

The Chalice War: Stone

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Chapter 1

Eyes closed, mind open, he waits. A frisson of anticipation passes through him, eliciting a shudder, a sigh. Not long now. Not long at all.

He tastes danger in his casting, and possibility. Perhaps a promise calling to him from the Above. Here in the Below, there is only the safety of a prison.

He has sent the restless ones ahead, knowing their portals to the Above are far less obtrusive than those he and his fellow Fomhoire must use. The restless are creatures of magic; it is in their very nature. They can slip from the Below to the Above and back again with ease, making hardly a ripple in the bounding. One reason why they are such perfect predators.

Somewhere close, just beyond his reach, a Sidhe works her magic, a spider spinning a web. As with any spider, once she is dead, her web can be broken with little more than the swipe of a hand.

She and her kind keep watch, seeking to confine the Fomhoire to this place. But they are easy prey; the network of awareness they use to guard the boundary is porous. It grows weaker by the day. Time is on the side of the Fomhoire, as are the fates.

This night's triumph will offer but a taste of what is to come.

A tremor runs through the magic Above. It flickers, like a candle guttering in a sudden wind. An instant later, it is duller, more faint.

Now, he sends to those around him.

And they echo, keening to one another, *Now, now, now!*

He leads them, and so must keep his anticipation in check, though their eagerness mirrors his own. Emotion and desire flutter in his heart, and he stifles a grin. Freedom, blood, revenge—all of these and more beckon to him.

Now, his mind whispers again.

His conjuring is complex and demanding, even with the Sidhe web weakened, even with other Fomhoire lending him their strength. The incantation is as old as Baelor himself. The words are like stones in his mouth, and the power, as it awakens, seems to heat his blood to a boil, scalding him from within: his chest, his limbs, his head.

Soon enough, the portal opens. Silvery gray, its edges jagged as broken glass and gleaming like cold moonlight. The others clamor forward, and he orders them back with a single snarled word. They retreat, glowing eyes darting between him and the glimmering rent in the fabric of their world. Those margins would burn like Sidhe fire; it needs to be wider before they can pass. He repeats the spell over and over, his voice building each time he starts anew, power coursing through him, the pain of the burn tipping over into ecstasy. And still he chants, until he is incandescent and the portal is broad enough for all of them to cross.

He waves them through, not daring to interrupt the incantation. When all have gone, he follows, allowing the gap to snap shut behind him. Release leaves him lightheaded; he staggers, rights himself.

The other Fomhoire watch him. They appear in human form now. He examines himself, runs a hand over face, neck, chest. Unlike his companions, he is clothed—the advantage of being

a shapeshifter in the Above.

The restless ones stand nearby—three of them, blood staining their mouths and chins. Their stench reaches him, and he winces. It never bothers him in the Under; only here.

The ravaged body of a Sidhe lies at their feet. Her blood dampens the pavement, glistens with the glow of a streetlamp. Her chest rises and falls, the movement faltering, labored. Her eyes remain open.

He walks to her, the feeling of movement both alien and oddly familiar. It is always like this at first.

The Sidhe stares up at him, eyes wide, imploring, her breaths shallow and quick. The restless ones have fed first on her innards, as they are wont to do. Later, after he finishes with her, they might take the rest.

“You want to die, yes?” he says. His voice sounds odd, but this too will pass in short order. Already he feels more at ease in his Above form. “There is much pain?”

She can only gape. She is nothing; she might as well be dead already. But she lives, and so might be of some use.

He squats beside her, glances at the mass of bloody feathers nearby. A hawk. Her conduit, no doubt. Without it, she is powerless. The restless ones have done well.

“I could kill you. End the pain. Would you like that?”

Tears brim in her eyes.

“Release is yours if you grant me a simple boon: the names and whereabouts of those who maintain the network with you.”

Weak as she is, dying, her body in ruin, she manages to convey her refusal. The look in

her eyes hardens. She turns her gaze skyward.

“I expected as much.” He stands. “Die slowly, Sidhe.”

He turns back to the other Fomhoire, sees hunger in their expressions.

“Find clothes,” he tells them. “Find conduits for yourselves. Then hunt. Already, we’ve killed one. More will follow. For some of you, this is your first time in the Above. It is a wondrous place, once you get used to it. But remember, the war is everything.” He waves a hand at the bloodied thing behind him. “Every Sidhe corpse brings us that much closer to the victory first sought by our forebears.” A smile curves his lips. “Now, go.”

They say nothing, but turn and shuffle off into the night, their movements stiff, awkward. He knows, though, that they will find their way and blend in, as others have done before them.

He no longer wonders if the Fomhoire will prevail, only when, how soon. He watches the others go before approaching the three restless ones.

“Have you found any of the other Sidhe?” he asks.

One of the creatures answers, its voice like steel scraping stone.

“Good,” he says. “Where?”

They tell him and leap into the sky, soaring on membranous wings. He will follow on foot, once he has his conduit. It is all happening swiftly now, more so even than he anticipated. The Sidhe, he feels certain, do not yet understand how close they are to being destroyed. An advantage he and his fellow Fomhoire must exploit.

He glances at the woman. She moves no more, her eyes are glazed and dull. Another gone. And not so many left.

Chapter 2

Two drops of blood. One on the bottom stair, glistening on brick, red on red. The other on the cement landing by the front door.

The drops were small; she might easily have missed them, walked past and into the house without noticing. But having seen, she couldn't look away, and she couldn't take another step.

She stood rooted to the walkway, empty reusable grocery bags tucked under one arm, an oversized bottle of Australian Shiraz in the other hand, her bag slung over her shoulder. And she stared at the blood.

Alistar has cut himself, said a voice in her head. *He's cut himself while working in that damn garden of his.*

To which a second voice—Alistar's, usually so calm and reassuring—said, *No, he's dead. You need to get the hell out of here.*

Blood, brick, the geraniums in the ceramic planters Alistar had placed on either side of the stairs. So much red today.

The front door was open behind the screen. Burl should have been there watching for her, tail wagging, tongue lolling happily. Or he might have been in the back garden with Alistar, in which case he should have come bounding around the corner of the house as soon as she pulled up.

She reached for the dog with her mind, with her magic. Nothing. This is what she felt at the store. This was what made her rush through the rest of her shopping, what drove her to flee the grocery store, leaving her half-full cart beside the check-out line. The sensation had been

abrupt, final, like someone placed a wall between them.

Like someone had killed her conduit.

On that thought, she was moving again. Not inside, but to the back, the sweat on her palm making the bottle slick and unwieldy. At the corner of the house, she let the canvas bags drop to the ground. She kept hold of the wine; a weapon now.

As soon as she stepped into the backyard, she spotted Alistar. He lay in the dirt between the slate patio and his bed of gladiolus. Even from a distance, she could see the blood that stained the front of his shirt, like a fan-shaped bib. She faltered a step, a choked sob escaping her, her stomach seizing into a fist. An instant later, she was at his side, knees cushioned in the rich black soil. A faint stench hung in the air, cloying, foul, the smell of rot, of disease, of death.

Alistar's throat had been cut, ear to ear, the gash a ghoulish grin on his neck. His eyes, pale blue and once electric with wit and mischief and passion, were fixed on a clear sky, unseeing, lifeless. His midsection She couldn't even look at that. Whatever killed him had feasted as well. She wanted to believe they waited until he was dead, but she knew better. A tear rolled down her cheek, and she swiped at it. It landed like a raindrop on the slate, darkening the stone just beside Alistar's hand.

His bloodied hand. One crimson-stained finger appeared to point at a dark scrawl on the patio. Letters in blood. A single word. Or part of one. "S-L-U-A—"

Not much, but enough.

"Oh, Alistar," she whispered. But her heart hammered.

Now she understood where that terrible smell had come from.

Sluagh. Shadow demons. Winged, enormous, utterly without mercy. Fomhoire assassins.

Get the hell out of here!

His voice again, urgent and compelling.

First, though, she had to find Burl.

If a Sluagh did this, or more likely a trio of them—the old powers did things in threes or fours—Burl would be dead, too. They would sense the magic in him and assume he had been Alistar’s conduit. Forced to guess, she would say the poor dog was dead before Alistar knew what was coming.

She remained beside him for another moment, trying to reconcile the wreckage before her with her memories of the man she had loved. She never should have gone out. She was the one with a conduit, the one who had been maintaining their part of the network since the death of Alistar’s conduit two months ago. She should have stayed here and sent Alistar to the store. But he was so happy in his garden, and she was gone for such a short while.

It’s not your fault, and this is no time for blame. Go.

Leaving him seemed wrong. He deserved . . . more.

No. You have to go. And you have to take it with you.

She stood, gripped the wine bottle once more, and strode to the back door. It was open, of course. Burl lay sprawled on the kitchen tiles, his silky white fur matted with blood, his water dish overturned, the floor covered with a thin, dark pink mixture.

Tears again, a stream of them this time. How could she cry so for her dog, when she’d shed barely a tear for Alistar?

He wasn’t just a dog.

She felt more than grief. The stench of the Sluagh was thick in here. She gagged, biting

back against the bile rising in her throat and the terror clawing at her chest. Without a conduit, she was vulnerable, all but defenseless. Sidhe or no, she couldn't cast much of anything without a source for the magic.

She swallowed hard, wiped her eyes again. Burl deserved to be buried, too. Losing either one of them would have been bad enough. But both?

She stepped over the dog, avoiding the stained water, and halted at the door to the dining room. Drops of blood trailed away from the kitchen, through the dining room, and into the living room. Toward the front door. She guessed they had come in from the front, killed the dog, gone back out the same way, and snuck up on Alistar from behind. Then they returned to the house and ransacked it, breaking and tearing nearly everything of value. Sluagh wouldn't worry about leaving behind a trail of destruction, much less a splattering of blood. They were hunters, nothing more or less. They worried about the kill and whatever they'd been sent to find.

At last, terror kicked in. She hurried to the bedroom, knowing she couldn't take much. There wasn't time, and the Sluagh hadn't left much intact. Clothes, photos, papers, books, music. Most of the furniture was Alistar's and what belonged to her wouldn't fit in her car.

Alistar had insisted they keep boxes in the attic and packing tape in the utility drawer, just in case there came a time when they would need to leave without delay. He had also paid the rent on a month-to-month basis; no lease.

"I want to be able to leave this place on an hour's notice, and never look back," he often said.

Hearing the words in her head once more, she muttered, "You were supposed to come with me, old man."

She was packed in less than two hours and had the car loaded before nightfall. But she waited until dusk to return to the garden for the one thing she couldn't leave behind.

When it was dark enough, she went to the garage and retrieved the ancient wooden crate Alistar stored there. It must have weighed ten pounds empty. She carried it to the farthest end of his garden, took a spade from his shed, and removed the stone from its spot in the dirt.

“It should be packed in soil,” he'd told her at least two or three times. “And the crate should be nailed shut.”

On one occasion she laughed at him. “Why tell me all of this? You'll be the one packing it. You never let me near that thing.”

He'd stared back at her, silent and grave and beautiful in the dying light of an autumn afternoon. Had he known it would come to this? Had he seen it?

She stared at the gaping hole she'd left in the dirt. They had hosted parties at the house, sat with friends on the patio, sipping wine and chatting deep into the night. No one ever noticed the stone, which was just as it had to be.

There was nothing striking about it. It was vaguely round, about the size of a honeydew melon, dull grey, with a few gleaming specs of mica and quartz. And with the spells she and Alistar had cast on it, its power was dampened. She shivered, as if someone ran a magical finger down her spine. The spells. They had cast them together, so that if one of them died, the spells would survive. He *had* seen this day coming.

Bastard. Brilliant bastard. More tears streamed down her cheeks. She went back to work.

The stone fit perfectly in the crate. She had created a nest of soil for it, leaving just enough room to sprinkle more dirt around it and over it. She sealed the crate then retrieved the

other stone from behind the shed. It looked much like the first; same color, shape, and size. She put it where Alistar's stone had been, smoothed the dirt surrounding it.

She stood, lifted the crate with a grunted "Sonofabitch!" and staggered out to the car. There she wedged it into a space she had left unfilled in the far corner of the rear hatch. As an afterthought, she threw in the shovel, too. It had been Alistar's, just like everything else in the garden shed. She slung coats and a few dresses over the stone, arranging and then rearranging until it all looked natural, like she was a slob, rather than someone trying to hide something.

When everything else was done, she went to the basement for the last of Alistar's precautions. Somehow, he had managed to buy or steal license plates from half a dozen states. On their own, the plates would have been of limited use, but he had also arranged to have new registration stickers sent each January from the state DMVs. She didn't know how he did it, and he never bothered to tell her; it was just Alistar being Alistar. But she was smart enough—or maybe scared enough—to put a fresh set of plates on her car, and to take the others with her. From now on, she would be from Maryland. Until she needed to be from somewhere else.

She tossed the old plates and the wrench into the back and closed the hatch.

She needed to let the others know. Their part of the network was open now, exposed. In recent months she had sensed gaps, weaknesses in their web of magic that the Fomhoire might exploit. Now it was worse, and without her conduit there was no easy way for her to send a warning. All she could do was run and hope she'd find an opportunity to tell them later.

It didn't feel right. Alistar still lay in the garden, Burl in the kitchen.

Alistar had long been a prominent figure in the Sidhe community, which made her one as well. They had helped establish the network monitoring this part of the Sidhe world for

Fomhoire incursions. That was reason enough for Fomhoire and their Sluagh friends to want Alistar and her dead. Not that they needed reasons to kill.

She sensed, though, that the Fomhoire were also after the stone, and she didn't understand why. Alistar had never explained to her the stone's significance. For years she had wanted him to tell her, but always he refused. Now she needed to know, and he was gone.

"That part wasn't so brilliant, old man," she whispered, peering through tears at the darkened house.

You'll figure it out. Now, go!

She climbed into the car, and with one last glance toward her home, toward the gardens, she drove away.

Chapter 3

At one point, late in the afternoon, Kelsey Strand realized that lights were blinking beside every line on her phone, twelve in all. She'd had busy days before, but having a conversation pending on every line? This was a first. She almost pulled out her cell and snapped a picture to commemorate the moment.

“You need help, Kel?”

Mike Doyle watched her from his desk, his gaze dropping momentarily to her phone console. He had lines blinking as well, though not nearly as many as she did. The higher-ups had given her the accounts because they knew how good she was, and because she told them she could handle all the work they might throw her way. She wasn't about to show weakness—not to Mike, not to their bosses.

“I'm fine, thanks,” she said, voice crisp.

She began with the easiest of her calls—a slam-dunk refinance request—and worked her way through to the most difficult: a foreclosure on a delinquent account. She knew which line was which, kept the names of all twelve customers straight in her head. This was what she did, her superpower, if she could claim to have one.

Out there, beyond the bank's walls, she struggled with the most basic of interactions. In here, though, as a disembodied voice on the phone, she could do anything.

Almost anything.

She couldn't help the Thomases with their delinquent account. This was the hardest call, and it only got worse when Mrs. Thomas started to cry. Kel often heard people fake tears on

calls, but these were real. She could tell. Sometimes she hated her job.

When at last Kel hung up—forty-five minutes past closing—she sat back in her chair and closed her eyes. She felt a headache coming on. Superpowers notwithstanding, she was still human. And she'd forgotten to stay hydrated, instead dipping too many times into the bowl of chocolate kisses at the edge of her desk. Her blotter was covered with little balled up pieces of silver foil.

Bad Kel!

Most of her colleagues, including Mike, had left long ago. The branch manager—a kindly older man named Bobby Wells—still sat in his office going over papers, and the janitorial staff had started cleaning the lobby. Other than that, Kel was alone. Again.

She gathered her things, shoved a handful of loan folders into her briefcase, and headed for the back entrance and the employee parking lot.

“Kel!”

She turned. Mr. Wells stood in the doorway to his office.

“Can I speak to you before you go?”

Kel sensed the first stirrings of a panic attack, and took a pair of mindful breaths.

Just a conversation with Mister Wells. You've had plenty of those. No problem.

“Yes, sir. Of course.” Her voice fluttered slightly. She hoped he hadn't noticed.

She shifted her briefcase to her other hand, wiped her sweaty palm on her skirt, and fixed a smile on her lips. Entering his office, she bobbed her head in greeting and sat. Mister Wells seated himself on the corner of the desk.

“Tiring day?” he said.

“Um, yes, sir. Very.” Another flutter.

Get your shit together, Kel!

“I won’t keep you long.” He paused, frowning, his white hair gleaming beneath the fluorescent light and his eyes in shadow. “I’d like this to remain between the two of us,” he said. “I’m thinking of retiring. I’ve worked here for more years than I care to count. And anyway, I’m considering recommending you as my successor. I was wondering what you would think of that.”

Kel gawked at him for several seconds, open-mouthed. She had been working toward this kind of promotion for years, giving up . . . too much. But on some level she had convinced herself it would never happen. Nothing like this ever did, at least not for her.

And the truth was, she feared the job as much as she wanted it. Mister Wells had meetings five days a week—face-to-face, with customers, with people from the national office, with federal regulators and state legislators and industry lobbyists. He went to lunches and dinners, and attended professional conferences. As branch manager, she couldn’t hide behind her phone. Kel had no idea how to have this conversation, and she’d known Mister Wells for years, for most of her career. How was she supposed to take on his job and talk to all those other people? The mere idea of it almost made her hyperventilate.

Her mother would tell her to turn him down, right now. He stayed for two or three hours after closing each night. She’d never find a social life that way. But these quiet hours after the bank closed—this was the part of his job she found most enticing.

Mister Wells eyed her, no doubt waiting for her answer.

“I’m . . . I’m flattered, sir. Thank you for thinking of me.”

A crease had formed in the middle of his forehead. “Are you interested? Because if

you're not—”

“No!” she said too quickly. “I mean, yes, I’m interested. There are parts of the job I’d need to . . . to learn to do. But yes, I’ve been” She faltered.

You’ve been what, Kel? “Wanting your job for several years now?” Really? That’s what you’re going to tell the man?

“. . . Been working here for a long time,” she went on, casting about for any response. “I feel very devoted to City-Side.”

Good God, how lame.

His eyes crinkled as if he could read her thoughts. “It’s all right, Kel. I think I understand.”

She feared he did.

“Go home. Give it some thought. But as I say, I’d prefer this stay between the two of us for now.”

“Of course.” She stood, smoothed her skirt. “Thank you.”

She left his office and started once more toward the rear of the building. Glancing back, she saw that Mr. Wells had gone back to his paperwork, his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose.

Most days, the fact that the bank closed earlier than other businesses allowed Kel to beat traffic out of the city to Brindledale. Tonight, she found herself smack-dab in the middle of rush-hour, giving her plenty of time to review in her mind her exchange with Mr. Wells. She cringed at pretty much everything.

You can’t be afraid forever.

If she could just set aside her anxieties for a while each day, she'd be able to do the job. She'd be great at it.

And if she could just sprout wings, she'd be a most excellent airplane

She had some idea of how much Mr. Wells made, and while they wouldn't start her at his current salary, being branch manager would mean a huge bump in pay. And the new position would take her one step closer to her goal of moving to the corporate office. In a couple of years, she might be able to afford to live in the city. Or she could trade in her Mustang for something more luxurious, something she wouldn't mind being in when stuck in traffic.

She patted the dashboard. "Nothing personal, Sally."

She'd considered anxiety medication before. Maybe it was time. Maybe she'd finally been presented with a good enough reason.

#

Kel reached her home in the Brindledale Ridge subdivision around dinner time. If not for daylight-savings, it would have been dark.

Vicki and Liz waited for her just inside the back door, their strident meows telling her in no uncertain terms how much they resented being left alone for so long. They snaked around Kel's legs as she came in and tossed her keys on the counter, their tails held high, their backs arched in anticipation of being petted. Both food bowls were empty.

"Just a minute, girls," Kel said, setting down her briefcase and purse.

More meows.

Her phone rang: her mother.

She let the call go to voice mail

She filled the cats' bowls, scratched their chins, and opened the freezer, searching for her own dinner. Half a dozen Weight-Watchers meals stared back at her.

She was as hungry as she was tired. But the memory of all those chocolates made her close the freezer door, retreat to her bedroom, and change into her walking clothes.

Half an hour, she told herself. Some time alone to think. She'd take her hand weights, to make it more of a workout, and she'd wear earbuds, to keep people from talking to her.

She crossed back through the kitchen, intending to leave the house by the back door, like she always did. But as she reached for the door, she realized the cats weren't by their food and hadn't touched any of what she'd given them.

"Where'd you two go?" She found both of them perched on the back of the living room sofa staring out at the yard.

"Ah," she said. "Bird, huh? More appealing dinner than what I gave you?"

The Calicos continued to stare, not even bothering to twist their ears in her direction.

"Fine," she said, turning to go. "I'll be back soon."

Before she could leave the room, Vicki hissed.

Kel whirled. They now sat hunched, their tails curled under them, their ears laid flat.

She walked to the window, and peered out at the yard, the street, the neighbors' houses and gardens. She saw nothing unusual. Mrs. Ryan was walking her retrievers, but she did that every night.

Vicki hissed again, and this time Liz echoed.

"I don't know what you two are on about, but I'm going for a walk."

Kel let herself out of the house and started her loop through the subdivision. The

neighborhood wasn't big, but with all the twists and turns the length of the various streets totaled a little over three miles; she'd measured it once in her car. Tonight, she hadn't planned to cover the entire subdivision, but once she got going, she felt good and didn't want to stop.

She thought more about Mr. Wells and his job, about the prospect of trying one of the anxiety meds she'd considered, about the conversation she'd have to have with her mother. She made no decisions, but that was hardly unusual for her.

By the time she looped back to her house, the sky had darkened to a deep indigo and streetlights were coming on throughout the development. As she drew near, she spotted Vicki and Liz. They still sat at the window, alert and wide-eyed, their attention riveted on something she couldn't see. At least not at first.

Gazing into the shadows of her yard, she thought she saw an animal of some sort.

She slowed, the hairs on her arms and neck prickling.

What is that?

Whatever it was stared back at her. Dull yellow eyes, narrowed and unblinking. Her pulse raced, more from fear than exercise. She eased toward her door, never looking away from the creature. It was big, bigger than Mrs. Ryan's retrievers. A dog of some sort?

A low growl from the animal nearly made Kel yelp. She froze, watching as it eased out from within the bushes, and slunk toward her. Not a dog. More catlike, like a cougar, but darker. She remembered seeing black panthers at the zoo as a little girl; this reminded her of them.

She gripped her hand weights tighter and lifted one, ready to throw it at the cat if she had to. The creature growled again, but then wheeled, trotted off toward the backyard, and disappeared from view.

As soon as it was gone, Kel ran to her door. She fumbled with the keys for a few seconds, but managed to let herself into the house. She bolted the door and switched on every light in the living room. Her heart pounded and her breath came in gulps.

She hurried to the kitchen to see if she could spot the cat again, but she saw nothing. She reached for the phone to dial nine-one-one, but then stopped herself. What would she tell them?

I think I just saw a cougar in my yard. Or a panther. Or a strange wolf. Or a stray dog.

She could imagine them laughing at her.

There hadn't been wild cats this big in the natural areas surrounding Brindledale in a hundred years. And Kel didn't think dark panthers lived in North America at all. What in the world had she seen?

Vicki and Liz bounded into the kitchen and leapt onto the sink to stare out back. But they didn't hiss again or remain there for long. After a few seconds, they hopped down and went to their food.

Kel continued to scan the yard. She'd left the back door unbolted and, though she knew she was being foolish, she threw the bolt, just in case. As an afterthought, she flipped on the back floodlights, though there was still enough daylight to keep them from doing much good.

The ring of the phone made her start and drop one of her weights. The cats jumped.

"Hello?"

"You're home! I didn't know if I'd have to leave another message."

Kel grimaced. "Hi, Mom. Sorry I didn't call back. I got home late from work and then went for a walk."

"Oh. I thought maybe you had a date."

One might have thought Kel's lack of a social life was harder on her than it was on Kel. She didn't understand social anxiety, and on those few occasions when Kel tried to talk to her about it, she refused to believe a child of hers could have any mental health issues. *You just have to try harder*, she often said. *You've always been a little shy*.

"Nope," Kel said. "No date. I might be getting a promotion, though. There's a chance I could be the next branch manager at the bank."

"Oh."

No one but her mother could infuse a single syllable with so much—disappointment, accusation, the weight of thwarted grandmotherly ambitions.

"What, Mom?"

"Nothing! I think it's wonderful that you're doing so well at work. Really, if that's what you want."

"It would mean a lot more money," Kel said, in a way that made it sound like she had already made up her mind.

"More time, too?"

Time better spent scouting for suitable fathers for your children. Her mother was like some archetype from an old sitcom. Except she was the real thing, and she wasn't funny.

"I haven't made up my mind about it," Kel said. "I don't have a formal offer or anything like that. Mr. Wells said he's considering recommending me, that's all. I shouldn't even be talking about it yet."

"Oh. Well, all right."

They fell silent. Kel considered asking about Paul and Neil, to change the subject. But

that would lead her mother to the grandchildren she *did* have, and they'd be right back in the same place. Instead she said, "Is Dad there?"

A brief silence. Then, "Yes, of course, dear. I'll put him on, and I'll speak with you soon."

"Okay. Love you, Mom."

"And I love you."

The conversation with her Dad went better. He had been in banking himself and took pride in her accomplishments. If he wanted her to give him grandkids, he had the decency not to say so.

After hanging up, Kel was too tired to make dinner—even a frozen meal. She took out a carton of yogurt and grabbed an apple from the fruit basket. The cats had retreated to the living room; she assumed they were sleeping.

The more she thought about it, the more she figured her imagination had deceived her before. The animal in her yard had to have been a dog—a big one, sure, but a dog.

Thinking this, she glanced out the back window again. Night had fallen and the floodlights illuminated much of the backyard. Kel didn't see anything unusual. But as she raised the apple to her mouth, she thought she glimpsed a shadow moving at the edge of her garden.

When she tried to spot it again, it was gone.