

In the Rift: Glenraven II: Chapter 1

By Holly Lisle

PROLOGUE

The last of the search parties had given up looking for her months earlier. When the American woman pedaled her bicycle out of a little-traveled mountain pass in the heart of the Italian Alps, her husband had already received the notice that she was missing and presumed dead, her home town had already mourned, her friends had already paid their last respects. She had lived through a month of days in her absence; the world she'd left behind and finally rejoined had, in that same time, lived through half a year.

She and her guide rode into the town of Bardonecchia, where they caused a sensation. The guide brought with him a mangled corpse which he had strapped to a makeshift travois attached to the frame of his bicycle. The woman carried in her pocket a book. Neither the corpse nor the book were what they appeared to be.

The corpse looked like the body of the woman's best friend, also reported missing, but it was in fact a magical construct created to give the woman on the bicycle an alibi, while her real best friend remained behind in Glenraven, serving as the new Watchmistress for that beleaguered magical realm.

The book appeared to be a common guidebook. The woman knew it had once been the key that permitted her and her friend to enter the realm of Glenraven, but she believed that its magical qualities had died when she left Glenraven. She kept it with her only because it had sentimental value—it would

serve, she thought, as a remembrance of her friend and of the adventure they had experienced in a world of magic and wonder. She knew she would never return to Glenraven and her best friend would never leave, but she knew also that this was the best and happiest outcome either of them could have imagined.

In the center of a brief storm of publicity—a storm that would have been longer had anyone suspected the truth—the woman returned to America, to the little town of Peters in southeastern North Carolina, where she resumed her life and her marriage, had a child, and was happy. She forgot about the book, but in that she had help from the book.

Had it actually lost its magical properties, the book would have ceased to exist in any form. But it had not. It was changed, but it remained a powerful, complex artifact.

Further, it had a desperate mission, but the woman who had served it so well before would not serve again. The book needed to belong to someone else, someone it hadn't found yet.

It altered its appearance so that outwardly it became a copy of a techno-thriller written by an aging actor who had in the writing proven himself incompetent in two professions. Then the book sat on a shelf in the woman's house for nearly two years, until finally she put it into a large box full of other books she didn't intend to read and took it to a used bookstore. There she traded it in, never suspecting what she had just traded.

Chapter One

The dead horse lay across Kate Beacham's pinestraw path, hidden from the road out front by the mooncast shadows of the loblolly pines and the heavy overgrowth of the azaleas, rhododendrons, and camellias. The sharp, hard scent of

impending frost and the hotmetal stink of blood clogged the air. Kate leaned against the trunk of a pine and clenched her fists, digging her nails into the palms of her hands, fighting back tears. Her breath plumed out in front of her, frozen by the cold night air, the plumes as ragged as her breathing.

Someone had cut letters from magazines and pasted them to a sheet of college-ruled notebook paper, and had nailed the note to her horse's forehead. From where she was standing, she could read it clearly.

You'Re nExt

Her tongue slid along the backs of her teeth, tasting blood, feeling the new wobbliness in the front incisors. Her fingers touched her right cheek, probing at fresh swelling over the bone and beneath the eye, feeling the stickiness of scrapes that were beginning to scab over, setting off sharp needles of pain to counterpoint the dull throbbing in her back and ribs and thighs.

She looked at her torn shirt, at the dirt and the blood, at the gaps where the buttons had come off in the fight. She looked down further to her bloodied, scraped right knee that glowed in the moonlight through the new hole in her jeans. Further, to her feet. She still wore one Nike Air cross-trainer. The other had come off when she kicked at one of the attackers; he grabbed her foot, she pulled away, the shoe had stayed with him.

That attack hadn't been random.

She shivered and stared at the black, unwelcoming windows of the tiny house she'd bought, wondering if she dared to go in long enough to pack. Were they waiting in there for her? Were they standing on the other side of the glass, watching her find her horse? Were they laughing?

They'd been waiting in the alley. She owned a saddle shop on

the corner of Main Street and Tadweiller, a block from the police department and the county courthouse in one direction and right next to the used bookstore that had once been Baldwin's in the other. Like the other shop owners on the block, she parked in the service alley behind her store. She was working late. The saddle business she did in Peters wouldn't keep a mouse in scraps, much less rent a store and buy a house and feed her and her horse. But like a lot of other successful small business owners, she'd learned how to market to specialty buyers. She had a thriving catalog business and her reputation for high-end custom-made English and Western saddles and tack earned her visits from riders all over the United States and Canada. She even had a customer in Australia.

She'd been doing the finishing touches on a matching western show saddle, bridle, martingale and crupper for a client who barrel raced: oak leaves and acorns and lots of engraved silver on black leather. It was going to set off the client's dapple-gray half-Arab, half Quarter-horse; Kate could picture the completed saddle as she worked. She wanted to finish tooling the seat before the leather dried and she'd gotten involved in pebbling between the oak leaves and doing some extra detailing she hadn't actually planned until it started to be beautiful and suddenly it was ten o'clock and Lisa and Paul, her two assistants, had been gone for hours.

Weary but pleased, she let herself out the back way, locked up, and found her car key while she was still standing on the top step. She noticed only peripherally that the light by her back door was burned out and so was the one at the end of the alley. It didn't seem to matter. She lived in Peters, North Carolina, population ten thousand and a few, and though she and everyone else she knew locked their doors and took precautions, it was more because Interstate 95 ran right by the town than because anyone expected trouble from neighbors. Besides, the full moon lit most of the alley and the sky was

full of cold-brightened stars, and everything was as quiet as it should have been.

Deep shadows swallowed her car, but she hadn't really thought about that. How many hundreds of times had she left work late? Alone?

How many?

One too many.

Three of them had been waiting for her. They wore pantyhose over their heads, and one of them had a roll of duct tape. They grabbed her, the one with the duct tape wrapped it twice around her head, covering her mouth. "You're going to like this," they kept saying. "You're going to like us, witch." She'd fought, kicking and punching and head-butting, trying as hard as she could to hurt the three of them.

They didn't have weapons with them. No knives. No guns. They'd evidently figured they were three big men and she was one average-sized woman, and they hadn't anticipated the amount of fight she would be able to put up in her own defense. They should have. They certainly would the next time. Not all the blood on her shirt was hers. She'd kicked one in the nose when the three of them tried to pick her up to carry her somewhere. That one had dropped her and when her feet hit the ground she'd launched herself head first into the face of the one who had his arms locked under her armpits and around her chest. She'd heard the crunch of bone and he screamed and swore. She wasn't winning, though. For every blow she got in, they hit her with three, and the more she fought, the madder and meaner they became.

Then, from the shadows where she was fighting for her life, she saw the gray backside of the store at the end of the alley light up. Headlights were coming down the service road from the opposite direction.

“Shit,” one of her attackers said, and his friend said, “Later, witch.”

They ran, and she stepped out into the light of the headlights, hoping for help.

The car had been a prowl car, and the officer in the black-and-white had put her in his front seat, driven her around while she tried to spot the three men, and finally, when it became clear the three of them had gotten away, had taken her to the emergency room. The ER staff determined that she had a hairline fracture of the right zygomatic arch, which they'd translated when she'd asked—the thugs had broken her right cheek bone, but not badly. She also had numerous abrasions and contusions and a couple of bite marks and a slightly sprained ankle, but she didn't have a head injury or internal bleeding and she wasn't going to die. So she got a prescription for Darvon and a couple of tablets to last her until she could get to a drugstore, and the RN had her swallow one Darvon before she left.

Then she went to the police station and gave her statement and let a female officer take photographs of her injuries.

The police were kind, but they weren't very encouraging. She hadn't recognized any of her attackers. She hadn't gotten good descriptions. She hadn't been able to come up with any sure-fire identifiers—no tattoos or scars. She described three youngish white men, all between five-ten and six-one, all between a hundred eighty and two hundred twenty pounds. All three were going to be bruised and scratched, and she was sure one would have a broken nose. Maybe, she said, two.

Worse, she'd lied when they asked her if she knew why anyone might want to hurt her. She wasn't about to admit to the police in a small North Carolina town that she'd been attacked because she was Wiccan—a witch. Freedom of religion might be a constitutionally protected right, but that didn't mean

anything in most small Southern towns if the believer belonged to the wrong religion, and Kate knew it. She'd learned the hard way to keep her mouth shut. So what she did know about her attackers—that they were after her because of her religion—the police didn't find out. And as a result, they were all very caring but not very helpful.

A different officer took her back to the alley to pick up her car. He watched her get in it, watched her start the car up and check to make sure it would run. Then she waved to him that she was all right, and she backed out and drove home.

Parked in the driveway.

Walked up her walk.

Found her horse.

It was three thirty in the morning, and now she knew that they knew where she lived. She didn't know them, but they knew her. Had been waiting for her. In spite of what they'd said when they grabbed her, she had wanted to think what happened to her was just the odds, but her last, futile hope of that died. She'd wanted to believe the attack had been random violence that resulted from her carelessness, from her being in the wrong place at the wrong time, from bad luck. She had wanted to believe that any woman walking down those steps would have had the same thing happen to her, because if it were just random, then it would have been over. She could have put it behind her and gone on with her life.

But this was personal. These men were after her, and they weren't just going to go away.

She didn't let herself cry. She swallowed the tears and felt them blurring across her eyes. She'd raised Rocky from a colt. She'd trained him herself; had ridden him every day; had let him steal apples and carrots from the pockets of her coats; had talked to him and played with him and brushed him and

loved him. He was, she supposed, the child she never had and probably never would. They'd killed him to hurt her, and they'd succeeded. Standing there staring at Rocky lying across the pinestraw with his eyes open and dull and cloudy, she hurt worse than she had when the thugs had beaten her.

But she wouldn't cry. She wouldn't let them make her cry.

She wouldn't let them make her stupid, either. Carefully, she retraced her steps to her car. She got in, locked her door, and backed out of the pinestraw-covered drive. She drove two miles to the Dairy Mart, used the pay phone to call the sheriff—she lived out in the country, so she was beyond police jurisdiction—then drove home to await the arrival of help.

A car with two deputies got there twenty minutes later. Both men got out; the one that carried a camera went straight to the horse while the other came over to talk to her. His name was Merritt. He was genial, thirty pounds overweight, in his early fifties. She told him an abbreviated version of what had happened to her at work, then showed him Rocky and the note. The other deputy had finished with the photos of the horse and was working his way around the house by then, checking windows and doors.

Merritt said, "Death threat like this is a serious thing. Maybe they're only trying to scare you, but I wouldn't bet the farm on that."

The other deputy called from the back of the house, "No sign that anyone tried to get in here. Doors and windows are fine."

She turned to Deputy Merritt. "Would you mind coming in with me and making sure they didn't get in? I know it sounds paranoid, especially when everything looks okay out here—but I just want to be sure."

"I'll be happy to walk through with you." He headed up the walk with her. The other deputy walked slowly down the

driveway with his head down—looking for evidence, perhaps—got something out of the county car, and returned to Rocky. “Bobby, you getting that note?”

“I am.”

“Fine. I’m going to take this young lady inside and make sure there aren’t any surprises waiting for her. Call back to the station when you’re done there, and I’ll be out in a minute.”

The other deputy just nodded.

Kate unlocked the door, but Merritt walked in first. She followed and closed the door behind them.

The house smelled of cinnamon and apples from the pie she’d baked for herself the day before; and of Old English Red Oil, which she used to keep up the antique walnut dining room furniture she’d acquired piece by unmatched piece from various second-hand stores around the state; and of Murphy’s Oil Soap. The house was old and still a little run down, but she’d recently redone the wood floors with a drum sander and stained them herself, and she kept after them. The homey smells didn’t make her feel better. They just made her feel that terrible things could happen in the safest of places.

The deputy switched on the light.

The floor in the entryway gleamed. “This is right nice,” he said. He peeked through the doorway to his left, into the dining room, and then to the right, into the living room. His hand rested on the butt of his gun. “You wouldn’t think from the outside that this place was so pretty inside.”

“I haven’t had a chance to repaint outside yet,” Kate said. “That’s my big goal come spring. I’ve been working on the inside for the last year. I did most of the inside work myself in the evenings and on weekends.” She tried to hide her distress in small talk. It didn’t help, though.

The deputy opened the coat closet to the right of the entryway and said, "No one in there."

Kate reached in, grabbed the baseball bat she kept leaning against the wall and pulled it out. She worked off her remaining shoe and kicked it into the closet. The deputy eyed the baseball bat and raised an eyebrow. "That's not bad but for home protection I really do recommend a gun. You're a long way out here, and no matter how fast we come, it ain't going to be fast enough if you need help right away."

"I have a shotgun," Kate said. "And I shoot once a week."

"What do you have?"

"Mossberg twenty-gauge pump action. I keep it loaded with slugs."

"That'll do. What do you shoot?"

"Clay birds mostly. Boy down the road will come over and toss them for me when he can. When he can't I toss them myself."

"Damn. You hit any when you do the tossing?"

"Most."

"Damn."

They went into the dining room. Moonlight shone off the polished surface of the oval Colonial drop-leaf table and the arms and backs of the chairs, turning them silver. The deputy switched on the light, and the warm dark tones of the wood came alive. "Your chairs don't match," Merritt said.

"I got them one at a time at yard sales. Got the table the same way. Refinished everything and did the upholstery on the chair seats."

"You'd be pretty handy to have around," the deputy said, crouching down to look inside the deep storage area beneath

the china cabinet. "I can't get my old lady to wash the damn dishes without an argument. If I didn't say anything, she'd just live in shit."

He walked around the counter that separated the dining room from the kitchen and started opening the cabinets. "Have you seen anything so far that looks out of place?" His flashlight illuminated the dark spaces under the sink, where orderly rows of cleaning supplies sat waiting for use.

"Not yet," Kate told him."

"God, if it were, you'd sure know it, wouldn't you? Don't think I ever saw anyone kept a place so neat."

"I live alone. I'm the only person I have to clean up after."

"There's that," he said. He checked the pantry, and then the little downstairs bathroom and the storage area at the back of that. "We got three young'uns, Sharla and me. Oldest is nineteen now, youngest is thirteen." He turned from the storage area. "Let's take a look in your living room, then go upstairs."

He was as thorough in the rest of the house as he had been in the kitchen, and just as chatty. He commented on the afghans she'd crocheted, on the stenciling she'd done around the ceiling and doors in the living room, on her taste in decorating, on the size of the upstairs bathroom. She appreciated the fact that he was taking his time and taking her concerns over hidden intruders seriously, and he was kind and he never crossed the line between casual conversation and nosiness, but by the time he finished checking in her closet, she was looking forward to seeing him go.

He stepped out of her bedroom and walked to the dormer window at the top of the stairs; he looked down at the front yard. "Nobody here but us chickens, young lady. I'm done, and it looks like Bobby's done, too. I don't see him out there; he

must be back in the car." He looked over at Kate and smiled. "You going to be all right then?"

Kate nodded. "I'll be fine."

"We'll call Animal Control about the horse. They can take care of moving it for you unless you got other plans."

She pressed her lips together tightly and inhaled. "No other plans." Tears blurred her vision for an instant, but she blinked them back.

"Then we'll be on our way." He headed down the stairs and Kate followed him.

"Thank you."

"That's what we're here for."

She walked him out. From her doorstep, she could see the other deputy, Bobby, sitting in the driver's seat of their car, talking on the radio. He glanced up when he saw them step outside, and just for an instant he looked into her eyes; then he looked down so that the wide brim of his hat hid his face, but in that instant she'd gotten a clear look at him. He was in his late twenties or early thirties, and he had two black eyes and a tremendously swollen nose. "What happened to him?" she asked.

"Stepped in between a couple of fighting drunks off-duty. They quit fighting each other and started fighting him."

Off-duty. That meant Merritt might not have been with him when the fight occurred. "When did that happen?"

"Some time yesterday. Last night, I reckon." Merritt gave her a long, level look and said, "He might have been fighting the same bunch of troublemakers tried to hurt you. I'll ask him about it—if he thinks there's any connection, we might be able to look into it a little. It's really city's case unless we

can say for sure this incident and that one are connected.”

Kate nodded again. When Merritt walked down the path she closed the door behind him and locked the deadbolt and hooked the security chain into place. Then she stood in her entryway shaking, watching through the peephole in the front door as the county car backed down her driveway and moved out onto the road.

The other deputy, Bobby, had done everything he could to keep her from seeing his face. She'd seen it when he was surprised into looking up at her. Maybe he was just embarrassed about the way he looked. She was probably jumping to stupid conclusions. The county was a big one, and there had to be people besides the ones she'd hit who had black eyes and swollen noses.

But if Bobby was one of the men who attacked her, she couldn't even count on help from the sheriff's department. She wasn't safe anywhere.

She hurried to the stairs; eight up, right turn on the landing, and eight more. When she reached the top landing, she went to the dormer window and looked down, half expecting to see Bobby back in her yard skulking around. But of course he wasn't there. Nothing moved in the yard. No traffic moved on the highway. She was alone.

She went left, into the bathroom she'd remodeled; she stood over the sink and rinsed her face. She stared at herself in the mirror. Her long blonde hair was caked with blood. Blue-purple bruises mottled her right cheek and her jaw and built up swollen half-moons beneath both eyes. The sclera of her right eye was bloody. She opened her mouth and checked her teeth, and stuck out her tongue—she could see the deep, bloody marks where her attackers had slammed her bottom lip into her teeth. She opened the medicine cabinet, pulled out some Neosporin with lidocaine, and smeared it onto the cuts on her

face. It stung.

She wanted to take a bath, but she wasn't going to undress or do anything that made her as vulnerable as soaking in a tub until she had the shotgun beside her.

She looked in the linen closet again, just to be sure. No one was in it, of course.

She walked across the landing to her bedroom, eased the door open, and went in. She didn't have much furniture in the room; just the bookshelves, a Queen Anne wingback chair in the left corner opposite her, a solid walnut chest of drawers on the far wall, and her bed, a high, elaborately carved spindle bed that had cost her two show saddles in barter. She could see from where she stood that no one was under the bed. She felt ridiculous for even looking.

She walked around the foot of the bed and past the dresser and went into the closet. She slid her hand along the left closet wall until she felt the slight depression of the hidden panel she'd built into the closet when she remodeled. She pressed and the panel door popped out, and she reached in and took out the shotgun. It didn't look like much—Mossberg was a big believer in black plastic. The ribbed pump and the stock were molded of it. She thought of the guns she'd learned to shoot when she was little: the Browning over-and-under shotgun with the hand-checked stock and engraved silverwork on the breech; the little Remington twenty-two rifles; the 30.06 pistol that nearly took her arm off the one time her father let her try it. Those had been sporting guns. Her father liked to shoot targets, and occasionally he went hunting for their dinner.

She'd had no such intention when she bought the Mossberg. She'd been a woman suddenly alone in a house a long way from anyone, and when she bought the shotgun, she'd gotten it with only the defense of her home and her life in mind.

The Mossberg held five shells plus one in the chamber, but she didn't leave it that way when she wasn't home. She kept it locked. Now she unlocked the wire breech lock and removed it, grabbed two extra shells from the ammunition shelf, loaded the fifth, pumped it into the chamber, and thumbed the sixth shell into place. With the safety on, she stepped back into her bedroom. She checked her watch. Five a.m.. The sun would come up right around seven. She had two more hours of darkness, and she thought once she got through that, she might be able to crawl into her bed and sleep for a while. She was going to have to call either Lisa or Paul and have one of them open for her. She didn't think she would go in to work that day. But it was still too early to call anyone.

In the meantime, she wanted a bath.

She laid the shotgun across the bed and got some clean underwear and a pair of flannel pajamas with teddy bears on them out of her top right drawer. She took her watch off and dropped it on top of the dresser. When she turned back to pick up the shotgun, she noticed something she'd seen the time she came in with the deputy, but this time she really saw it.

On the nightstand nearest her, between the telephone and the reading lamp, lay a book. It was a Fodor's Guide, a travel book. Gold with black lettering, a photograph on the lower portion of the glossy paper cover. The photo was gorgeous: a gleaming white fairy-tale castle; a dark-haired, blue-eyed beauty leading a donkey over a cobblestone road that ran through a field of flowers; a blue lake in the background that reflected the mountains that lay behind it. The cover read: Fodor's Guide to Glenraven. A Complete Guide to the Best Mountain Walks, Castle Tours, and Feasts.

Kate always had a book or two sitting on that nightstand, so she hadn't really paid attention to that book. But she had never owned a Fodor's Guide. Had never borrowed one. She had never had the urge to be a tourist, to go someplace where she

didn't speak the language and didn't look like everyone else and didn't know where things were and didn't understand the customs. She figured she was enough of an outsider anyway; she didn't see where adding to that feeling of alienation would enhance her life experience in any way.

She stared at the book. It was proof that someone had been in her house. But what did its presence mean? It didn't seem like the sort of thing the thugs would have left

Unless they'd used its pages to cut out the letters of the note they'd nailed to Rocky.

Unless they'd left a note for her in it.

Heart pounding an erratic roulade, hands trembling, she picked up the book.

It felt like it was purring. The sensation so startled her that she almost dropped the book, but the vibration died away. She riffled the pages, wondering if the tiny thrill had come from a bomb hidden inside, but the book hadn't been hollowed out. She decided to go through it more slowly. She opened to the first page. For an instant she saw a typical cover page. Then the paper cleared as if someone was erasing it while she watched.

No sooner were the last words gone than new ones appeared.

Hello, Kate, the book said. I know the timing is terrible, and that you probably don't feel like dealing with this now, but now is when we're going to have to do it. You need to take me outside, and you need to do it quickly.

She dropped the book and stepped back from it. Be logical, she told herself. You've been through a lot in the last few hours. This could be any of several different, perfectly rational things. You could be having an allergic reaction to the Darvon you took. You could be suffering from some delayed effect of

trauma to your head. This could even be a hallucination resulting from post-traumatic stress. If you pick up the book again, it's just going to be a book. It won't purr, it won't hum, and it won't write little messages to you.

She picked up the book again. This time it didn't hum. So far, so good.

She opened it to the first page.

The hell I won't, it wrote. You're dealing just fine with your stress, you aren't injured, and you aren't allergic to your medicine, but if you don't get me outside fast, you are going to have a mess in your bedroom you'll never get clean.

Kate nodded. It would have been nice to have found a rational explanation for the book, but she wasn't willing to insist on one. She had always prided herself on her ability to take the unexpected in stride. As a Wiccan, she accepted the reality of magic in the universe—she just hadn't anticipated having it intrude so blatantly on her. She'd spent much of her life making herself as self-sufficient as she could, though. She believed she had the tools she needed to survive just about anything that life threw at her. Now she was going to find out if she was right.

"On the positive side," she told the book, "if you got here by magic, then at least the bastards who beat me up didn't leave you here."

I'll take the good news when I find it, she thought. She held onto the book, picked up the shotgun, and headed downstairs. She couldn't imagine why a book would need to go outside, or what could possibly be urgent about the request, but sometimes survival became a matter of knowing when to shut up and follow instructions.

Until she saw evidence to the contrary, she was going to assume this was one of those times.

Where to buy

- Amazon
- Barnes & Noble

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved