

An Excerpt from Kat Richardson's *Vanished*

When I was a kid, my life seemed to be run by other people's designs and not by mine. Once the time was ripe, I escaped from the life other people pushed me into and made my own. Or so I thought. Now it appears I was wrong about...well, everything. But I'll get to that later.

Two years ago, I died for a couple of minutes. When I woke up, things had changed: I could see ghosts and magic and things that go bump in the night. You see, there is a thin space between the normal and the paranormal—the Grey—where things that aren't quite one or the other roam. It's not a place most people can visit; even witches and psychics only reach into the surging tide of power and the uncanny and haul out what they need. But once in a while there's someone like me: a Greywalker, with a foot on each side of the line and fully immersed in the weird.

Sounds cool? Not so much. Some of my friends in the know are fascinated by it, but to me it's more frequently a royal pain in the ass. Because when I can see the monsters, they can see me, and if they have problems, I'm the go-to girl. I've been a professional private investigator for ten years, and it's a job I've come to practice on both sides of the veil because ghosts, vampires, and witches just don't take no for an answer. Since I'd died, I'd made my accommodation with the Grey and I thought I had it pretty well figured, even if some things were still a mystery to me, like, "why me" and "how does this stuff work?" It just did, and I did my best to get along. Until May of this year, when things got rather personal, starting with strange dreams and a phone call from the dead.

It started just like it had in real life: The man belts me in the temple and it feels like my head is caving in. I tumble out of the chair, onto the hardwood floor. In the dream I can see its pattern of dark and light wood making a ribbon around the edge of the room, like a magic circle to contain the terror.

I grope for my purse, for the gun, for anything that will stop him from beating me to death this time. I am still too slow. He rounds the edge of the desk and comes after me. I roll up onto my knees and try to hit him below the belt.

He dodges, swings, and connects with the back of my head. Then he kicks me in the ribs as I collapse again. This time I don't shriek—I don't have the air—and that's how I know something's changed. It's not just a memory; it's a nightmare.

The man's foot swings for my face and I push it up, over my head, tipping him backward. As he falls, I scramble for the door into the hall. This time I'll get out. This time I won't die....

But he catches up and grabs onto my ponytail—an impossible rope of hair a yard, a mile long and easy to grip. Was it really so long? I can't even remember it down to my hips like that. But in the dream it's a lariat that loops around my neck and hauls my head back until I'm looking into the man's face.

But it's my father, not the man who beat my head in. Not the square-jawed, furious face of a killer, but the bland, doe-eyed face that winked like the moon when I was tucked into my childhood bed. He read me Babar books and kissed my cheek when I was young. Now he calls me "little girl," and slams my skull into the doorpost.

I don't fight back this time. I just wrench loose, leaving my long hair in his hand. He lets me go and I stumble toward the ancient brass elevator, my legs wobbling and my

pace ragged. I feel tears flooding down my cheeks, and the world spins into a narrowing tunnel.

I see the elegant old elevator at the end of the tunnel, the gleaming metal grillwork shuffling itself into shape, as if it is formed from the magical grid of the Grey. There's a vague human figure inside, beyond the half-formed doors. There never was anyone there before....

I stagger and fall to my knees at the elevator door. The ornate brass gates slide open and I tumble into the lift, sprawling like a broken toy at someone's feet.

He's much too tall from my position down on the floor: a giant blue denim tree crowned with silvery hair. My dream vision zooms up and in, and something tightens in my chest until I can feel it strain to the breaking point.

Will Novak, my ex-boyfriend, looks down at me with a cool glance. "Oh. It's you," he says.

The too-tight thing in my chest pings and breaks. Pain lashes through me like the unwinding mainspring of a broken clock.

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I woke up with a scream in my mouth that twisted into shuddering tears. I huddled into my bed and cried, feeling that something had been wrecked or wrenched apart in a way I didn't understand. I wished I was cuddled up with Quinton in his safe little hole under the streets and not alone with the lingering desolation of my nightmare.

I'm not much for emotional outbursts. They're counterproductive and ugly and they tend to put someone at a disadvantage. Even alone in my condo I felt a little

ashamed of weeping like a brat, and I was glad the ferret wasn't going to tell anyone. But I still felt bad about it.

The dream was a bad start to a bad day filled with unpaid bills, lying clients, dead-end investigations, and ghosts behaving badly. So with the past and my death on my mind, I guess it wasn't such a surprise that I got a phone call from a dead boyfriend. The dead seem to have a thing about phones.

I didn't recognize the number, but that never stops me. I answered the phone, "Harper Blaine," like usual.

"Hiya, Slim."

"I think you have the wrong number."

"Ahhh...no. I had to whistle pretty hard, but I think I got it right."

Whistle? What the—?

"Hey," the voice continued, "you know how to whistle, don't ya?"

I couldn't stop myself from finishing the quote. "You just put your lips together...and blow." That was Slim Browning's line from *To Have and Have Not*. Lauren Bacall to Humphrey Bogart. My favorite film. It was someone else's favorite film, too....

He laughed. "I knew you wouldn't forget."

A chill ran over me. "Who is this?"

"You're disappointing me, Slim. It's Cary."

"Cary...?" I echoed, feeling queasy.

"Malloy. From LA."

Cary Malloy had mentored me through my first two years as a professional

investigator. We'd broken the rules about interoffice romances. Then he'd died in a car accident on Mulholland Drive. Two fast cars racing on the twisty road with a distracting view across the nighttime basin of lights; a bad curve; Cary's car parked on the shoulder as he observed a subject's house, pretending to admire the view; one car swinging a little too wide, sliding out the side of the curve...I hadn't been there, but I always felt as if I had, as if I'd heard the sound of the cars colliding, scraping across the road in showers of sparks and the screech of metal. The two cars had tumbled over the cliff, milling down the canyon side as the third rushed away into the darkness.

The subject had called it in. After all, it had happened right across the street, and the small fire started in the dry chaparral by hot metal and spilling gas was a menace. The entangled state of the burning cars made it plain both drivers were long dead by the time LA County Fire arrived. The residents of the canyon had simply stood at the edge of the road and watched. There was nothing else they could do.

My silence gave my thoughts away, I suppose. Cary's voice said, "Yeah...dying really bit."

My own voice shook a little when I replied, "That's what I hear. Umm...why did you call?"

"It's complicated." I could almost hear him shrug. "But, look, I have to tell you—" He choked and coughed, his voice straining now. "Have to say, it's not what you think."

I could hear a noise, a crackling sound.

"You don't know what you really are, Slim. You need to come here and look into the past," he muttered, his voice fading as if he was moving away from the phone.

“There’re things...waiting for you....”

“Cary? What things? Cary!” I shouted at the phone, feeling tears building and trembling over my eyelids.

But he’d already faded away, and the flat, dull hum of the dial tone was the only sound from the phone. I put the receiver down and pressed my hand over my mouth, squeezing my eyes shut against the burning of saltwater tears. Coming on the heels of the nightmare, this was too much. But I wasn’t going to cry. Not over Cary Malloy. Not again and after so much time. I wasn’t twelve anymore, and blubbering wasn’t going to help anything.

I wasn’t crying when Quinton came tapping at my office door a few minutes later, but I must have looked pretty horrible. He glanced at me and slid in, locking the door behind himself as he dropped his backpack on the floor. He crouched down beside my chair and tried to catch my eye.

“Is the ferret OK?”

I frowned in confusion. “What? Why are you asking *that*?”

“Because you look like your best friend just died. What’s wrong?”

“I just got a phone call from a guy who’s been dead for eight years.”

“That’s never bothered you before.”

“I used to date him. He died in a car wreck.”

Quinton straightened and leaned on the edge of my desk. “That is a little weirder than normal. What did he want?”

“I’m not sure. He wasn’t very clear. He wanted me to come...someplace and look into the past. He said things aren’t what I think—he said I’m not what I think. And then

he faded out.”

“Was he always a cryptic pain in the ass, or is that new since his death?”

I had to snort a laugh—it was kind of funny imagining clean-cut, preppy Cary in the role of oracular spirit. “No! He loved spy novels, but he himself was about as cryptic as a bowl of cereal. He didn’t hide information; he just kept his mouth shut if he didn’t want things to get out.”

“But he called you. After eight years. Maybe I have some competition here....”

I made a face. “I don’t think so. But that’s not the only weird thing. I dreamed about my death last night.”

Quinton looked uncomfortable and sat down on the edge of my desk so he could avoid looking me straight in the eye. “You mean...in the future?” Some things still freak out even Quinton, I guess.

“No, I mean when this all started two years ago; when I died in that elevator,” I explained. “I don’t see the future.”

He gnawed on his lower lip and thought a bit, holding my hands in both of his. His grip was warm and comforting, loosening a tension in my shoulders I hadn’t noticed until it slid away. “It’s an interesting coincidence. Do you think it’s more than that?”

I made a face and shook my head, slightly disgusted with the direction my thoughts were turning. “I have decreasing confidence in coincidence. Freaky Grey events almost never ‘just happen’ together. It’s like a pond where the ripples of one event can set off a whole series of others.”

Quinton raised his eyebrows expectantly but said nothing.

I sighed. “All right. I have the feeling that something’s building up. There’s a lot

happening around here lately with the ghosts and vampires and magical things. I have three open cases right now involving ghosts, and Edward's been sending more invitations—of various kinds—for me to come to work for him. You know how much he wants to control me.”

“Yeah. The vampires have been kind of restless lately here in Pioneer Square,” Quinton added. “Do you think that's something Edward's doing to get to you?”

Edward Kammerling was the leader of Seattle's vampire pack; he was also the founder of TPM, one of Seattle's biggest development groups in a city historically run by developers of various stripes.

“I don't know,” I said. “I can't see how he'd benefit from drawing attention, do you?”

“No,” Quinton confirmed, shaking his head with a grim set to his mouth. “But even with the stunners I gave to some of the homeless to drive the bloodsuckers away, there's definitely more biting going on. But it's kind of hit and run—I'm not seeing a pattern, just an increasing frequency of attacks.”

Quinton had developed cheap, battery-operated shock prods that he called “stunners” that incapacitated vampires for a few minutes. The jolt was not strong enough to kill them but enough to give the near-victim a head start on running away. He'd distributed them to some of the more-stable of Pioneer Square's indigent population to reduce their chance of being an unwilling vampire lunch. Most of the “undergrounders,” as we called them—the homeless who lived in the hidden spaces under the city or simply preferred life below the rest of the world's radar—didn't always know their assailants were undead and they didn't care. They just wanted to be left alone, like Quinton himself.

He was their personal mad scientist.

“It could be another faction war....” I suggested. When I’d first fallen into the Grey, I’d discovered that vampires jockey for position constantly. At the time there’d been at least three individuals who wanted Edward’s head on a plate and were looking for ways to get it. One was now dead—or re-dead if you prefer—one was apparently biding his time, and the other was currently holding to an uneasy agreement I’d helped to hammer out.

“Could be,” Quinton admitted. “But who knows?” Still knitting his brows, he muttered to himself, “I wish I knew when ghosts were more active. If there’s a rise in paranormal activity...”

“Then what?” I asked.

“Huh?” he grunted, jerking out of his thoughts. “I’m not sure, but I’d like to know. Maybe there’s a correlation between ghost activity and vampire activity, or maybe there’s something more personal here. I mean, if your dead boyfriend thinks there are things you should know and if there’s a rise in paranormal activity at the same time, I’d think that’s significant. But we don’t know what it’s indicative *of*. I wish I had some more equipment...”

Quinton was having a geek moment—that sort of glazed-eyed mental gymnastics session that ends in the discovery of penicillin or the invention of the Super Soaker and the resulting battalion of wet cats. I left him to it while I pondered what he’d just said.

There was a lot more going on in the paranormal than usual. Cary’s strange call only highlighted the fact that the activity seemed higher around me, something I’d been either missing to or ignoring. It was unwise for me to turn a cold shoulder or blind eye to

that sort of thing. Usually I don't put a lot of trust in the words of ghosts—they tend to lie or know only a fractured, incomplete version of the truth, just like live people. But Cary had more weight with me when alive than most people, and his sudden call had come with the freight train impact of the dream that preceded it. If that was a coincidence I'd eat the proverbial hat.

"I'm going to Los Angeles," I announced.

Quinton twitched from his reverie and raised his eyebrows at me. "Why?"

"Because I can't think of any place else Cary could mean by 'here' when he said I needed to 'come here and look into the past.' There's too much of my past coming up all at once, too much strangeness, for his call to be meaningless. I know this isn't the best time to go," I added, stopping Quinton before whatever words forming on his lips dropped into the air, "but if there's really something going on that will affect me, maybe I should get a jump on it first."

"You sound like you think I'm going to argue with you."

"Well..."

He shook his head. "Oh no, Harper. I'm not getting between you and a case. I know better."

"A case? This isn't a case. It's me."

"Even worse. If you think there really is an answer in your past to what's going on now, or to why you are what you are or how you got that way, I know nothing will stop you from pursuing it. I'm not going to throw myself in front of a runaway train. I'll hold the fort here and I'll look after the ferret, and we'll take on whatever's going on in Seattle when you get back. I think Chaos and I can manage that."

Chaos, my pet ferret, adored Quinton and his many pockets. Quinton was more than capable of keeping tabs on the strange and otherworldly while I was away. He couldn't do much more, but unless hell literally broke loose and rose to the surface of Seattle's streets, I didn't think he'd have to.

I bit my lip, uncomfortable about heading back to the place I'd escaped from and not sure I liked the idea of being a "case," or having to look at my past, or tracking down an old, dead boyfriend to find out what he was talking about, or dealing—as I would have to—with my mother, either.

Maybe all that showed on my face. Quinton gave me a crooked smile and leaned forward to kiss my cheek, murmuring, "The sooner you're started, the sooner you're done, right? And then you're back with me, and whatever's wrong, we'll fix it."

That did put me over the edge, and I clutched him close and kissed him back very hard. I could feel the pent up tears flow down my cheeks and a juddering sensation shook my chest. Why does love feel like hiccups? I snuggled into the warm sensation for a moment before I got back to the drudgery.

I'd have to rearrange my schedule, but no matter how much I didn't like the idea, it appeared Los Angeles and my mother were inevitable.