

DARKSPEED

The Unnatural Adventures of Elle York

By Olivia Leigh Blacke

CHAPTER ONE

“Mama, I don’t *wanna* get up,” Mouse groaned, not opening her eyes. She shivered, drawing her knees up to her scrawny chest and wrapping thin arms around herself. “Cold,” she muttered softly, her teeth chattering, “so cold.” She rolled over, looking for a more comfortable position, but instead banged her elbow against the hard floor. She opened her eyes, momentarily startled that instead of seeing her childhood bedroom with the poster of Justin Timberlake taped above her bed, she was staring at a jagged stone ceiling.

Then Mouse remembered where she was and sat up so quickly the room spun. When her eyes focused, she took her first good look around her prison cell. The cold chamber looked more like the dungeon of a medieval castle than a room in Lower Manhattan. It was bare of furniture and there was only one door, a huge steel barricade with rivets the size of her fist. There was no doorknob. A pair of nearly empty oil lanterns flanked the mammoth door, creating flickering pools of orange light.

Mounted on the walls, higher than she could reach, were thick metal rings with chains dangling from them. A dark, oily smear between the chains made her shudder as she imagined the previous resident hanging there. *How long ago was that?* she wondered as tears carved

channels down her dirty cheeks. *And what happened to them?* She already knew the answer, and she feared that she wasn't far behind.

The room reeked of mold and urine, and in the corner was a pile of feces turned gray with age. There were other smells too – sweat, fear and the metallic bitterness of dried blood. She knew these odors well by now. It was the scent of back alleys and the tent cities where the homeless dwelled. It was the scent of death and despair.

She'd heard stories about places like this, but refused to believe them. How many transients just like her had spent their last days in this very cell? She never thought it could happen to her, but deep down she'd always known her days were numbered. She just hadn't thought that her end would come so soon. Mouse was barely even fourteen, and realized with absolute certainty she wouldn't live long enough to celebrate another birthday.

“Get up, little one,” a dry, inflectionless voice ordered from the shadows.

Obediently, she scrambled to her feet. She swayed, her legs trembling with fear and malnourishment. Mouse whipped her head around, searching for the source of the sound. She thought she had been alone. She had been certain of it.

“Are you crying?” the voice asked.

Unashamed, Mouse blew her nose noisily and rubbed it with her grungy arm. “Yes,” she replied in the tiny, high-pitched squeak that had inspired her nickname. She'd been called Mouse for so long that her real name was only a vague memory. In the back of a closet in an apartment in Minnesota, a birth certificate named her Michelle, but she would never see that dusty slip of paper or her hometown again.

“Child, there is no reason to cry,” the monotone, genderless voice answered, like an invisible judge handing down her sentence. “It is too soon for you. You are not ready, not yet.

You will be back, when it is your time. When you are ripe.” The door swung open on its own. “Leave,” the voice commanded. “For now,” it added ominously when she hesitated at the threshold.

Gathering her courage, Mouse stumbled through the door into a long hallway. To her right, closed doors stretched down an unlit corridor. To the left, the exit beckoned. Her heart bounded in her chest as she made a wild dash towards it, knowing that at any moment her captors could change their mind and pounce. She ran towards salvation and flung open the enormous double doors at the end of the hall.

Sunlight washed over her, the brightness of midday and the noise of the street disorienting. She hurried blindly down the steps. How long had she been confined in that terrible place. Days? Hours? Months? She risked a glance back over her bony shoulder at the dark church as the front doors slammed shut.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!” A man yelled angrily when she staggered into him. He grabbed her by the shoulder and shoved her away. “Freakin’ junkie!” He spat noisily onto the sidewalk as she lurched towards the curb. Running between honking, skidding cars, she dashed across the street. Mouse scrambled towards Tomkins Square Park and kept running, putting as much distance as she could between herself and the hell she’d so narrowly escaped.

At the edge of the park, she paused to catch her breath and plan her next move. She had to get as far away from New York as possible, but she didn’t have a single penny to her name. She couldn’t afford subway fare, much less a bus out of town. She needed money and she needed it now.

Mouse studied the people in the park. No one paid any attention to the tiny, dirty girl watching them intently with experienced eyes. It wasn’t long before she found her mark, a

couple strolling hand in hand. A designer purse dangled from the woman's arm. It was tempting, but the tiny bag was probably worth more than its contents. Mouse brushed past them and feigned a stumble. The man gallantly held out his arm to steady her out of habit.

"Thanks," she squeaked, slipping her hand into his back pocket, and then took off at a run towards the far end of the park.

"Hey!" he shouted, as his hand clutched at his now-empty pocket. "Somebody stop that little bitch! She stole my wallet!" He ran after her, leaving his high-heeled date alone.

Mouse sprinted towards the park's exit, knowing she could easily lose the man in the streets of Alphabet City. She had only gone a few steps past the fence when she felt a vice-like grip on her shoulder. She twisted around, ready to fight for her freedom, but it wasn't the tourist. It was a cop. He towered over her as he reached for his handcuffs.

CHAPTER TWO

It was a rare perfect morning in Manhattan. Not even a hint of smog marred the skies, but inside the office, the atmosphere was sour and the air was stale. The windows were closed and the shades tightly drawn, trapping all of the tension in the room. Harsh florescent lights turned the industrial beige walls into a sickly shade of yellow.

“Thank you for joining us, Dr. York,” the dean of New York University said without offering her a chair. He was in his mid fifties, but thick white eyebrows sticking and liver spots on his bald head made him look almost a decade older.

Elle York groaned silently, tugging at the hem of her stifling suit jacket as she shifted, wishing she'd worn sandals instead of the shiny black pumps that pinched her toes. But as uncomfortable as she was, she was glad she'd dressed in her professional best. When Dean Leon Frankes called staff members by their formal titles, it was never a good sign.

She straightened her shoulders as the dean leaned confidently back in his leather office chair. His ample belly rolled over his belt and squeezed through the armrests. Diplomas and awards decorated the walls of his stifling office. On his walnut desk, there were photos of him posing with dead fish instead of family portraits.

To his right, Marcia Harris, the head of the Fine Arts department, fidgeted with the edges of her blouse, picking at imaginary loose threads. Her short gray hair was swept neatly back with silver clips, revealing a long, graceful neck. She nodded at Elle and offered a smile of encouragement.

“Before we begin,” the dean said, his voice filling the room, “I just want to mention that your student reviews were exemplary this semester. Your classes were full and your retention rate was ninety-two percent. Not bad, not bad at all. You’re a fine asset to this University.”

“Thank you,” Elle replied cautiously. At twenty-eight years old, she was one of the youngest assistant professors at New York University. She taught religious studies, and thought she was doing pretty well for herself. But the dean never summoned junior faculty members into his office just to compliment them.

Frankes steepled his fingers under his double chin and leaned forward. “That being said, your attendance record is wholly unacceptable. During the last semester, you disappeared without warning for weeks at a time.”

She nodded solemnly, wishing she could disagree. He was exaggerating, but only slightly. Elle had a perfectly good reason for missing class, but it wasn’t anything she could tell her boss. While she enjoyed teaching, her real purpose in life was far more dangerous and time consuming.

Elle York was a monster hunter, and lately business had been good, too good. Over the last six months, she’d hunted a huge lizard-creature in South Carolina, rid Northern Maryland of a troll infestation and cleaned a family of selkies, blue-furred river creatures that looked like small, carnivorous manatees with extra flippers, out of the Central Park Reservoir. As a result, she’d missed more than her share of lectures and barely had time to grade final exams.

Frankes continued, a scowl on his fleshy face, “You return with no explanation and just pick up where you left off with no regard to the scholars that pay good money to attend your class. It’s not fair to the University. It’s not fair to the students.” He paused, focusing on her

intently. “It’s not fair to me. Some of their parents have complained to the board. They want an explanation and so do I. If there’s a problem, we need to know about it.”

“No problem, sir.” Elle bit her tongue. She wanted to say, ‘*Sorry, I was busy saving the world from monsters.*’ However, she didn’t dare. She was in enough trouble already without everyone thinking she’d lost her marbles, so she grimaced and kept her mouth shut. Despite her extracurricular distractions, she had worked very hard to get this job and was good at it. Now it was all slipping away and she was powerless to stop it.

“What is it, Dr. York? Drugs? Alcohol? Relationship troubles? We’re a family here. Let us know what’s going on so we can help.”

She wanted to tell him to stick his assistance someplace that wouldn’t be getting a tan anytime soon. “Thanks for your concern, Dean Frankes. It’s nothing like that. I’ve been working on a research paper that has taken me away at awkward times. I don’t want to fall behind on my *required* academic publishing quotas.”

He leaned back, his chair groaning in protest, and stared at her. “And yet, you don’t have anything to show for it. You haven’t published a single article since you got here. I’d say you’re already well behind the curve. As your contract clearly states, you will submit at least one paper for publication every semester, or a book every three years. Since I haven’t seen anything from you recently, I can only assume that you’ve chosen the book option. So, where is it?”

“I’m having a bit of writer’s block, sir,” Elle said hastily. She hadn’t really been procrastinating, there just weren’t enough hours in the day to juggle two careers and still sleep occasionally. Her social life was almost non-existent and the closest thing she had to a hobby was running for her life.

The dean cleared his throat. “Well then, this is resolved simply enough. You need a sabbatical. Take all the time you need to put the finishing touches on your book and rejoin us for the next spring semester.”

Elle’s green eyes grew wide. She’d never be able to cover her rent for six months without a steady paycheck. “That’s really not necessary. I have a light load planned for the summer sessions, and I have some very exciting things planned for fall. I’ll find time to write,” she added quickly.

The dean shook his head, tiny shockwaves rippling through his chins. The negotiation was going badly, but Elle didn’t know what else to do. She could shatter the heart of a stone-skinned Fugari demon with one blow and nail a pixie in mid-flight with a .22, but she was impotent in ordinary situations when she couldn’t resort to violence.

“I’ve already taken the liberty of dropping your summer courses and notifying the students. If you manage to complete your book, and convince me that there will be no more unexcused absences, I will consider reinstating you next January.”

For a moment, she fantasized that Frankes has suddenly sprouted a spiny tail, a forked tongue or even overly pointed ears, anything that would indicate that he was a monster. Demons she could deal with. She could fight. She could kill. However, in the world of daylight and dress codes, she had to play by the rules, and no matter how hard she wished that he were something hideous and evil that she could banish, he remained solidly and stubbornly human.

Elle stepped forward and placed her hands on his desk. She leaned over until she was nearly at eye level, glad she hadn’t worn a low-necked shirt. Although it might have helped her negotiations, the idea of Frankes ogling her cleavage made her skin crawl. “Dean Frankes,

please, I really can't afford to take any unpaid leave right now. I've learned my lesson, and it won't happen again. I promise that my attendance will be beyond reproach next semester."

He narrowed his enormous eyebrows. "You're not listening to me. You don't have any classes next semester. You're on administrative leave as of right now. Mandatory furlough. Use this time wisely. Finish your book. Figure out your priorities and get your life back together. Then we'll reassess whether or not you have a place at NYU."

Elle struggled to keep herself in check, torn between the desire to cry and the urge to hit something. "Sir, if I could just..."

Impatiently, he interrupted with dismissing wave of his hand, "This conversation is over. If you have any interest at all in returning to this University next year, I would suggest that you take my offer. Check in regularly with Dr. Harris with your progress reports. Have a nice day, Dr. York."

Elle had been in enough fights to recognize when she was beaten. Without another word of protest, she nodded curtly and strode from the room. Marcia Harris hurried to catch up. "Come on, let's go get some coffee. Maybe splurge and get lots of empty calories. Everything looks brighter with chocolate chip scones," she suggested, struggling to match Elle's long-legged pace.

They took the stairs down to the first floor and jaywalked across the street. "Marcia, I don't know what I'm going to do," she admitted as they walked past the giant stone arch in Washington Square Park. Elle removed a handful of Bobby pins and shook her long red hair free of the tight bun. Then she ripped off her suit jacket and slung it over her arm.

In the park, the trees were starting to fill out and the fountain was littered with the remnants of apple blossoms. Neither of them paid any attention to the man sitting casually on a

wrought-iron bench, peering at them over his paper. He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, trying to catch a snippet of their conversation. An old-fashioned bowtie wound around his skinny neck and a matching plaid woolen cap perched on his head, hiding his receding hairline. A flesh-colored earpiece designed to look like a hearing aid rested in one ear. He muttered something to himself as the women passed.

“I know it feels like it right now, but it's not the end of the world,” Marcia continued with forced cheer, as they exited the park and headed towards their favorite coffee spot. “Look on the positive side; at least you won't have to attend any more boring staff meetings listening to Leon ramble on about the budget and University initiatives anymore...” she caught herself talking like Elle wouldn't be coming back at all and quickly changed her tune, “for a couple of months at least.”

“Oh yeah, that gives me something to look forward to. I try to play the game, but Dean Frankes never liked me. When he wasn't making snide comments about my sloppy appearance, he was attacking my curriculum. I'm just surprised it took him this long to get rid of me,” Elle griped as she approached the counter.

“It could be worse. He was considering suspending you altogether instead of putting you on leave.”

Elle groaned, knowing it wouldn't make any difference when they figured out that there was no book, and never had been. “I really appreciate your support, Marcia, but I think I just lost my appetite.”

Having never seen Elle turn down caffeine before, Marcia studied her quizzically. “Don't worry, your job will be waiting for you. And you can call me if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” Elle replied, trying to sound sincere. “I will.”

She hurried out of the coffee shop before she could say something she might regret later, oblivious to the beautiful weather as she tried to wrap her head around what had just happened. What she needed was a steady paycheck. What she had was an unavoidable responsibility that interfered with her career, jacked up her medical insurance premiums and didn't put a dime towards her bills. She couldn't keep chasing monsters all night and still show up fresh-faced and prepared for the next day's lecture. Something was bound to give eventually. She just hadn't expected it to be today.

It was almost eleven o'clock in the morning. The suits and ties were all in their offices by now and the lunch rush had yet to start. With classes out for the summer, even the normal bustle of students rushing to class was missing. Other than the old man in the plaid cap and a homeless woman slowly pushing a rickety shopping cart along the pavement, she was alone. Elle wandered slowly down empty the street back towards her apartment. Walking aimlessly in the middle of the morning just drove home the fact that she was unemployed and broke; a failure.

When she opened her front door, her pet iguana, Elvis, scurried up to greet her. "How'd you get out of your cage, buddy?" she asked as she bent over to scoop him up. Elvis was two and a half feet long and his rough skin was a bright spring green. Because he had a tendency to escape and wander around the building, she was always careful to lock his cage before she left the apartment.

A man's voice answered, "I let him out."

Startled, she jumped, almost dropping Elvis. "Liam, you scared the heck out of me!" Her neighbor, Liam, had a key to her messy apartment and watched her iguana when she was out of town. She just hadn't expected to find him standing in her kitchen wearing a flamboyant orange tropical shirt unbuttoned over his wide, hairy chest.

“Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. My microwave's on the fritz and I didn't think you would mind if I came over and used yours to nuke up some pizza. Figured you'd be at work.”

Most of the time, she was thrilled to have a friendly neighbor, but right then she just wanted to feel sorry for herself without an audience. “Of course I don't mind,” she said, holding back a sigh.

The microwave dinged. “Well, let me get out of your hair. Thanks again. I'll see you later.” He retrieved his pizza and let himself out.

Alone at last, Elle collapsed in front of her desk and turned on her computer. If she were going to write this phantom book, she would have to start it sometime. She logged on, opened up a new document and stared at a blank page. The phone rang shrilly and she reached for it, grateful for any excuse to procrastinate for a minute longer.

CHAPTER THREE

The last time that Rosalie García had been near the ocean, she was only seven years old. The beautiful, dark haired girl had huddled aboard a freighter for days along with her parents and several other Cuban refugees. Violent storms tossed the vessel mercilessly and swept her father overboard as they struggled up the coast of the United States. When the passengers finally arrived in New Jersey, soaked, frozen and starving, Rosalie vowed she would never go near the water again.

Now, at the age of twenty-two, Rosalie floated lazily down the Hudson River on a warm spring day. She wasn't afraid of the water anymore; in fact, she didn't have a care in the world. She rode the tide on her back with her eyes closed and her arms spread. Her long hair fanned out around her head like a black halo. When she bumped into a pylon jutting out from Chelsea Piers, she didn't even open her eyes.

She couldn't. She'd been dead for days and her eyes were swollen shut.

Her once-bronze skin was now gray and slick. It sagged loosely on her petite frame as if it would slide away at any moment. Tiny fish nibbled blissfully on her exposed flesh and bloated toes as she bobbed on the surface. Almost all of her organs were missing, eaten.

If the knots keeping her under that water had held or she hadn't bumped into the pier, no one would have ever discovered her. She would have just floated out to sea and disappeared like so many others. Fortunately for Rosalie, her hair snagged on the pier and the more the waves fought to claim her, the more entangled she became.

At low tide, a boater on his way back to his slip noticed something odd glinting on the surface of the water and came in for a closer look. As soon as he realized it was a corpse, he lost his lunch overboard. Once his stomach was empty, he radioed the police.

An hour later, the river was crowded with boats. Some were search and rescue. Others were city cops. Most, however, were onlookers curious to see what was going on. People maneuvered their sailboats as close to the gruesome scene as they could manage, dropping anchor just a few feet apart from one another. Scantly clad girls and garishly dressed guys hopped from boat to boat, trading phone numbers while sharing beer and snacks. A few boaters roped their hulls together and once they turned on the music, a small party formed, which drew an even larger crowd.

The more dignified couples avoided the party boats as they sat on their decks, sipping champagne and nibbling brie on thin wafers. Lounging in their cardigans and pearls, they remarked about what the City was coming to while secretly looking forward to the juicy gossip they would share the next day at the club.

The papers carried an artist's rendition of what Rosalie should have looked like on the front page the next day, but they didn't have a name to go with the once lovely face. The story made the nightly news, complete with video feed from the circling helicopters and interviews with onlookers. It was all that anyone could think about for fifteen minutes, and then her spotlight faded and people went about their ordinary lives ruled by sports scores and stock market figures.

No one stepped forward to claim the body. Since she had few close friends and her mother lost her battle with cancer six months ago, not a single person recognized the waterlogged, grotesque remains as the once-beautiful and vivacious Rosalie. She had no

identification on her and her fingerprints were damaged by too much time in the water, so she remained a Jane Doe.

There was an autopsy, but the decomposition was too bad to determine which of her many slashes and broken bones actually killed her. There was no water in her lungs, so the only thing that the coroner could say with any certainty was that she didn't drown. Among the lumps, bruises and missing organs, he noticed a purple mark on her right wrist. He concluded that someone had ripped a bracelet from her arm during the attack, but there was no way he could have known it was from a silver ID bracelet that she never took off. Engraved on one side was her name. On the other, it read simply in the same curling script, "*Love, Mom.*"

She lay forgotten and alone in a cold drawer in the city morgue. When no one stepped forward to claim her, Rosalie's body was cremated. Her remains were stored in a numbered box in a municipal warehouse. Rosalie had joined the ranks of all the other unsolved crimes in New York City.

CHAPTER FOUR

Elle snatched up the phone on the second ring, eager for any distraction from the blank screen staring at her. “Hello, may I speak with Elle York please?” a man with a Spanish accent asked.

“Speaking,” she replied cautiously, not recognizing his voice.

“This is Officer Mendez, NYPD at the 9th Precinct.”

Immediately, Elle’s brain switched to panic mode. Did she have any unpaid parking tickets? Not that she could remember, but they seemed to multiply when she wasn’t looking, like those annoying inserts in magazines. Just when she thought this day couldn’t get any worse, it managed to slip deeper into the abyss. Her throat dry, she managed to croak out, “Uh, how can I help you, Officer?”

“You don’t remember me, do you?” He paused for a moment before continuing. “We met about a year ago, when I was working in Queens.”

Then she remembered him. Mendez had been a rookie when she met him, right out of the Academy. But a year in the New York Police Department could make a veteran out of anyone, and that was just considering the human violence. The City was a magnet for tourists, people looking for their big break, and everybody in between. Unfortunately, many of those in-betweens weren’t human at all. The twenty-four hour all-you-can-eat buffet that was Manhattan drew *unnatural* creatures like flies to spoiled beef.

On top of the sheer number of available victims wandering around like blindfolded sheep, the jaded been-there done-that attitude of the island made it the perfect refuge for all things

abnormal and other-worldly. So many people lived shoulder to shoulder in the City that they had learned to ignore anything, and everyone, around them. A nine-foot-tall green lizard would hardly attract more attention than a double-parked car. A Silver-Sided Tarnac demon would cause a panic if sighted anywhere else, but in Manhattan, people would assume it was a performance artist and toss a quarter at its oversized feet.

Last summer, when the shredded corpse of a teenaged girl turned up in Astoria, Elle heard about it on the news and decided to go sniffing around. She didn't realize that on her fishing trip she was going to end up as the bait. After wandering around Queens for a few hours without any luck, she went back to her car. As she climbed into the front seat of her Mustang, a Wendigo grabbed her from behind.

It was eight feet tall, with purplish scales and coarse white hair on its shoulders, abnormally long arms and naked torso. Bright red eyes shone down at her over long, skinny fangs. The unearthly scream that came out of its thick neck made her blood run cold. She had just enough time to snatch her steering wheel lock as it hauled her out of the car, and used the heavy club to bash in its thick skull.

Officer Jose Mendez heard the commotion and came running just in time to see Elle landing the fatal blow. He emptied his service revolver into the monster's corpse and together, they disposed of the body. Officially, the teen's killer was still at large, but Elle and Mendez knew otherwise.

"You still there?" Mendez asked. "You told me to call if I needed anything, and I need you now. No, that came out wrong. There's something I can use your help with. Not me, exactly. A girl. I mean a girl needs your help."

Elle cleared her throat as she jerked back into the present. "Where's the girl?"

“She's at the station. I'm trying to convince Mouse to go talk to you, but I don't think she will. We're gonna release her soon, and she'll probably disappear.”

“I'm free right now,” she offered without hesitation. Anything was better than staring at the empty page on her computer monitor. “Think you can hold her long enough for me to get there?”

“I can try. We're on C...”

“Yeah, I know the address,” she interrupted, glancing at her watch. She knew all of the local precincts, for better or worse. “I'll be there in a few.”