

RELENTLESS: THE EMPATH AWAKENED

A DOMESTIC NOIR

EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

CHAPTER ZERO: THE RAYBURN AND THE CLOSE

The vibration of a heavily revved engine rattled the thin glass of the terraced house, sending a sympathetic shiver through Selene's mug.

She gripped the ceramic tighter, letting the scalding heat press into her palms—a physical anchor against the chaotic noise of the close. Julian's kitchen smelled of burnt toast and damp wool; it was a tight, cluttered space that compressed her psychic senses, forcing the claustrophobia of the present against the sprawling, quiet isolation she had left behind.

Through the window, the view was an assault of hard concrete, tarmac, and sun-bleached bricks. There were no trees here to soften the edges, just rows of houses built so close the windows almost touched, their glass eyes staring directly into one another with an oppressive, unblinking intimacy.

Julian pushed a glazed yum yum across the scratched formica table. Selene bit into it, the sugar coating her teeth like construction grit, sharp and violently sweet against the bitter residue of her morning.

'So', Julian said, his voice flat, cutting through the mechanical hum of the fridge. 'The digital meat market. How's the psychic radar handling it?'

Selene swallowed the heavy dough, feeling it sit like a stone in her stomach. 'It's a catalogue of hollow frauds. Three this week. One wanted to detail his humdrum commute down the dual carriageway. Another sent a list of his gym routines. The third just projected this grey, desperate static through the screen, begging for someone to carry his emotional concrete'.

Julian let out an abrupt laugh.

Outside, the aggressive crunch of a bumper mounting the kerb drew their attention. The parking wars of the close were relentless—a territorial battle that seemed to seep right through the brickwork. Selene looked out at the postage stamp gardens, each one manicured into a neat cage of lawn and paving. Beyond them lay the labyrinth of roads, a grey maze that left her feeling trapped, as if the tarmac had been poured specifically to drown out her connection to the soil.

'I miss the space', Selene said, staring at the condensation. 'In the sticks, I had my rowan tree standing guard in the garden and the foxes slipping through the undergrowth. And the deer...'

She let the word hang in the cramped kitchen, feeling a resonance echo in her chest. The deer had never been just wildlife. *Running Deer*: It was her spirit name, a tether to the earth that she kept guarded. Watching them step through the

morning mist at the edge of her garden had always felt like looking into a mirror. Here, surrounded by concrete, that mirror was shattered.

Her mind drifted back to the old kitchen, the heart of her rural sanctuary. 'I miss the Rayburn most. I didn't mind the work of it—the black soot under my fingernails or the dead weight of the coal scuttle. I enjoyed the ritual of loading it up with coal and wood to keep the winter at bay. There was something grounding in it. It was an honest heat that didn't ask for anything in return'.

She paused, her thumb tracing the rim of her mug. 'I even miss the pests. Those squirrels decimating the nut holders put out for the birds'.

'And the gifts?' Julian prompted.

'The mice were a trial', Selene admitted, a ghost of a smile pulling at her mouth. 'The bungalow floor was often a map of the living and the dead—trophies of a twenty-year war I hadn't asked to join. But I miss that afternoon a fully grown, living rabbit came through the catflap and ended up behind my desk. It wasn't even scratched. It just sat there trembling on the floorboards, an offering from a predator who didn't know what to do with her catch once she had it indoors'.

The smile faded. It was replaced by a plummeting ache.

'You did the right thing, Selene', Julian said, his voice dropping into a necessary gravity. 'The seizures... the way Aurora was losing her balance. When the vet came to the bungalow to put her to sleep, it was the only way'.

Selene nodded, though the memory of that final intervention felt like a cold, administrative procedure. She thought back to the very beginning, twenty years prior. She had gone to the Cat Protection League with an insistent pull in her gut. *I want a female black cat*, she had told them, though she didn't know why. Two weeks later, the call had come: "Selene Ashkara? We think we have the cat for you."

'Five previous owners', Selene whispered. 'Aurora was too much for them. No one could handle her. She climbed the curtains; she'd launch herself from the furniture onto your back. I was intimidated by her at first, terrified of those sharp claws. But I loved her. She would just gaze into my eyes and adore me. She was the light of my life'.

She looked down at her hands. 'Aurora used to sit right in the middle of my tarot spreads, claiming the cards as her own. She'd pin down clients by sitting on their laps. I could tell they were uncomfortable—especially the dodgy men—but they'd be forced to be polite and stroke her while she held them in their place'.

Julian chuckled. 'I remember how she bullied me into going to bed while I was cat-sitting. I didn't want to leave the fire, but she insisted. When I finally got to bed, she kept pushing me, head-

butting me until she could sleep under my arm, tucked against my chest'.

'Aurora was an Aries—a butting ram', Selene laughed, the sound brittle. 'She had no patience for boundaries. Did she wake you up by rattling the wrought iron rings on the chest of drawers? Or did she just grab your lip with one of her claws to remind you it was breakfast time?'

'Both', Julian admitted.

'It's time for another relationship, Selene', Julian said, shifting the weight of the conversation. 'Especially after so many years. After Liam... now there was a rat'.

Selene flinched. The name Liam was a bruised nerve she refused to touch. She wouldn't relive it; she wouldn't give the memory the oxygen it needed to burn again.

'I have had lovers, Julian', she protested, her voice tight, closing the door on the subject.

'But nobody close', Julian countered.

'It isn't that easy for someone like me', she said, staring into the dark tea. 'Men always say the same thing. "Someone as lovely as you—I'm surprised you haven't got a partner." As if a connection is something you just pick up at the supermarket. But it's different for me. I see the rotten floorboards before I even step inside'.

* * *

An electronic chime cut through the room. Selene's laptop, sitting on the edge of the table, lit up with an alert from the dating site.

'Okay, what does this one look like?' Julian asked, leaning over.

Selene stared at the screen. 'The profile picture is blank'. She hovered the mouse over the block button. 'Another one to delete?'

'Wait', Julian said. 'Read it'.

'It sounds... nice', Selene admitted, her brow furrowing. 'Country walks, love of animals, looking for a real partner'. She opened the message. 'He says he loves freewheeling a bicycle down hills. And that if I share my favourite sweets—Jelly Tots—with him, he'll share his orange Smarties with me'.

'How sweet', Julian said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

'The website wanted to know my favourite things', Selene explained, her face flushing. She looked at the blank avatar again. She had uploaded a professional photo of herself—the version of Selene the world expected to see. Yet this man, hidden behind a grey silhouette, wasn't commenting on her features or the curve of her smile. He was talking about confectionery.

A reckless impulse flickered in her chest. For once, she didn't want to be appraised like a piece of rural real estate. She wanted to engage with someone who was willing to stay hidden themselves, making the exchange about something other than the surface.

'No, you're right. I'm going to block him', she said aloud, her voice betraying her.

Instead, her fingers moved over the keys. She typed: *I don't speak with faceless people.*

She hit send, the message disappearing into the digital void.

Outside, a car door slammed shut with a metallic thud.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BLIND SPOT

The mobile phone vibrated against Selene's thigh, a mechanical buzz that bit through the thin cotton of her trousers. She was sitting on the sagging sofa in Julian's front room, the claustrophobia of the terraced house pressing against her.

She checked the screen. Fiona.

Selene tapped the green icon and held the phone to her ear. 'Hello, Fi'.

'It looks like a literal murder scene, Selene', Fiona's voice barked through the speaker, breathless. 'Half a bottle of Merlot, right in the centre of the cream wool rug. The viewers are arriving in two hours to value the house, and it looks like I've slaughtered a pig in the lounge'.

Selene closed her eyes, letting Fiona's high-frequency energy wash over her. It was exhausting, but familiar. 'Don't rub it', Selene instructed, her voice dropping into a flat calm. 'If you scrub it, you'll just push the stain deeper into the weave. You have to draw it out'.

'With what?'

'White wine if you have it, or soda water. Blot it with a clean tea towel. Then bury the damp patch in a thick layer of table salt. Leave it. Let the salt act as a vacuum to suck the moisture and the pigment out of the fibres'.

A sigh crackled over the line. 'You're a lifesaver. God, I need to sell this letting agency before it gives me a heart attack. I can't deal with the logistics anymore'.

'You've been talking about selling the business for a year, Fi. Just sign the paperwork'.

Fiona was a good woman, but her energy was a loud current. She had started as a client, coming to Selene for readings when her marriage was dissolving, but the dynamic had shifted. Fiona was the letting agent who managed the tenancy for the rural bungalow. When Selene's finances hit a wall a few years back, Fiona had bent the rules, absorbing the delays and keeping the landlord off Selene's back. It was a debt of kindness Selene wore like a heavy coat.

'I am signing it', Fiona insisted, the sound of a cupboard door slamming echoing down the line. 'Which is why I'm calling. As soon as the ink is dry, I'm going down to Cornwall to scout out relocation areas. Sennen. I've booked a luxury apartment right on the coast. And you are coming with me'.

Selene's stomach tightened. 'Fi, I can't. I have telephone readings booked, and I'm hardly brilliant company at the moment—'

'I am not taking no for an answer', Fiona cut in, her tone shifting to maternal. 'It's an all-expenses-paid trip. I'm driving, I'm paying for everything. We both have our own ensuites, so you can lock yourself away when you need to. But I don't want to do the drive alone, and you look like you're fading into the wallpaper in Julian's house. You need the sea air'.

Selene rubbed her forehead, the psychic cost of the trip tallying in her mind. Fiona was pitching it as a sanctuary, but Selene knew the truth. Fiona was a functioning alcoholic. The apartment looking out over the remote waters of Sennen wasn't a retreat; it was a gilded isolation tank. Selene knew the reality of Fiona's mornings—the violent shakes that didn't subside until the first glasses of red were downed. The suffocating neediness that sucked the oxygen from any room she occupied. Ensuites wouldn't be enough of a barrier. Selene wouldn't get a minute of space.

But then, a drop in temperature swept over the back of Selene's neck.

Cornwall. The psychic sight didn't arrive as a voice; it arrived as a physical weight, tasting of sharp salt and wet slate. For years, she had harboured an unshakable premonition that the coast of Cornwall was where she was meant to end up. It was a gravitational pull she had never been able to rationalise.

Go, the intuition registered, cold and clear.

Selene swallowed the lump of resistance in her throat. 'When are you planning to leave?'

'Two weeks', Fiona said, sensing the victory. 'Just come with me, Selene. Let the Cornish salt air pull the grief out of your system for a few days'.

'Alright', Selene breathed. 'Two weeks. I'll pack a bag'.

'Brilliant. I've got to go bury this rug. Love you'.

'Love you too'.

Selene pulled the phone away from her ear and pressed the red button. The screen went black with a sharp click.

She stared at the dead phone, the reality of the impending trip settling like lead in her stomach. Then, a faint scuffling sound drew her eyes to the doorway of the lounge.

A cat stood on the threshold.

It wasn't Julian's pristine white cat, Snow. This creature was a ragged shadow. It was a long-haired grey, its fur violently matted into dirty dreadlocks, with stark patches of pink skin showing where the coat had been torn away. It was a hollowed-out, vibrating bundle of anxiety.

The cat locked its wide eyes on Selene. Instantly, an electric pull connected straight to her heart, bypassing her usual psychic defenses.

'I see you have met Blue', Julian said, stepping out of the kitchen.

Selene couldn't look away from the animal. 'Who is he?'

'Next door's cat', Julian said, his voice laced with disgust. 'He was expelled. They bought one of those yappy designer dogs, and Blue was unceremoniously shoved out into the cold. He sneaks in here to eat Snow's leftovers. I don't mind. He needs a safe harbour'.

As Julian spoke, Blue took a hesitant step forward. Then another. Without warning, the matted grey cat hopped onto the sofa and climbed directly onto Selene's lap.

The physical weight of him was wrong. He was bony and sharp where Aurora had been solid and commanding. He didn't head-butt her or demand attention; he simply collapsed against her thighs, a shivering mass seeking available warmth.

Selene froze, her hands hovering uselessly over his ruined coat.

She knew she should stroke him. She knew he was a refugee seeking comfort. But the moment his bony spine pressed against her stomach, a suffocating wave of guilt crashed over her. It felt like a betrayal. The ghost-weight of Aurora was still too heavy, pinning her down from the inside out.

Selene's throat tightened with a fresh, acidic grief. She didn't have the heart to push the broken creature off her lap, but as she stared down at the matted fur, she poured a layer of emotional concrete over her chest.

She let him stay. But she refused to connect.

* * *

Later that evening, the kitchen smelled of hot sunflower oil and convenience food. Julian pulled a blackened baking tray from the oven with a tea towel, scraping a mountain of oven chips, vegetarian nuggets, and frozen peas onto two mismatched plates.

He set one down in front of Selene. The food was a landscape of two-thirds beige and one-third green, bleeding warmth into the formica. Selene picked up her fork, the metal heavy and cold in her hand. She put a single chip in her mouth. It tasted like cardboard and salt, dry against her tongue, but she forced herself to chew. Her appetite had been cremated with Aurora; eating now was a mechanical necessity to keep the physical shell upright.

Julian sat heavily opposite her, his shoulders slumped with the bone-deep exhaustion of a twelve-hour shift.

'I don't know how much longer I can do the geriatric ward', Julian muttered, stabbing a vegetarian nugget. 'It's the smell that

gets into your clothes. Bleach, boiled cabbage, and that sickly underlying scent of decaying skin'.

Selene pushed a pea around her plate, giving him the space to purge the static of his day.

'And the boundaries are just gone', Julian continued, taking a bitter swallow of tap water. 'Take Arthur in Room Four. Eighty-two years old. Paper-thin skin, half blind, and his mind is unspooling from the dementia. I was leaning over his chair this afternoon, trying to secure the bib so he wouldn't spill puréed peach down his cardigan. Out of nowhere, his liver-spotted hand shoots out and clamps right onto my inner thigh'.

Selene paused, her fork hovering. 'Arthur?'

'Right up near the groin', Julian said, laughing, though the sound was harsh. 'And he squeezed. With surprising grip strength, I might add. He looked me dead in the eye, lucid for a split second, and said, "I know what you boys like." It's tragic, really. The loneliness rots their brains until the only way they know how to make a human connection is through a desperate grab'.

Selene stared at her plate. The psychic weight of Julian's story settled over the table—a suffocating mix of pity, disgust, and the stark terror of outliving your own dignity. It was the same chaotic energy she had been reading on the dating app all morning. People throwing themselves against the walls of their own isolation, looking for someone else to absorb the impact.

'How did you handle it?' she asked.

'I pried his fingers off, wiped his chin, and told him my hourly rate didn't cover extras', Julian sighed, scraping his plate clean. 'You have to laugh, or you end up weeping in the sluice room. Anyway. Let's clear this up'.

They moved in tandem, a practiced domestic rhythm. The scrape of forks against ceramic, the clatter of plates into the stainless steel sink, the rush of cold water. Selene wiped down the formica, scrubbing away the grease spots until the table was bare.

The silence of the house crept back in, thick and expectant.

* * *

Selene dried her hands, the rough cotton of the tea towel scraping against her knuckles, and sat back down. She pulled her laptop toward her and lifted the lid. The screen flared to life, casting a harsh, artificial blue glow across her face.

There was a notification sitting in her inbox.

The faceless man had replied.

'He messaged back?' Julian asked, leaning over her shoulder, the smell of bleach lingering on his jumper.

'Yes', Selene said. Her finger hovered over the trackpad. She clicked the message open.

There was a single attached image, followed by a short line of text. Selene clicked the file, and the grey silhouette vanished, replaced by a photograph. He was standing in a generic, brightly lit room. He looked painfully ordinary. He had a thin, elongated face, framed by black plastic rectangular glasses that sat heavily on his nose. His hair was neat but thinning, and his smile was a tight line that didn't reach the corners of his eyes.

Beneath the image, the message read:

Fair point. I'm not much for photographs, but I wouldn't want to lose out on the Jelly Tots over a technicality. I'm Brett, by the way.

'Well', Julian said, his voice flat. 'He looks a bit like Louis Theroux. If Louis Theroux had spent a decade working in middle management and lost the charm'.

'He looks normal', Selene said.

'What's the psychic radar say?' Julian asked, staring hard at the screen. 'What's the vibe?'

Selene narrowed her eyes, leaning closer to the harsh blue light. She reached out with her intuition, waiting for the physical hit. She waited for the taste of copper, or the cold static of deception, or the wet cement of a man looking for a surrogate

mother. She waited for the rotten floorboards to reveal themselves.

Nothing happened.

The air in the kitchen didn't shift. Her stomach didn't plummet. There was no high-frequency ringing in her ears.

It was an absolute vacuum.

Selene stared at the black plastic frames, a cold stillness spreading through her chest. To a woman who had spent her entire life deafened by the psychic noise of the world, this sudden silence was intoxicating. It felt like walking out of a hurricane into a soundproof room.

'I don't know', she stated, her brow furrowing.

Julian pulled back, surprised. 'What do you mean, you don't know? You knew the man at the garage was sleeping with his sister-in-law before he even handed you the keys. You always know'.

'That's just it', Selene said, her voice trembling. 'I don't know'.

'What does it mean?'

Selene kept her eyes locked on Brett's awkward, tight smile. She ignored the cardinal rule of her own survival: if a room has no echo, it means the walls are padded.

'Perhaps I'm too close', she offered, the lie for Julian, but mostly for herself. 'Sometimes... sometimes it's hard to see for myself'.

Outside, the streetlamps flickered on, casting fractured shadows across the close.

CHAPTER TWO: THE FREQUENCY

Through the party wall, the muffled buzzer of a television gameshow bled into the room, followed by the tinny vibration of canned applause. Julian reached for the remote and pushed the volume up. A synthetic bassline thumped through the lounge, a low vibration pressing against the floorboards. The chill-out playlist was a looping track of manufactured calm, a necessary barrier against the architecture.

Selene struck a match. The sulphur flared, catching the wick of the ceramic oil burner. She tipped a vial of lavender oil over the water. It was not a ritual of peace; it was a fumigation. She needed the sharp, medicinal scent to strip the psychic residue of the phone lines from the air.

She picked up her tarot deck from the glass coffee table. The cardstock was thick, the edges worn down by years of friction. She shuffled them, the rigid snap of the paper syncing with the bassline. It was a mechanical action. Grounding the static.

She cut the deck and turned over a single card, pressing it flat against the glass.

The Hermit. A figure standing alone in a barren landscape, holding a lantern against the dark.

A rhythmic engine hummed against her stomach.

Blue.

The cat was no longer a ragged shadow. Selene had taken a steel comb to his matted dreadlocks. He was still bony, his spine a scraggy ridge under her palm, but the stark pink patches of skin were covered. He sat coiled on her lap, a vibrating mass of heat. He watched the tarot card fall, but he did not move to claim the spread. Aurora would have scattered the deck. Blue just absorbed the warmth from Selene's thighs.

'He makes a beeline for you every night', Julian said, taking a swallow of dark ale. 'He ignores me'.

'I resisted it', Selene said, her voice flat. 'But looking at the ruin of him... I knew Aurora wouldn't mind the intrusion. He anchors me to this concrete'.

'The lady doth protest too much', Julian said. 'You need the weight of him right now'.

Selene stroked the cat's skull. The visceral connection pushed back against the exhaustion in her mind.

'How were the phone lines today?' Julian asked, peeling the paper label from his bottle.

'A parasitic draw', Selene said, staring at the Hermit. 'The first was a woman begging me to dictate text messages to her ex-husband. She was a human vacuum. I could feel my energy draining through the earpiece'.

'And the rest?'

'An amateur astrologer who paid to correct my interpretation of a Saturn return. He didn't want a reading. He wanted an audience'. Selene shifted, Blue's claws briefly catching the fabric of her trousers. 'Then a sceptic. He spent twenty minutes sneering. He demanded lottery numbers. When I refused, the abuse started'.

'What did he say?'

'He called me a fraud. Demanded I guess the colour of his underwear to prove my worth'.

'Christ. What did you do?'

'I cut the line. I left him talking to the dialling tone'. Selene rubbed her temples, the lavender oil failing to clear the ache behind her eyes. 'The static is still in my teeth. For the first time, Fiona's Cornish isolation tank feels necessary. I need to get out of the city'.

'Better a sceptic on the phone than Arthur in the flesh', Julian muttered, dropping the shredded label onto the glass table. 'He managed to undo his catheter bag this afternoon. Poured it

straight into the ward sister's orthopaedic clogs. He looked me dead in the eye and blamed the maintenance staff'.

Selene pushed the grim image away. 'The dating app is throwing up new frauds, too. The fitness fanatic. The one who sent his gym routines'.

'Did he ask you to spot his deadlifts?'

'He sent a photograph. Unsolicited. Full frontal'.

Julian leaned forward. 'Let me see'.

'I deleted it. And blocked him. It was repulsive'.

Julian let out an abrupt laugh. 'You are uptight, Selene. It's a biological imperative. A gross one, but funny'.

They laughed. The sound was brittle, echoing off the bare walls of the lounge.

'There is someone else', Selene said, letting the silence settle. 'A shop manager. He lives in Truro'.

'Cornwall. That is geographically convenient'.

'I am going to meet him while I am down there with Fi. I think it will be a necessary distraction from the alcohol'.

An electronic ping cut through the synthetic bass. Selene's phone lit up on the glass table, casting a harsh glare over the Hermit card.

'The Truro manager?' Julian asked.

'Brett'.

Julian frowned. 'The faceless man? You gave him your personal number?'

'It is easier. It saves logging into the portal'.

The lie tasted of copper.

'What does he want at this hour?'

'He sends messages. Good morning. Sweet dreams. That sort of thing'.

'That is a heavy frequency', Julian warned. 'You haven't even heard his voice. You keep putting off the phone call'.

'Men are like buses', Selene said, staring at the illuminated screen. 'Nothing on the timetable, and then two idle in the exhaust fumes at once'.

'Are you meeting Brett before you leave?'

'No. I will wait until I return. If I decide to see him at all'.

Selene picked up the device. The screen illuminated her face.

Sweet dreams. I hope you find some space to breathe tomorrow. Her thumbs moved over the glass keyboard. She typed: *You do not know me.*

She stared at the text. It was an admission. It gave him too much traction. She pressed the backspace key, deleting the sentence character by character until the text box was an absolute vacuum.

She pressed the side button.

The phone hit the glass table with a hard clack.