

Dream Stalker

A Paranormal Mystery

by Nancy Gardner © 2021

“Those marked by the mighty Scáthach walk the labyrinthine paths of Shadow Land to seek justice. Yet that power comes with a warning. Beware of the lurking Stalker, for he exacts a monstrous toll from those he captures.”

Chapter 1

Salem, Massachusetts—October 1, 2013

I stumbled through the early morning fog blanketing Salem's Gallows Hill, hurrying to the oak tree that my maternal grandmother, Sadie MacAskill, loved. When I was a child, she'd taught me that witches like ourselves derive energy from working with green, growing plants and trees. I could still feel our arms stretched around the oak's trunk, listening for the pulsing power within it.

"Feel Mother Earth's wisdom rising," she'd said.

I'd never needed wisdom more. The plan I'd cooked up with an old friend had gone terribly wrong. Kitty was supposed to bring my estranged daughter, Sarah, to dinner. Sarah's favorite dinner, creamy chicken pesto and pasta, was baking in the oven when I got the call.

"Kitty hasn't come home, and I'm not ready to see you without her. I may never be ready," Sarah said, her voice cold and unforgiving. She hung up before I could reply.

When I called her back, she refused to answer. If my husband, Sam, had still been alive, he'd have known what to do. But he'd died two years ago.

It was long after midnight when I threw the cold casserole down the disposal and crawled into bed. When sleep proved impossible, I paced the empty rooms of our Chestnut Street home until dawn, then grabbed the nearly empty bottle of homemade dandelion brandy as an offering to Nana's spirit and rode my Vespa to the park atop Gallows Hill.

Exhausted and headachy, I forgot to watch my step and tripped over a rock. I managed not to fall, but the bottle flew out of my hand. I watched it shatter, watched the last golden drops seep into the grass. I felt like I was watching my relationship with my daughter ebb with it.

As I dropped shards of glass into the nearby trash can, the wind seemed to whisper that I didn't deserve to find the wisdom I needed. I'd failed Nana, and I'd failed my daughter.

“Enough self-pity.” I pulled my leather jacket tighter and scurried past the crumbling pavilion and rusting flagpole to the ancient oak. Once again, I pressed my cheek to the rough bark, closed my eyes, and waited. The bark pulsed. A crow landed in the branches above me, cawing and shaking loose a shower of dead leaves. I opened my eyes, and for a moment, Nana’s face wavered before me. Then she was gone, leaving me with my questions unanswered.

My cell vibrated. Who would call me this early? Sarah? Kitty with an explanation? I checked the screen. Neither. Honey Campbell, my landlord and a good friend. She owned the building on Pickering Wharf where we both ran our businesses. Her barbershop took up the first floor. My herbal studio, Healing Thyme, sat above it.

“Hi, Honey. What’s up.”

“Thought you’d want to know your friend, Kitty, came looking for you,” Honey said in her soft Scottish brogue. “And bye-the-bye, she looked like shite. She stumbled off toward Moe’s. You might yet find her there.”

Two months earlier, Kitty had stopped me on the street. I’d taken her for a panhandler and almost turned her away. Then she said, “Lily, don’t you remember me? My parents took us to New York to see *West Side Story*. We had the best time.”

We’d shared a cup of coffee and Kitty shared her story. She’d been a high school biology teacher until she’d been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer’s. The disease had taken everything from her: her teaching career, her home, her reason for living. She’d ended up lost on the streets.

Things had taken a turn for the better for Kitty when she found a permanent bed at St. Bridget’s Homeless Shelter and, because of the doctor who volunteered his services there, Kitty’s memory was making a remarkable improvement.

“Thanks, Honey. I’m on my way.” I dashed back to the Vespa, strapped on my helmet, and started the engine. Usually, the thrum of the engine beneath me and the slapping rhythm of my braid tapping against my back soothed me. Not this morning. I pressed the throttle and hurried to Pickering Wharf, determined to find out what had gone wrong last night.