rippled across its surface. Even the wings of the gnats that hovered in the air around her seemed to shimmer with black iridescence.

With her heart jumping sporadically in her chest, Sara stared at her trembling fingertips, rubbing them with a thumb. Had there been something on the branch she'd pushed aside, some poison she'd absorbed instantly through sweaty fingers that could have caused such an intense reaction?

If the bark of the branch contained some kind of poison, the effects were already receding. The runaway pounding of her heart slowed to normal. Colors faded. Intensity waned. Gnats returned to their rightful place along the shoreline of the puddle, and the world Sara knew slid back into place.

Except for the woods behind her. A darkness waited there, crouched and dangerous. Its long, clammy touch reached out to stroke the back of her neck with a hint of cool. As if drawn against her will, she turned to peer past the tangle of brush into the shadows beyond. Something moved there, just outside the range of her vision. Something sinister...and compelling. Something that was waiting for her. Never mind it

was irrational. Forget it was impossible. Death was there. Death, and something else. Sara knew with perfect clarity that if she crossed the line between the shoulder of the road and the shadows of the woods, her life would change forever—and not necessarily for the better.

Goosebumps began a slow march up her arms. Drawn by a curiosity she couldn't name, she pushed the tree limb aside a second time and ducked beneath it. A moment later, she had stepped from the sunlight into shadow.

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