

TWILIGHT HEALER

Chapter 1

“Leslie, your negligence may cost Fitzpatrick his life. Right now, he’s hanging by a tiny thread.”

Daniel Crawford, Leslie’s boss, folded his bulky arms across his chest. He spoke quietly, but his narrowed eyes betrayed a smoldering anger.

Leslie Taite sipped coffee while she sat before his mahogany desk. Her fingers trembled and she dropped her cup, spraying its contents on Crawford’s blotter and gray, for-business suit.

“I don’t believe this.” Crawford shook his head, wiping his jacket with a napkin. “Do you understand what’s happened?”

“Oh, yes, I do,” Leslie blurted, swallowing hard. She brushed the wisps of ginger hair from her reddened eyes. *Why did you choose respiratory therapy for a living, her mind screamed. To heal people? That’s bull. You’re just seeking absolution for Mom’s death.*

“Are you going to fire me?” she asked in a small voice.

Crawford let loose a deep sigh. He gazed toward his phone, as if he thought he’d find his answer there. “I don’t know how the lack of oxygen affected Fitzpatrick. If you’re lucky, his family won’t press charges. If you’re luckier, he’ll recover, and you’ll get by with a written warning.”

Leslie buttoned her lab coat and rubbed her arms. Crawford’s olive oil voice sent chills up her spine. In the past, he’d delivered scathing criticism if she so much as farted off key. What surprises did he have in mind?

“So far, I only have Sarah’s version.” Crawford’s smile didn’t reach his slitted eyes. “Talk to me, Leslie. What happened downstairs?”

The shivers settled around her neck, and Leslie heard her teeth chatter. After dabbing her eyes with a tissue, she pulled out a wrinkled slip from her pocket. Her assignment sheet. “Fitzpatrick had surgery for a perforated stomach ulcer last week. The other day, he became septic, and Dr. Saunders ordered a CAT scan to find out why. He said that Fitzpatrick’s drinking and smoking history could cause complications.”

Crawford leaned back in his leather chair, scratching his ruddy forehead thoughtfully. “Fitzpatrick did all right until his test. What went wrong?”

Balling her fists inside her pockets, Leslie got up and paced around the office. She paused by the shaded window, keeping her eyes on Crawford.

“The charge nurse Sarah and I brought Fitzpatrick to Cat scan. After I hooked him to the portable ventilator, she screamed at me to move the vent from the intravenous

pump. I asked her where I should move it. She shouted, ‘Over there.’ Her directions didn’t make sense, so I asked, ‘Where’s there?’ She waved her hand and yelled, ‘Over there, stupid!’”

Leslie gazed at her boss, bracing herself for a scolding. Crawford’s face turned beet red, and his lips trembled, but he remained silent.

“The more she carried on, the more she confused me. So I put the ventilator where I thought it should go.”

Crawford leaned back and covered his eyes. “You meant well, but Fitzpatrick’s breathing tube dislodged. God only knows how long he went without oxygen.”

Straightening up again, Crawford folded his hands and regarded Leslie intently. His phone suddenly rang out loud, breaking a silence seeming long as death.

“Daniel Crawford, Respiratory Therapy,” he said after snapping up the receiver. A long pause followed, and his gray eyes clouded over. “I see,” he added quietly. “Thanks, Sarah.”

Leslie blinked, fighting an onslaught of tears. “Fitzpatrick didn’t. . .”

“He’s alive, but unresponsive.” Elbows propped against his blotter, Crawford counted on his fingers as he roll-called Fitzpatrick’s symptoms. “He does not move or open his eyes, even when getting stuck for blood. His pupils are dilated. He does not breathe on his own. His contracted posturing indicates serious brain damage. Dr. O’Toole is seeing him now.”

Crawford paused and massaged his temples. “Fitzpatrick’s wife knows what happened. She’s threatening to press charges. She’s already called her lawyer.”

Tears formed in the corners of Leslie’s blue eyes and rolled down her cheeks. “I’m sorry. . .” She sank into her chair. “So sorry.”

“Your tears won’t make him better,” Crawford said grimly. “The breathing tube dislodged during his Cat scan, a routine test. Do you know what lack of oxygen does to brain cells?”

Leslie nodded, blotting her eyes. Asphyxiation could turn a healthy person into a house plant, condemned for life to a respirator and feeding tube. Though Crawford’s voice remained low-key, his censoring glare and tight-lipped frown accused her of criminal negligence.

Her brother Gerry had worn that same look the day Mom died, she remembered. Emphysema had raped Mom’s lungs, compliments of years of cigarette smoking. She’d spent her last years in and out of Betsy Ross Hospital, where Leslie worked now.

Leslie would never forget Gerry’s frosty eyes or the anger in his voice when he badgered her with questions. Never mind that emphysema was incurable. Never mind that, in the end, Mom had called the shots by swallowing a bottle of sleeping pills.

Leslie buried her face in her hands and sobbed loudly. For the moment, she forgot about her boss. Instead, she thought about the numerous complaints she’d endured about malfunctioning equipment and botched procedures, especially the times she tried to draw blood. She’d palpated the radial artery and wedged it against the bone, the way she was taught, but the needle always missed its mark. “Get out, you vampire!” one patient shouted. “Get someone who knows what they’re doing.”

She thought about Bill Saunders, her mother’s doctor, who’d supported her decision to attend respiratory school, even after he saw her Apticom test scores. He even convinced Crawford to give her a job. *Your stupidity may cost Bill his career*, a phantom

voice said. *What about that, Leslie?*

“Assuming Fitzpatrick’s wife sues, my track record won’t help,” she managed after a pause. “And the way I have trouble catching on. . .”

“Leslie.” Crawford’s eyes, pale and resolute as steel, met hers levelly. “The courts won’t care about your past mistakes. I suggest that you keep your mouth shut. Bringing up your mechanical difficulties will only give the Fitzpatricks’ lawyers ammunition.”

“Okay.” Leslie lowered her eyes. “What happens next?”

Crawford dragged his fingers through his sweat-drenched hair and studied his notes. “If Fitzpatrick snaps out of his coma, his wife may drop the charges. As you pointed out, Fitzpatrick didn’t take care of himself. That will help our case. Realizing that you didn’t mean any harm, I could let you off with a written warning.”

Leslie gasped and felt her throat go dry. Why was Crawford acting so nice? “Suppose Fitzpatrick doesn’t recover?”

“If he remains comatose or dies, I’ll have to let you go,” Crawford said quietly.

“You’ve got to believe I’m sorry,” Leslie repeated. “But the way Sarah kept yelling. . . I couldn’t think straight.”

“I understand that,” Crawford said in an edgy voice. “Unfortunately, Fitzpatrick has two girls, ages six and nine. Your inability to think may have robbed them of their father.”

Crawford stood up, his way of ending their meeting. “For now, you’re suspended, pending the outcome of Fitzpatrick’s treatment. You may get a second chance. But you’d better think hard, Leslie, before practicing respiratory therapy here or anywhere else. How will you live with yourself if your mistakes cost someone’s life?”

“I hear you,” Leslie mumbled, bolting from the office. She fled to the lot, where she’d parked her rusty blue car. Jamming her key into the ignition, she jarred the engine into an angry roar and sped out of the lot in a cloud of blue smoke.

She hurried down Cherry Street, a four-lane thoroughfare surrounded by battered tenements, nested in the bowels of Northwest Philadelphia. Night blanketed the buildings like a shroud. Thunder blasted overhead, and rain splattered on the windshield. Its dampness penetrated the windows, sending shivers through Leslie’s body.

Dr. Wolf had diagnosed her learning dysfunction, and aptitude tests didn’t lie. What made her think she could work with complicated machines and formulas, especially with human lives involved? *Your father*, the shadowy voice whispered. *After Mom died, he insisted that you go to college. Gerry, shelly, and Warren made it through school, he’d said. Why not you?*

“School.” Leslie’s voice came out in ragged gasps. “Dad, you meant well, but you’re not the one coping with motor and perceptual deficiencies.”

Thunder blasted like fireworks overhead, cutting into her thoughts. She turned right on Sunset Lane, an S-shaped road that ran through woods. Rivulets of rain flooded her windshield, making the trees look like sickening blobs.

She would have given anything for a job near home, instead of her present commute that included miles of unlit road. But hospitals had downsized, and jobs for new therapists had become scarce. As it was, Crawford had hired Leslie only because of Bill’s recommendation. She didn’t dare relocate to an area where gangs and criminals ran rampant. Given her learning impediment and the poverty of offers, she had to settle

for any position, even if it meant driving across Pennsylvania.

Leaning against the seat, Leslie rubbed her throat where two scabs had formed. She'd cut herself on some rose bushes, and the healing sores itched terribly. She started to think about Alex, one of the few friends she'd made at Betsy Ross. Alex lived on Mill Road, just off Sunset Lane, she remembered.

I wonder if he's home, she thought. Maybe I could stay at his house until the storm passes.

She'd met him weeks ago at Saunders' office. Her coworkers considered Alex Somebody Important because he wore a three-piece suit and carried a briefcase. But he approached Leslie with a smile and later asked her out to a night club for dancing. He insisted that she consider him her friend, even after she told him about the trouble she had mastering procedures at work. Either he wore blinders, she concluded, or he didn't understand the score.

What would she tell Alex? That she got suspended because her carelessness had caused her patient to suffocate? That his family will sue the hospital? No respectable man would want anything to do with her.

With a weary sigh, Leslie clicked on the radio, hoping that music could take the edge off her shivering. Instead, a newsflash cut in. ". . . a woman's body found in a Dumpster off Forrest Road. The police have no identification available at this time. They found no signs of foul play, except puncture wounds in the throat. An autopsy showed that her body was exsanguinated."

"Exsanguinated?" Leslie echoed, shuddering. Another reason she hated working at Betsy Ross. At least ten similar casualties had turned up near the hospital, including Fred, a coworker and good buddy. She'd never forget his gut wrenching cries the night she found him bleeding in the alley.

"Authorities have launched a full scale investigation, but they have not named any suspects."

At the word "suspects," Leslie snapped off the radio with trembling fingers. What if Fitzpatrick's wife went to the police?

Moments later, orange construction signs surfaced from the misty shadows. Leslie knew from past trips that parts of Sunset Land had been scraped for resurfacing. Straining her eyes, she scanned the road for potholes, but could only make out puddles, grass, and shiny pavement. She eased her foot off the gas pedal.

The street curved on a downward slope, and she suddenly felt the car slide. "Shit!" she cried, pumping the brake. The Ford zig-zagged, did a three-sixty, and skated down a ravine.

The trees below seemed to rush at the car. Crunching of metal followed as her hood crumbled like an accordion. The steering wheel plowed into her chest, causing pain to explode inside. Her head rammed into the windshield. Only dimly aware of her throbbing pain, Leslie stared at the colors flowing in sickening shapes before her. Waves of dizziness washed through her. Seconds later, she plummeted into darkness.

Chapter 2

When Leslie came to, she found herself in a hospital bed. Two intravenous needles lay buried in her arm, and nasal prongs fed her oxygen. Her head ached terribly, and her chest felt as if a heavy weight laid on it. Maybe a two-ton weight. Her breath came out in short rasps. *I'm having a heart attack*, she thought crazily. *I'm going to die, and no one can do anything about it.*

But that didn't sound exactly right. She'd just turned twenty-eight, an unlikely age for someone to suffer from heart problems. Suddenly aware of intense pressure on her bladder, she snapped on a light. Looking down, she saw the cause of her discomfort: a Foley catheter that was collecting her urine.

She cried out, tears running down her face, as stabbing pain tore through her chest. The dim light illuminated the words "Property of Betsy Ross Hospital" on her intravenous pump.

"Beige curtains," she murmured, casting her gaze. Leslie mopped the sweat from her face with her blanket. The cardiac unit had pink drapes. She remembered this from her job orientation.

To her left, she spotted a bedside commode, sink, and a mirror. She had to inspect her injuries, and the drapes offered privacy. Fists gripping the side rails, she pulled herself upright. Her legs dangled over the side. Somewhere through her cloud of pain, she heard clattering on the window pane.

A bat hovered by the window, its webbed wings and claws tapping the glass. Spiked teeth protruded from its mouth. Its flickering tongue dripped blood down its gray hairs. Its red eyes focused on Leslie with a reptilian watchfulness, making her feel like a mouse gazing into the eyes of a cobra.

"I can't move with that thing staring at me," she muttered, turning out the light. Hand gripping her intravenous pole and drainage bag, Leslie struggled to her feet. Waves of dizziness rolled through her, causing her head to reel. Her right leg buckled. *Call a nurse, for God's sake*, her mind screamed.

The call bell dangled out of reach.

Bracing herself against the wall and pole, Leslie hopped on her left foot to the sink. Her right foot flopped and thumped on the linoleum. Her head and chest throbbed with each step. What felt like rusty nails dug into her chest with each intake of breath. Sweat trickled down her face. When she wiped her forehead, her fingers brushed against silk tape and gauze.

Silk tape and gauze? How did it get on her forehead? Hands gripping the counter top arm rests, Leslie groped along to the sink. Felt for the light switch beside the mirror. The light revealed the white turban covering her head. A mop of red curls peeped through the bandages. Thin ribbons of blood trickles from her bruised lips.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped.

"Leslie, what are you doing?" Light flooded the room. Leslie craned her neck.

The speaker, a blonde nurse, ran to the sink. "You're not allowed out of bed."

"I had to use the john." Leslie swallowed hard, staring at her visitor. Something about the woman's narrowed eyes coated her stomach with unease. "Who are you?"

"Sarah." The nurse's voice dripped with sarcasm. "I'm the one who cleaned up

your mess last night.”

“What mess?” Leslie’s blue eyes widened. She winced as Sarah yanked her shoulder. “Stop! You’re hurting me.”

“If you want to kill yourself, do it on someone else’s shift.” Sarah eased Leslie into bed. “I’ll be damned if I get sued by a shit like you.”

Leslie rubbed her arms, trying to soothe the goose bumps. “I don’t even know you.”

“Very funny,” Sarah snapped. “Now shut up and . . .ow!”

Tapering fingers closed over Sarah’s arm and yanked. The owner’s milk-pale skin and spare frame made him look frail, but his piercing gaze intimated that those hands could tear through limb and bone. “A professional never talks down to her patients,” he said quietly. “She advises, but she never condescends.”

Sarah’s cheeks bleached ivory. The anger fled from her eyes, chased by utter terror. “Um. . .of course, sir,” she mumbled. “I was just leaving.”

Hugging herself and shivering, Leslie watched Sarah scurry to the exit. Who was this man? He sounded like a teacher or manager. Maybe Sarah’s boss. “Thank you,” she said, smiling.

The stranger’s green eyes glimmered like gemstones. Gently, he draped the blankets over her shoulders. “I promised not to let you face your problems alone.”

“You did?” Leslie’s ragged breathing echoed through the room. Something about the stranger’s chestnut curls and angular features looked familiar, but she couldn’t recall his name. “Do I know you?”

The man’s eyes opened wide as saucers, betraying surprise and disappointment. “We danced at Neptune’s Orchard.”

“Neptune’s Orchard?” Leslie stared at him intently, thinking that he’d confused her with someone else. She didn’t recall dancing at Neptune’s Orchard or any other nightclub since . . .college. “Who are you?”

“Alex Wallach.”

Leslie thought she detected an European accent. It sounded familiar, but she still couldn’t place him. “Do we work together?”

“No.” Alex lowered his eyes. “Maybe the accident. . .never mind, we’ll talk more when you’re feeling better.” He turned toward the door.

“Alex, wait!” Panic seized Leslie, causing her to shake and hyperventilate. Her voice sounded cracked and dusty. “What if that maniac comes back?”

Alex turned toward Leslie again, his satiny icy hands cradling hers. “Sarah won’t hurt you. I personally guarantee it.”

His silvery voice took the edge off Leslie’s shivering. She almost forgot about her injuries, but not quite. A sudden spasm wreaked her chest, causing her to double over. Tears flooded her eyes. “God, I hate this. What happened to me?”

“During the storm last night, your car hydroplaned and slammed into a tree. My driver and I brought you here.”

“Then you saved my life.”

“I did my best.” Alex eased her against the pillows. “Try to get some sleep. I’ll stay with you.”

“Please do.” Leslie closed her eyes. Colors floated in sickening shapes under her lids. Only dimly aware of her throbbing headache, she thought about her job and the two

years of training she'd endured to get her degree.

Her family held a graduation party, she recalled. Even Gerry, who belittled her achievements, had wished her luck. Her fiancé Tom bought her. . .where was Tom? Did he know about the accident?

Rat-a-tat. Rat-a-tat. The noises stirred Leslie awake. The bat hovered by her window, guarding her room like a sentry. Its wings stretched across the lower pane.

Moonlight streamed through her window, throwing ghostly shadows on the plaster walls. Her eyes scanned the room for Alex's chair. Empty. Any second, the panes would shatter, and the bat would swoop down on her.

Instead, her door creaked inward, and light flooded the room. Two men wearing white lab coats entered, whispering in hushed voices.

Silvery gray hair crowned the short man's chubby face. He carried a chart and clipboard.

Leslie recognized his companion as Bill Saunders, her mentor and family doctor. Studying his tanned face, she saw why Alex had looked so familiar. Thick, wavy brown hair crested his angular features and blue eyes. Except for his tanned complexion, he almost looked like Alex's twin, right down to his aquiline nose and thin lips.

"Hello, Leslie," Saunders said, smiling. "I'm sorry for waking you so early."

"Don't apologize." Leslie inhaled deeply, feeling relief trickle through her body. Another protest from the rusty nails near her rib cage followed. Hugging a pillow against her chest, she struggled to a sitting position. "I'm hurting badly, Doctor. What happened?"

"You took a nasty hit," Saunders said. "Three broken ribs and a concussion."

A deep sigh escaped the pudgy man's mustached lips. "The concussion required an emergency operation. Fortunately, your friend brought you here in time to avoid serious complications. In most cases like yours, by the time the patient reaches the hospital, the train's already left the station."

"The train. . .what?" A sick feeling rose in Leslie's stomach. She'd learned the score on severe head injuries during her training. If the patient lucked out, he or she recovered and squeaked through life with a walker or cane. In most cases, severe concussion spelled years on life support machines. "I'll never work again."

"You almost didn't survive," the older man said pointedly.

"But you made it." Saunders' soothing voice offered a reprieve. Almost like Alex's, but without the accent. "You'll work sooner than you think."

"I hope you're right." Leslie shifted her gaze toward the older man. "I already thanked Alex for saving my life. That goes for you too, Doctor. . ."

"O'Toole," he prompted her. "Joseph O'Toole. Don't mention it."

"Dr. Saunders, I didn't know you had a brother," Leslie murmured, still thinking about the resemblance. "Alex treated me quite. . ."

"They only look like brothers." O'Toole pulled up a chair. "Know where you are, Leslie?"

"Betsy Ross Hospital, where I work as a respiratory therapist." Leslie closed her eyes, hoping to ease the throbbing. "My mother died, and my father lives with my brother Warren. Alex Wallach brought me here after the accident. How's that for alertness and orientation?"

O'Toole and Saunders exchanged glances. "Not bad." Saunders smiled, but his voice sounded edgy. "Who's the president of the United States?"

"Clinton." Leslie shrugged. "Why?"

Leaning forward, O'Toole shone a light in her eyes. The glare made her squint. "How long have you worked here?"

"Long enough to make probation and qualify for health insurance."

O'Toole chuckled. "Times goes fast, Leslie. Let's try this one again. What's today's date?"

"I'm not sure." How long had she worked at Betsy Ross? The rattling at her window made it hard to think. She counted on her fingers. "March, 1993. Crawford hired me in October, and I worked here six months."

O'Toole scribbled something on his clipboard. He glanced toward the window and started. "Holy. . . what's that thing doing on the windowsill?"

"Beats me." Leslie cringed against her pillows, shuddering. "That bat, or whatever you call it, gives me the creeps."

"I can see why." Stepping to the window, Saunders lifted the blinds. A horrible flapping sound followed. "What an ugly-looking brute. It doesn't look like any bat I've ever seen."

Hugging the blankets against her chest, Leslie peeked toward the window. In the distance, the rosy fingers of dawn streaked the sky. The bat hovered in mid-air a moment, then soared away into the shadows.

Saunders pulled the blinds shut. "Whatever it is. . . has gone. I'll notify Maintenance, in case the critter makes another visit."

"Good idea." O'Toole wiped his ruddy face with a handkerchief. "Let's get back to you, Leslie. I heard that you took a short walk. How did you feel?"

"Awful." Leslie eyed O'Toole closely, but his poker face didn't offer any hints. "My right leg gave out when I put weight on it. It was like my muscles had gone on vacation. I'd better find a desk job."

"Not necessarily. As your brain cells heal, you should notice more mobility. Physical therapy will strengthen your muscles." O'Toole spoke in a monotone voice, as if he'd stuck his nose in a book. "The harder you work at your exercises, the sooner you'll walk."

He paced slowly around the bed. "What makes respiratory therapy so important to you?"

"Well. . ." Leslie coughed explosively. More waves of pain followed. "My mom died of emphysema, and I want to help patients like her. I hate to quit my job before I've even started."

O'Toole furrowed his eyebrows. "For the record, Leslie, you've worked here two and a half years."

"No way." Leslie rubbed her eyes and yawned. "I just made probation."

Reaching into his jacket, Saunders produced a newspaper. "Look at the date."

Leslie reached for the paper with shaky fingers. The date, "March 20, 1995," leaped at her from the front page. "Oh, no!" she moaned, covering her eyes.

"It's not the end of the world." O'Toole's voice softened. "We expected some memory loss."

“Some?” Leslie echoed feebly. She pressed her fist against her quivering lips. “I lost the last two years.”

O’Toole edged toward the door. “Try not to get upset. I’ll order some Xanax to help calm you.”

“Not so fast, Doctor. Sarah said she cleaned up my mess. Why?”

“Ask Sarah,” O’Toole said before closing the door behind him. “We’ll talk later.”

Leslie swallowed hard, choking back her noiseless sobs. Her fists clenched and unclenched. “What Sarah said. . . I can’t remember any of it. Why?”

Saunders paced around the room and stared out the window. “You don’t exactly work in a friendly environment,” he said after a pause. “People here will blow up if you even look at them crooked.” He looked her squarely in the eye. “I believe that the stress here added to the trauma, causing your amnesia, and I suspect that Joe feels the same way.”

“I see.” Saunders’ gentle demeanor and willingness to explain emboldened Leslie to continue asking. “Sarah said that if I wanted to kill myself, I should do it on someone else’s shift. What did she mean? What mess did I leave her?”

Saunders cleared his throat. “I can’t say because I wasn’t on call. Sarah behaved inappropriately.”

A professional never talks down to her patients. “Really?”

“You don’t bring your hostilities to the bedside. One of my patients, for example, swears and beats up his wife. I hate his guts, but I can’t let him see that when I’m treating him. I’ll speak with Sarah.”

“Doctor?” Leslie’s voice trembled. “Was my bedside manner any good?”

“My patients speak highly about you.” Saunders laid his slender hands on her shoulders. “Neither Joe nor I would help if we spoon-fed you specific details. You’ve suffered through multiple injuries and major surgery. Concentrate on getting better. Your memories will return when you’re ready to accept them.”

The gentle way he spoke made Leslie believe that he genuinely wanted to help. Her shivering eased. “Dr. O’Toole won’t even look at me. He couldn’t wait to leave. Either he hates me, or he’s hiding something about my condition.”

“Joe keeps negative feelings to himself,” Saunders said flatly. “You may have minor impediments, but I believe in my heart that you’ll return to work.”

Leslie managed a weak smile. “I hope you’re right.”

“I’ll tell you what’s bothering Joe and myself.” Saunders opened the blinds again, showing the dilapidated buildings against a hazy sky. No sign of the bat.

“Go on,” Leslie prodded.

“During your surgery, Joe heard this roar outside the window. A school of these bats, like the one we saw, crowded at the window, rattling the panes.” He turned toward Leslie, shaking his head. “The maintenance men can take down one, but if a cluster of them nest in the courtyard. . . well, people better look out.”

