

Spirit Lake

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For every day of sunshine it seemed there were ten days of rain on the Oregon coast. It had been raining the night Richard Stapleton hid his wife and sons at the bottom of Spirit Lake.

It was raining now.

Richard stared out the window of the Crabs & Other Good Things Café as he wiped down a table. A small waterfall streamed from the corner of the roof's gutter, splatting against the pavement outside. Rain-dimpled puddles ran into small streams and trailed down the roadside curb. Cars splashed through the puddles, trying to avoid tire-eating potholes as they hurried to finish errands and other business before the day came to an end.

Damn rain always made the roads a slippery mess, but no matter. He'd figure out some way to see his family tonight.

"Got a problem, Ricky?"

Startled, Richard looked around. His sister stood behind him, arms crossed across her ample stomach. An order pad peeked from the pocket of her cornflower blue apron. She raised an eyebrow.

Had he missed something?

Richard quickly glanced at the few customers seated at the counter, the empty pink and blue booths pressed close along the side wall and front window. The square tables scattered throughout the café were deserted except for the condiments piled neatly in the center of the checked table cloths. February was not a busy time of year. "Problem?"

"Just wondering when you were going to get to work, that's all." Stephanie winked and nodded at the table. "You've been polishing that same spot for the last five minutes."

Richard made himself smile. "Just watching the rain, Steph. You know me." Oregonians were always so polite, so proper.

So plastic.

"How's Celia doing?"

Richard didn't want to discuss his family with his sister. Not in public. Where anyone and

everyone could hear. He glanced at the customers sitting at the counter. Harry Thompson with his Mickey Mouse suspenders and John Deer cap. Leonard Wessel on the stool next to Harry, gray beard brushing the top of the counter as he nodded at something Harry said. Neville Satorini sat on the other side of Harry, staring into his cup of joe. Through the order window in beyond the counter he could see Nick Barrows' white chef hat move back and forth as Nick worked the short order grill.

Satorini was the quiet one, never saying a word, just listening. Richard didn't mind the silent part; it was the listening that bothered him.

Stephanie laid her hand on Richard's arm. "Is everything okay between you and Celia?"

His breath quickened. Stephanie had always been strong. She'd protected him from the raging of their older brother until Richard had outgrown the clod and learned to take care of himself. Could he trust his sister to keep his secret? Could he trust her to keep his family safe?

Stephanie tucked a strand of gunpowder gray hair back behind her right ear and stepped away, breaking eye contact. Breaking the bond.

"She's fine," Richard said. He looked back at the table and picked up the bus tray stacked with dirty dishes. If it wasn't for the fact that his wife was born and raised in Bayside and didn't want to leave her family roots, he'd be in sunny California, working a real job. Not stuck doing dishes in his sister's husband's small-time café, worrying about keeping his family safe. "She's doing an art fair in Seattle. Took the boys with her," he lied.

"She's got quite a gift, that girl does. The way she paints those animals; you'd swear they could step right out of the frame and run off. She's on her way to the big time, you mark my words," Stephanie said as he headed toward the kitchen, weaving his way among the tables.

No, he couldn't trust Stephanie with his secret. Couldn't trust anybody. Everyone thought Celia's gift was a great thing, but the fact was Celia's gift had put the whole family in danger. Reporters showing up at odd hours of the night, TV cameras shoved in her face. Agents calling, calling, calling trying to convince her that they could do a better job representing her than any other agent in the world.

One of those agents had the balls to try to get to her through their oldest son, sweet-talking the boy on his way home from school, promising to make his mommy a big star.

That same agent was lying in a coma at Providence Medical Center in Portland.

The hot odor of sour grease singed Richard's nose as he shoved through the swinging doors

into the kitchen. Nick flipped a hamburger patty in the air, then slammed the spatula down, nailing the meat to the grill with a sizzle. “Keep an eye on this puppy,” Nick said. “I gotta get some more cheese.” He ducked through the door in the back of the tiny kitchen, filling the frame as he walked through.

Richard dumped the tray of dishes into the huge, stainless steel sink, poured in a stream of soap, ran hot water until steam fogged his glasses. Celia was tiny and vulnerable. A delicate soul that needed protecting. He’d known that from the day he’d first seen her in the Crystal Knight bookstore, struggling to pull down a book from the top shelf of the art section. He’d stepped up and slid the book free before she toppled the entire shelf. She’d smiled at him, a smile that not only lit the entire room, it lit his heart as well. That’s when Richard decided that he’d do anything to keep that smile from fading.

Carefully he removed his glasses, pulled a cloth from a small, flat box he kept in his shirt pocket, and polished the lenses until they glistened. For a moment the world was blurred—greenish-yellow spot on the ceiling where airborne grease collected, water stains on the walls, cigarette burns in the linoleum—all washed together in a montage of formless blobs. Then he slipped his glasses back on and everything came into focus.

He couldn’t tell anyone where Celia and the boys were hiding. Their safety depended on him.

Smoke rose from the grill as Nick shoved his way back through the doorway and turned the spattering burger. Richard swallowed hard to keep from gagging. Usually he managed to ignore the smell, but tonight the stench of burning meat mingled with the reek of deep-fried shrimp gone bad. Someone had forgotten to change the fryer. Again.

A movement in the soapsuds caught Richard’s attention. A spider struggled to swim through the billowy bubbles. He stared for a moment, fascinated, then shook his head and reached a gentle finger under the spider. He lifted the panicked insect free of its prison, set it on a towel. After a long second, the water soaked into the terrycloth and the spider began to move its legs. He lifted the spider and towel and carried them carefully outside.

Beside the green, rusted dumpster was a man-sized bush, its dark green leaves shiny with rain. Large pink blossoms hung limp amid the foliage. The rain had knocked several blooms to the ground where they lay scattered atop the wet gray and black gravel. The sound of waves pounding against the shore thundered between the weathered clapboard houses that stood

between the café and the ocean. On days like today, Richard was glad he lived back on Spirit Lake, away from the rage of a stormy sea. At least the wind wasn't blowing—yet.

Richard held the towel up to a branch and nudged the spider onto the smooth, dark red bark. He wiped his hands as he turned back towards the café, but before he could take a step, he heard a familiar cry.

“Sean?” The world froze for the span of a heart beat. It sounded like his son, but it couldn't be. Sean was safe, hidden with Celia and Dan. Richard held his breath, waiting to hear the cry again. But all he heard was rain pinging on the metal lid of the dumpster. Drops of water dripped from Richard's hair onto his glasses and he slipped them off as he walked back into the restaurant. He tossed the towel into the hamper, pulled another cloth from the box in his pocket, and dried his glasses. His hand trembled just a bit and he concentrated on his movements until his action was steady and his glasses were clean. It had only been his imagination playing games, probably brought on by Stephanie's meddling questions.

Taking a deep breath of grease-filled air, Richard walked over to the sink, plunged his hands into the scalding water, and began to scrub.

“Going fishing tonight?”

The question caught Richard off guard. He glanced at his brother-in-law standing half in, half out of the swinging kitchen door, and shook his head. The bald spot on the top of Gilbert's head glistened in the artificial light like fresh cooking oil just poured from a can. His mustache held remnants of whatever snack he'd been munching on and Richard's stomach turned.

“Too much rain.” He didn't want anyone along when he visited his family and he had to see them tonight—he'd made a promise and he always kept his promises. He moved over to the deep fryer and grimaced as he lifted the oil-coated basket free. He set the basket in the still soapy sink, then placed a metal bucket under the drain of the fryer.

“Rain's letting up,” Gilbert said. He raised his eyebrows and grinned, deepening the dimple in his left cheek.

“You're probably right, but I've got some work to do tonight,” Richard said, returning Gilbert's smile. He reached under the deep fryer and twisted a ball valve. Stephanie popped up behind Gilbert, her round face shining.

All smiles, like a bunch of piranhas waiting for dinner. He adjusted the bucket's position.

“Why don't you two go fishing?” she said. “You won't get much of a chance once Celia

gets back with the boys. It'll be good for you." She lowered her eyebrows and shook a finger at Richard. "I worry about you stuck in that house all by yourself. Even when Celia's around you don't get out enough. You're too pale and you don't eat enough." She watched him for a moment, finally noticing what he was doing. "Why are you doing that now?"

Because you're about to poison your customers, he almost said. But Stephanie didn't take kindly to someone trying to tell her how to run her business. "I forgot to change it last night," he said. The oil bubbled gently into the bucket by his feet. He was trapped. There was no way to say no to Stephanie. He'd just have to make a little change in his plans.

"I guess we can go," he said. "Meet me at the dock, the usual time." He smiled again and nodded. Gilbert's face glowed. The man loved to fish. More than that—he loved Celia's father's boat. Old Man Barnes had a major stroke two years ago and passed the boat on to Richard. The old aluminum hull was dented in several places, but the motor ran, and almost immediately Gilbert had become his best friend. Now Richard couldn't even start the engine without Gilbert standing by his elbow, fishing pole in hand, panting like an eager puppy.

The fryer gave a burp. Richard closed the valve, lifted the bucket, and carried it towards the back door. "See you in a bit." He lifted a hand in a half-wave before turning the door handle and escaping outside.

A cold breeze greeted Richard with the clean scent of ocean. Despite his revulsion for the coast and its interminable rain, he still liked the mingled smell of seaweed, free wind, and salt water. It always managed to lift his spirits, at least a little. He stepped behind the dumpster and started to pour the grease from the bucket into the gravel. Stephanie would have a fit if she ever caught him dumping grease this way. There was a special container for the old grease, but Richard didn't care. He watched the oil glug, glug, glug, spreading over the gravel before oozing between the rocks and disappearing.

He'd almost finished when he heard the baby cry again. This time Richard didn't hesitate. He set the grease bucket upside down, moved around to the front of the dumpster, and lifted the metal lid.

Visions tumbled through Richard's mind—pictures of newborn babies abandoned and left in dumpsters. They were often so sick by the time they were discovered, they never made it through the night. Just the thought of someone abandoning a baby made Richard's blood boil. He squinted hard, trying to see in the darkness.

At first he could only make out dark mounds humped on top of each other. He was about to give up and go back inside, when he thought he saw a movement on top of a bag close enough to reach. He pushed up onto the rounded edge, held his breath against the stench of rotting crab and kitchen scraps, and leaned forward, stretching his arm to its fullest length. His fingers brushed against something warm and soft and he grabbed. A startled mew filled the air as Richard swung his feet back down onto the ground and cradled a kitten to his chest.

“You’re safe now, little one,” he said. He murmured to it comfortingly as he carried it into the kitchen. The tiny creature looked at him with huge green eyes and mewed again, the cry weak and strangled. Its gray fur was soaked and sticky and reeked of garbage. Richard pulled out a towel and rubbed the matted fur until it was dry.

“What have you got there?”

Richard hadn’t even noticed Stephanie come in the kitchen. He held up the kitten. “Found it in the dumpster.”

Stephanie took the little ball of fur and peered into the tiny face. “This little guy needs a vet.”

Richard felt a twinge of jealousy at the look on his sister’s face. She used to look at him that way back when they were kids—after his older brother had gone on one of his rampages—but after they’d grown up and gone their separate ways, the look had disappeared. He reached out and took the kitten back, tucking it into his shirt. “I’ll take care of it. Sean’s been wanting a kitten.”

Stephanie nodded. “He loves little animals almost as much as you did,” she said.

Richard glanced at her in surprise. He didn’t realize she’d recognized his love for animals; his need to take care of anything weaker than he.

“I came to tell you that Gilbert’s headed home to get his fishing stuff. If you want to leave now, go ahead. I think I can handle ‘rush hour’ until Jason gets here.”

Richard didn’t argue. He tossed the towel into the hamper, grabbed his keys, and headed for the door. Fifteen minutes later he had the kitten warm in the truck with a bowl of milk and had hooked up the boat trailer. The kitten lay limp on the seat beside him, too tired to drink the milk. Richard patted the stiff little body. “Just wait ‘til you meet Sean. He’s going to be so excited.”

The moon was going to be full tonight. There’d be plenty of time to see his family after he got rid of Gilbert.