

AMITYVILLE HORRIBLE



KELLEY ARMSTRONG

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• One

“You know how you said you’d never do another reality ghost show?” Mike’s voice bounced off my dressing room walls.

“Yep, I did.” I turned the speaker sound down on my cell phone and pulled a tendril of loose hair from my twist. “And it still stands. Never, ever, ever—”

“It’s for charity.”

“Doesn’t matter. Not after the last time.”

“*Charity*, Jaime. Using your good fortune to raise the fortunes of others. I know that’s important to you.”

I tried to force out another “no,” but it stuck in my throat. Damn it. I took a deep breath. “What’s the cause?”

“Cotard’s syndrome.”

“Never heard of it.” I picked up the phone, switched to the browser and typed in a search.

“It’s a neurological disorder,” he said. “That means it affects the brain.”

I bit back a retort. That’s the price I pay for playing “ditzzy minor celebrity” for thirty years. Not that I’m a brain surgeon, but I do know the word for it is neurosurgeon.

“Cotard’s is very debilitating,” Mike continued. “It’s a rare but terrible—”

“Walking corpse syndrome?” I read from the screen. “Hell, no.”

“It’s a real condition, Jaime,” Mike hurried on. “Sure, there’s a promotional tie-in. Ghosts, zombies, walking corpses. But that’s just the hook. We’ll be raising real money for real victims. Think of the children.”

“It says here Cotard’s only affects adults.”

“Think of the children *of* those adults. Can you imagine what that’s like, having your parents believe they’ve been zombified? Absolutely tragic. But you can help. See, the idea is—”

I hung up. As I was turning off the phone, a knock came at my door.

“Ms. Vegas? Ten minutes.”

I shoved the phone in a drawer, checked my hair one last time and headed out.



Live shows are hell on performers. At the end, you feel like you’ve run a marathon, shouting at the top of your lungs the whole way. It’s not just the physical toll. There’s a mental one and an emotional one. A live show means your audience is right there, waiting to be entertained, and you sure as hell better deliver, because if you don’t, you won’t need to wait for the reviews to trickle in. They’ll tell you, then and there. It’s not just heckling. I’ve learned to deal with that. I think I actually prefer heckling to that most insidious critique—boredom. I swear, I can be on my catwalk in front of five hundred people, talking a mile a minute, half blinded by the lights, I’ll still hear every yawn, notice every pair of closed eyes.

So why do it? With my reputation, I could probably make more giving private sessions. I could certainly make more with a TV show. There was a time when I dreamed of that. Then, after that last reality show, *Death of Innocence*, I got my offer, and I realized I didn't want it. Yes, it was the next step up my career ladder. But I was happy where I was, and sometimes, that's more important.

So what gets me out on that stage? The audience. Sure, there are jeers and there are eye rolls. I'm a spiritualist. There's always part of the audience that comes to mock the crazy lady who thinks she talks to the dead—or the con artist who fakes it. There are also yawns and even snores on a really bad night. But that's five people out of five hundred. For the rest, I deliver what I promise. Not just entertainment. Happiness. Peace. Closure. Even if it's not real, it does something. Something magical.

Tonight's show was in an old theater. With this kind of performance, the older the venue the better. It was a traditional setup with a stage at the front, but my crew had added a portable catwalk to allow me to walk down the middle aisle, elevated so everyone could see me. As I walked, I talked.

"There's a spirit trying to come through. It's a woman. The name..." I lifted my hand for quiet as I strained to listen. "Margaret? Marg? Meg? Megan? Do we have anyone hoping to contact a loved one—"

I didn't even need to finish. Two dozen hands shot up.

"Wait..." I said. "I can see her now. Marg? Meg? I know this isn't easy, but if you can just come a little..." I smiled. "Yes, that's better. Thank you. Take a moment now. Rest."

I turned back to the audience. "She's come partially through the veil. I'm still not hearing her clearly, but we're going to give her a moment before I ask her to complete the journey. We had a few people who'd lost someone named Margaret or Megan..."



The hands shot up again. Another dozen joined them, those who had, in the last few minutes, sifted through their memories and remembered great-aunt Marguerite, who died when they were five.

“I can see enough to give a partial description,” I said, my gaze fixed on the stage. “She’s dark-haired.”

Several hands lowered. A few more wavered.

“She’s not tall,” I said. “Five-two? Five-three?”

More lowering. More wavering.

“Average weight? Maybe slightly more?”

We were back to a dozen hands now. I climbed off the catwalk and headed down the aisle to one that had been firmly up since the first question.

“I feel a pull in this direction,” I said. “Can you tell me your name?”

The woman—gray haired, mid-sixties—stood.

“Nancy. Nancy Masters.”

“And who are you looking for today, Nancy?”

“My sister Margie. She passed last winter. Stroke.”

I looked toward the stage. “The woman I’m seeing is young, but spirits often choose their materialized form from a time when they were happiest. Margie was a brunette? Petite?”

Nancy nodded.

I backed up to where I could see both Nancy and the stage. “She’s coming through a little better now. She’s wearing her hair. . .”

I squinted at the stage, while watching Nancy’s reaction out of the corner of my eye.

“Down?” I said.

No reaction.

“Short?”

A slight dropping of her jaw. Disappointment.

“To her shoulders?”

Her gaze shifted from mine, but her jaw reset. Getting warmer. . .

“No, it appears to be up.”

Her gaze returned. Hotter. . .

“Yes, that’s why it looked short. It seems to be pinned up. In a bun?”

A faint droop to her eyelids. Cooler. . .

“No, a twist.”

Her eyes gleamed, crow’s feet wrinkling as she struggled not to smile.

“Yes, definitely a twist. Like mine tonight. She has excellent taste.”

A laugh tittered through the audience. Relief and approval. The whole rapid-fire exchange had taken a matter of seconds as I peered at the distant figure, as if trying to get a better look.

There was no figure. No ghost. In fact, there was vervain burning backstage and in the lobby. If anyone asks, my staff will explain that it’s to soothe troubled spirits. That’s what they think, because everyone on my staff believes I can speak to the dead. It’s a job requirement.

They’re right, too. I can. I’m a necromancer, which is an old word for those who can speak to and raise the dead. Like most, I tried to stick to the “speaking” part and do as little even of that as possible. I just don’t actually do it in a show, because if I snuff out that vervain, the room will fill with the dearly departed of audience members, local residents, state residents. . . Hell, if I’m within two hundred miles of someone a spirit wants to speak to, he’ll show up.

Wouldn’t that make me more credible? No. Because if Nancy’s sister Margie really did appear, she’d have a message. She might ask Nancy to get Margie’s favorite necklace back from her divorced daughter-in-law. Or to tell Margie’s husband not to flirt with that

fifty-year-old hussy down the road. Or to make sure Margie's grandson didn't buy that motorcycle he was eyeing.

Nancy doesn't want—or need—to hear such petty concerns. She needs to hear that her sister is happy. She's in a good place and looking forward to the day when they will be reunited. Unless Margie loathed Nancy or was a closet axe murderer, she really is happy and missing her sister. That's just not the message she'd impart first. So I do it for her.

Is that wrong? Probably. I've long since stopped worrying. I make people happy. I give them closure. It's as close to a money-back guarantee as you can get in this world, or the next.



After the show ended, I had a press conference. Normally, that would be a waste of time. You want the media coverage while folks can still buy tickets. But this had been my first show in Oklahoma City in a decade, so advance media hadn't been necessary. With proper outreach from my team, tonight's show had sold out a month ago.

However, as long as I was in Oklahoma, I might as well do a few stops. That's where this press conference came in handy, letting people know that if they missed tonight's show, they could catch the ones in Tulsa and Lawson later this week, but they'd better move, because seats were filling fast. Doing the press conference post-show meant the cameras could catch the happy audience members as they departed. It wasn't so much about letting people know where to find me as convincing them—if they thought it sounded intriguing—that I was the real deal.

While my audience members sold the show for me, I rested backstage. Then I swanned out, apologizing profusely for my

disheveled appearance, explaining the mental and physical toll a summoning had on me, joking about aging ten years in two hours. I looked fine. Or as fine as I can look at forty-eight without the help of needles or scalpels. Of course, I'd spent the last twenty minutes touching up backstage—I'd rather dive into a pit of putrefying zombies than appear on camera without at least a mirror-check. It's not about vanity. It's about image. Okay, maybe a little vanity, too.

When I came out, cameras clicked and mikes turned my way. I mingled with the crowd asking after everyone's health as if we were at a cocktail party. There were even cocktails. Bloody Marys and Zombies. When you do this shtick, you either embrace it or try to dignify it. I've learned long ago that I'll get a lot more laughs—and a lot less ridicule—if I play it up.

I was making my way through the crowd when a pert blonde rattled off a TV station call sign so fast I didn't quite catch it. I focused on her name instead, which I've always found to be more important. It was Brittany. I'm guessing at the spelling, though I'm quite sure there was really an extra I or silent H in there somewhere. There always is.

"Ms. Vegas!" she squeaked. "Is it true you've signed on for the Amityville show?"

"Amityville?"

She raised her voice. After you reach a certain age, everyone mistakes confusion for hearing loss. Or dementia. In show biz, that age starts at about thirty.

"The charity event?" she said. "For Cotard's syndrome?"

I opened my mouth to give a gracious response, something about my schedule. But she kept going.

"I heard you signed on. That is so amazing. It's a great cause. My father has Cotard's. It's such a tragic disease that no one ever

hears of, but that's going to change." She put out her hand. "Thank you. Really. On behalf of the families of Cotard's sufferers everywhere." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "Thank you."

All around us, camera bulbs flashed and I knew, without a doubt, that I was screwed.

.. Two

“I’m going to kill you,” I said when Mike finally answered his phone. “I’m going to murder you, then summon your spirit and stick you in a very small, very dark box. No, wait. I’ll stick you in front of a television, where you are forced to watch reality TV reruns for eternity. Reruns of your own shows.”

“I—”

“I did *Death of Innocence* as a favor because I know I owed you for my first Keni Bales appearance. So I signed on to help raise the ghost of Marilyn Monroe. And when it all went to hell, was it my fault?”

“No, but—”

“Your first big show was about to be canceled. But then, one of your performers discovered a child’s body in the garden. Who did that?”

“You, but—”

“I found that poor girl, and soon, no one gave a crap about Marilyn, because you had something even juicier. *Death of Innocence: Satanism in Brentwood*. A smash hit. Who gave you that?”

“Well, it was a joint—”

“Joint effort, my ass. It was me. I even went along with the wildly inaccurate Satanic cult angle for you. I put up with Todd

Simon and Bradford Grady, and I salvaged a ratings smash hit from a train wreck. Five years later, the video is still selling enough to send you to Venice every spring. And how do you repay me?"

"By giving you another smash," he blurted. "Star billing in a brand new special. At double the rate I paid you for *Death*."

"I am not—"

"With a cut of video sales."

I paused. "Net or gross?"

"Net, of course. I can't—"

I hung up. I counted to three. My phone rang.

"Okay, gross, but it will be a much, much smaller percentage than you'd get for net—"

"A smaller percentage of something is better than a huge cut of nothing. I know how your accounting works. I'll take gross—if I agree to do it, and we're a long way from that. Setting me up with that fake reporter tonight—"

"Fake?" he sputtered. "I don't know what you're—"

"Cut the crap and this will go much smoother. You sent her. She nailed me on camera. That means I have to at least listen to what you have to say or I'm the diva bitch who couldn't spare a few minutes to raise public awareness of zombie-itus."

"We'd prefer to call it—"

"Whatever. Yes, Cotard's is a real condition. Yes, people suffer from it. But that's not why you're using it, so let's stop pretending you care. You know that if I do this, I'll treat it seriously, even if I'm the only one who does."

I let him sputter, then cut in with, "So what's the gig?"



“Yes, *that* Amityville.”

I was lying on a hotel bed with my feet propped against the wall. I'm sure I looked like a sixteen-year-old on the phone with her boyfriend. Which was pretty much accurate. I was on the phone. With my boyfriend. And I might be a long way from sixteen, but there's something about Jeremy Danvers that makes me feel like a teenager even after five years together.

Maybe it's because I've never quite gotten over that embarrassing school-girl crush I had on him. Or because it still feels a little like teen dating. We talk for at least an hour on the phone every day and get together mostly on weekends.

I've had friends look at our long-distance arrangement and question just how committed I am to Jeremy—and he to me. After all, we *aren't* kids. We should be living together by now, if not married. Which goes to prove, I guess, that those people aren't actually friends, or they'd know there's no question about what I feel for Jeremy.

Yes, we *aren't* kids. That's the point. I have my career, which keeps me on the road. He has his, as werewolf Alpha, which keeps him in New York state. I suppose, to some of them, if I was truly in love I'd give up my job for him. Which, again, proves how little they understand me. I love Jeremy. I love my job. I can have both. He's already planning to step down as Alpha, and when he does, he'll join me on the road more often, but neither of us is talking about a permanent move. Maybe someday, when I do retire, we'll grow old together at Stonehaven. Until then, I'm ecstatically happy with exactly what I have.

“It's not actually being filmed at *the* Amityville house,” I said to Jeremy. “Mike couldn't get that. So he's renting a similar looking place and renovating it to match the movie set. He won't claim it's the Amityville house...but he won't try to avoid confusion either.”

“I see.”

“Yes, totally cheesy. But the charity angle helps. Also, I’m the only spiritualist, which means no ego clashes like we had in Brentwood. The other pros are parapsychologists. Then there are the extras. They’ll start casting those slots after the press release goes out tomorrow.”

“So the extras will be actors?”

“Mmm, not exactly. They’re supposed to be just regular folks who dare to spend a night in a haunted house. It’s an old routine. I’ll send you links to some YouTube clips. They’re good for a laugh. Basically, a bunch of people running around in the dark, hearing pipes creak and mice skitter, and scaring themselves silly.”

“I see.”

I lowered my feet. “It’s too cheesy, isn’t it.” I swore under my breath. “I should have—”

“You should have done exactly what you wanted to do. Or, in this case, felt compelled to do. I was assimilating, not judging. You know that.”

“I do. Sorry. Just...” I inhaled. “I know it’s not exactly a brilliant career move. It’s not a bad one, but for respectability, it’s two steps down from the Marilyn show, and that wasn’t exactly the highlight of my career.”

“It didn’t damage it. In fact, it raised your profile, didn’t it? Boosted attendance at your shows?”

As he spoke, something flickered to the side. I sat up.

“Jaime?” he said when I went silent.

“Just a sec. I may have a visitor.”

Most people who know I’m a necromancer would keep talking. Asking questions. *Is it my spirit guide, Eve? A ghost? Has a ghost been bothering me? Is Eve being a pain in the ass?* Jeremy knew that the best response was silence while I puzzled it out.

I looked around. The natural thing would be to call, “Who’s there?” but with ghosts, that’s like rolling out the welcome mat. It’s better to wait and let the ghosts make contact...then send them packing as quickly as possible.

That sounds cruel. It is cruel. It’s also self-preservation. I help when I can, but if I opened myself up to every spirit who asked, I’d be plagued by them every moment of the day. Luckily, I have a very effective watchdog—my ghostly bodyguard, Eve Levine. Dark witch, half-demon and ascended angel. Yes, angel, which might be the scariest of the three. She has only to show up, Sword of Judgment in hand, and most spirits decide they really didn’t want to talk to me after all.

Unfortunately, being an angel means there are times Eve isn’t around. Like now. She’s out of contact, and I’m on my own, relying on her reputation to protect me.

When I looked around now, though, I saw no sign of a ghost. A trick of the light. That happens, even with necromancers.

“False alarm.” I lay down on the bed and propped my feet up again. “You’re right about the show. I’m just...I feel like I was railroaded into this, and now I’m scrambling to convince myself it’s not as bad as it seems.”

“It won’t be as bad as it seemed. Because you’re in it now.”

I smiled. “Thanks.”

“When does it film?”

“In two months.”

“Would you like company on set?”

My smile widened. “I would.”



The show filmed in May. I would arrive early to do promotion. Jeremy wasn’t joining me until the filming began. Promotion

is hell. While one could argue that having him there would make it easier, I've learned that it really doesn't, because I'd much rather be with him, so I tend to arrive at interviews at the last possible moment, and if they cancel, I don't rebook. I know that's unprofessional, but like I said, when it comes to Jeremy, I turn into a sixteen-year-old girl, ignoring her assignments and bouncing around shrieking, "He's here! He's here!"

So I arrived alone. The first week was spent in New York City—there aren't many major media outlets in Amityville. I did morning shows. I did talk shows. I summoned spirit after spirit. A few of them were even real.

Then, two days before filming started, it was time to go to Amityville to meet my fellow ghost hunters. And time to meet the house where we'd be ghost hunting.



The show had hired a sedan service take me to Amityville. That sounds fancy, until you realize the town is only an hour east of New York City. A taxi probably would have cost more.

The main crew was supposed to meet at the house for a big "getting to know you" party. Then, at the last minute, we were texted directions to a local inn with a curt "change of plans" note.

"Change of plans, my ass," I muttered on my cell to Jeremy as the car entered Amityville. "They never planned for us to meet at the house."

"They want to film your first look at it. For part of the special."

"Exactly. Last time they did that when we arrived, but it was such a mess they cut it. No one wants to see jet-lagged spiritualists stumbling in, muttering about their crappy flight. They want a big reveal this time. And the party isn't for the real people anyway."

“Just the fake ones?”

I laughed. “Close. Pros only. They’ll hold off on introducing us to the regular folks who ‘won’ slots. They’ll want to film that. Get my reaction when I realize I’m about to spend the night with people who’ll probably make me look like Mensa material.”

His silence worked better than any verbal rebuke.

“Sorry, sorry,” I said. “I’ve almost stopped doing that.”

“Around me.”

I still mocked myself around others is what he meant. Getting the jokes and insults in before they could. Which he hated.

He changed the subject with, “So it’s just the professionals today. The parapsychologists. Did Mike provide you with a list of names yet?”

“He doesn’t dare. I’m sure he looked back through my career and hired everyone I’ve ever had friction with, for better TV. I’ll handle it. I just...I wish, for once, I could tell myself it’ll all work out fine.”

“It will,” he said. “Eventually. It just takes some work to get there.”

I sighed. “I know.”

... Three

The driver dropped me off at the inn's front gate. Apparently, his fee didn't cover actually pulling into the lane. I could have bitched—normally I would, oh-so-politely, as I've learned from Jeremy—but traffic in New York meant I'd spent two hours in the car and I was happy for the excuse to walk, if only up the drive.

The inn was on the outskirts of Amityville. It was your typical New England inn, a big white colonial with rose gardens just coming into bloom. I meandered up the drive, stopping to smell the roses, literally.

As I was straightening, I felt a ghost behind me. It's not an icy draft running down my spine or anything so dramatic. It's like sensing a person there, because that's what ghosts look like to a necromancer. Regular people. It's only when you see them walk through objects that you realize otherwise.

When I turned, I caught the flicker of a spirit. I sighed. A disappointing reaction for everyone who'd be watching the upcoming show. I should shriek. Or pale. Or at least tremble in my boots. But given that I was wearing designer boots with five-inch spike heels, trembling really wasn't wise.

The truth, as much as it would dismay every horror fan, is that

your average spook isn't all that spooky. In fact, they'd be kind of offended if I ran screaming.

So I sighed. Then I waited. But my phantom was a shy one. Finally, I said, grudgingly, "If you want to talk to me, wait until I'm in my hotel room." As much as I hate to invite ghostly encounters, it was better than having one show up on camera. Nothing ruins a fake seance like a real spirit.

"That's the deal, okay?" I said. "Contact me when I'm alone and—"

"Jaime? You're early."

I looked to see Mike bouncing down the front steps.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

He flashed a thousand-dollar smile. "Helping bring my baby to life, of course."

Mike never shows up on the set. Hmm. This wasn't good.

"Did I hear you talking to someone?" he asked.

"Just a ghost."

He laughed and hugged me. He thought I was joking, of course. I didn't disillusion him.

"You'll be pleased to know I took your advice about our afflicted guests," he said.

"It wasn't advice. If you parade people with Cotard's in front of the camera, I will walk off the set and—"

"I've invited relatives instead. They'll tell their stories in brief clips to be played throughout the special."

"Tastefully and respectfully."

A faint shudder. "Yes. Though I think you're overreacting and doing a disservice to the sufferers—"

"It's a mental illness where people think they've died. They believe they're in hell or that they're zombies or that they're missing limbs or body organs."

His eyes glittered. "I know."

"They've been known to stop eating and die of starvation. Or test their death theory by committing suicide."

"Oh, well, we wouldn't show *that*."

I gave him a look as we walked up the front steps.

He sighed. "Yes, yes. There will be no Cotard's sufferers on set."

"Couldn't find any who'd agree, could you? It's kind of hard to get excited about making your TV debut when you think you're dead."

We walked through the inn's front doors. Mike tried to persuade me to go to my room first, take some time, fix my hair. My hair was fine. Ten years ago, I'd have hurried off to check anyway, certain I had huge snarls sticking out the back. I knew better. Mike just didn't want me going to the party yet.

I was, as he'd said, early. In fact, I was significantly earlier than Mike told me to get there, because I knew he wanted me to swan in thirty minutes late and start establishing my diva-hood as soon as possible. So I turned my suitcase over to the bellhop, to be placed in my room, and insisted on joining the party.

Mike led me along the hall toward the source of the murmurs I'd heard since entering the inn. We walked into the party in the common room. There were no decorations that looked as if they'd been hauled out of a Halloween box. No decorations at all, which told me this part was not going to be filmed. I could relax a little, probably for the last time until this show was over.

Mike steered me straight to a tall, gray-haired man with his back to us.

"Jaime, I believe you know Oliver Black," Mike said.

I tried to hide my surprise. I certainly did know the producer. He was supposed to helm the Marilyn show, and I'd been thrilled about that, not just because Oliver seemed to be a genuine fan of

my work, but because I was a genuine fan of his. At the last minute he'd been pulled and I got stuck with Todd Simon, beer commercial producer extraordinaire, who'd barked commands from afar. When Mike had said Oliver would be producing this new show, I'd expected the same switcheroo.

Mike's up to something, I thought, as I air-kissed Oliver's cheek and told him how thrilled I was to have him here.

Oliver wouldn't be staying, of course. That wasn't his producer job. But having him here to meet the crew and impart a few words of encouragement still meant a lot.

Before I could chat with Oliver, though, Mike led me to the next surprise.

"And your director," he said. "I believe you two have worked together before?"

"Becky!" I said.

It was Becky Cheung, who'd directed *Death of Innocence*. By the end of that show, I wouldn't have been nearly so pleased to work with her again. She hadn't been bad, simply inexperienced. After the show, though, her star had jumped, and her first act had been to cut ties with Todd Simon, which had proved the young woman was brighter than I'd thought.

Becky had gone on to make a name for herself in TV and hadn't forgotten that I'd helped her make her big break. Anytime we were due to be in the same city, she'd invite me out for dinner. I could chalk that up to simple networking, but after I withdrew from Hollywood, the number of "let's do lunch" voice-mails on my phone plummeted.

Finding her here was a surprise. Mike had told me that he'd hired someone new, rattling off a name I couldn't find on the Internet. Had he replaced his first choice? Or had he been planning on Becky all along? Either way, I should be thrilled. So why did I feel like there was a shoe over my head, waiting to drop?

The gifts kept coming after that—and the shadow cast by that shoe continued to grow. For the parapsychology pros, he'd hired Ted Robson, the EVP expert from *Death*, and Bruce Wong, who'd handled spirit photography. Both ranked high on my list of “pros I'd like to work with again.”

I chatted with the two parapsychologists and was introduced to a third, who I'd never worked with, but had heard great things about. We talked about their plans for the show and as I enjoyed a glass of champagne, I finally began to relax.

I was being paranoid. Mike had every reason to make this a good show and, really, with something like this—a group of strangers shoved together in a “haunted” house—there was no need for the interpersonal drama so essential to other reality shows. It was a different audience with different expectations. They wanted to see ghosts and ghouls, not meltdowns and catfights.

“Jaime?” Mike said, coming over after I'd spent some time with the parapsychologists. “There's someone else I want you to meet.”



Mike took me into a small room adjacent to the party. Inside, a man sat on a couch, checking his email. He was in his thirties, slender, with slightly shaggy blond hair and horn-rimmed glasses. I didn't recognize him.

“Jaime, I'd like to introduce you to Gregor Baronova.”

The name meant nothing. When Mike spoke, though, the man noticed us and leapt up.

“This is most unprofessional,” he said, speaking with a thick Russian accent. “I am so sorry. My wife had asked me to tell her when I arrived safely so I came in here to send her an email message.”

He extended a hand, then realized he was still holding his phone and fumbled to get it into his suit pocket.

"It is a great honor, Ms. Vegas. I have followed your career with much interest. When I was told I might work with you, I thought someone was making a joke."

"No joke," I said, flashing a smile. "Though you might start to wish otherwise after a few hours on the set with me."

"She's kidding," Mike said quickly. "Jaime is a dream to work with."

Gregor nodded. "I am certain she is."

"So you're joining us on set?" I said. "What's your specialty?"

Gregor looked anxiously at Mike. "She does not know?"

My smile froze a little. "Know what?"

"I was assured that my participation had been approved by you." Gregor turned to Mike. "Quite assured."

"Er, yes," Mike said. "We...seemed to have a communication gap on that. The producer was very clear about wanting everyone to meet at the same time. Otherwise, I would have been *more* than happy—"

"He didn't tell me," I cut in. "But that only means that I haven't had the chance to get to know your work better. Your name sounds familiar..."

It didn't, but you never tell someone in show biz that you haven't heard of him.

"I am new to this line of occupation," Gregor said. "I have only performed in Russia."

"Performed?" I looked at Mike. Sweat was trickling down his face.

"Yes," Gregor said. "I am a...what do they call it here? A spiritualist. Like you."

... Four

made a lot of demands when I accepted this job. It was a negotiating tactic. I demand a bunch of things, a few of them will be granted, and when the rest aren't, I have bitching leverage. There was only one clause that I absolutely insisted on in my contract. No other spiritualists.

That might sound like ego. And sure, part of it is. I like to be the star. To be honest, I used to prefer working with others, because I could use my necromancy to outshine them. Not nice, but there's no room for nice in show biz.

My last experience, however, had taught me that the risks of working with other spiritualists outweighs the advantages. Namely, that I can, inadvertently, cost them their careers. Or their lives.

On *Death*, I'd been haunted by the ghosts of children buried in the garden. So, with Jeremy's help, I'd investigated and unmasked those responsible. But my young colleague Angelique had been convinced I was doing something show-related behind her back. She'd tried to insert herself into the investigation...and wound up being the killers' final victim.

Then there was Bradford Grady, famed British spiritualist with a long-running hit series. While I was investigating, I'd got advice from a eudemon, who'd possessed Grady. Now, eudemons aren't what we'd call "demonic." They probably shouldn't be classed with

demons at all. But somehow, perhaps proving he did have some psychic ability, Grady recalled elements of his possession and became convinced that Satan himself had taken over his body. He quit his show and moved from ghost-hunting to demon-busting, destroying his career in the process.

Did I feel guilty for what happened to my colleagues? Yes. Especially Angelique. People had noticed, too, and bloggers and tabloids still talked about the “*Death of Innocence* curse.” Wasn’t it odd that one of the three spiritualists not only emerged unscathed, but saw her reputation leap to new heights? There were plenty of tasteless jokes accusing me of some “satanic” sacrifices of my own, offering up one co-worker’s life and another’s career to advance my own.

So, I had good reason for making sure that clause went into my contract. I continued chatting with Gregor—it wasn’t his fault—but didn’t delay long before suggesting we shouldn’t hold him captive. He had a party to attend. Mike wanted to show him around, but I gave him a “talk to me or I walk” look that he couldn’t ignore. We returned to the small room.

“There is a clause in my contract—” I began.

“We haven’t violated it,” he said as he closed the door.

“What?”

“The clause specifies an American or internationally known spiritualist. Gregor is neither.”

I stared at him. “You set me up.”

“It wasn’t me. The studio insisted—”

“Why the hell am I surprised? You’ve done nothing except set me up since—”

“Hold on. That’s not fair, Jaime.”

“You didn’t set that fake reporter on me after my show?”

“Er, yes. I admitted that. But the rest—”

“One thing. I only insisted on one thing.”

“And I couldn’t give it. You know how it is. I’m the show-runner. That means I have a helluva lot of clout, but I still answer to the studio. They hold the purse strings. Without them, there is no show to run. If they want another spiritualist, I can argue, but ultimately, all I can do is make this as easy on you as possible. Find someone American viewers have never heard of, meaning he won’t compete with you on the marquee, but might boost international sales. And I can make sure I don’t hire an asshole, which I think you can agree Gregor is not.”

“I reserve judgment.”

“I can do something else, Jaime. I can make damn sure you get everything else you want, whether it’s in the contract or not. I can build you a dream-team to minimize conflict. Focus on real entertainment.” He paused. “I even gave in on the Cotard’s victims.”

“Because you couldn’t find any.”

He sighed. “I’m doing my best here. I know you’re not happy, but...This is what we have to work with.”



There was no shortage of people I could blame for Gregor Baronova. The studio, for insisting on a second, unknown spiritualist when I was a proven performer. Mike for not having the courtesy—or balls—to forewarn me. My lawyer, for not making sure the clause was iron-clad. But the responsibility for my career lies squarely on me. It has to. Otherwise, it’s too easy to find scape-goats. You need to accept that the world doesn’t exist to help you succeed. In fact, it would really rather you didn’t. Nothing personal—it just doesn’t understand why it should care.

I’d signed the contract. I’d seen the clause and I’d seen the qualifiers and I’d decided it was meaningless legalese. I didn’t call

my lawyer for clarification. Oh, I'd still fire him. I had to, because I'd made it clear that this clause was important to me and he should have seen there was a loophole. But I was still stuck with a co-performer, and it was ultimately my own fault.



I left the party as soon as I could exit gracefully.

“Seven o’clock pickup,” Mike called as I was leaving. He didn’t come over; he was wisely keeping his distance. “Is Jeremy coming?”

I nodded and continued toward the door.

“I’ll see you at the house, then,” Mike called. “When all will be revealed...On camera.”

Normally, I’d have found a joke in that. Something about not being paid enough to reveal all. He knew it, which was why he said it, and when I didn’t respond, that told him he was still in the doghouse.

“Have you met Jaime’s boyfriend?” he was saying, loudly, as I left. “Jeremy Danvers. He’s an artist. I bought one of his older works at auction last year. Dropped half a mil. Of course, it’s worth it. We’ll be lucky to have him here. He’s very reclusive, as all the best artists are...”

I picked up my pace so I didn’t need to hear him bragging about Jeremy, as if getting him here was a personal triumph. I knew Jeremy wouldn’t appreciate everyone knowing who he was. He’s not quite so reclusive these days—I give him a reason to leave the Pack and Stonehaven. But he does value his privacy more than anyone I know. He’d prefer to quietly slide on set as “Jaime Vegas’s boyfriend.”

He’d texted me before the party to say he’d begun the trip. Another text an hour ago told me he’d stopped at Antonio’s for

a coffee break. I'd insisted on that. It was a six-hour drive, and I knew it was hard to pass within ten miles of his best friend's place without stopping. We planned to pay the Sorrentinos a visit after the show, but for now, Jeremy would get caffeine and a leg-stretch before continuing on. Another text thirty minutes later said he was back on the road. So, allowing for New York traffic, he should be here...I checked my watch. In about thirty minutes.

That was just enough time to get out of my heels, splash water on my face and revert to day makeup. One could argue, I suppose, that considering I'd be professionally made up on set tonight, I should just go bare-faced until then. It wasn't like Jeremy hadn't seen that. But I like to put in a little effort for that reunion moment. The makeup would come off on the bedsheets soon enough.

That thought was enough to cheer me. I stopped in at the front desk to get my room number and was directed to the far set of stairs. I had the top floor corner room. The best in the house, the innkeeper informed me. Mike had insisted on it.

I should have ignored the advice to take the far stairs. There were too many directions involved in getting there—down this corridor, make a left, take a right, another left, you can't miss it.

I missed it. I ended up in the service hall, by the kitchens. The inn didn't serve lunch, and it was only mid-afternoon, so there was no one around to ask for directions. I'd feel a little foolish doing that anyway. *That Vegas woman? She got lost looking for the stairs to her room. We were all worried that once she found it, she'd be trapped inside, searching for the door out.*

I was backtracking when I caught a flicker down a side hall. I turned to see a woman standing there. She could have been real... if the inn was hosting a Roaring Twenties night. I quickly turned away, as if I was just a regular person, with no supernatural abilities.

"Help me. Please help me."



Damn. The “regular person” shtick would work so much better if I could douse the spirit-world glow that marks me as a necromancer.

I turned. The woman—about twenty, with a blond bob and beaded dress—was partway down the hall. Tears streamed down her face. There was blood on her dress. More spattered her bare arms.

I took a slow step forward. “You aren’t real, are you?” I murmured. “You’re a residual.”

“Please, help me.”

Her gaze seemed to be fixed on mine. A trick of perspective, I told myself. She was just the psychic replay of a traumatic past event. Nothing more than a ghostly holograph, the real victim long since passed over to the other side, living a happy afterlife.

Still, I took another step.

“I need help,” she said. “He’s coming. Please—”

She let out a shriek, eyes going huge, staring at something over my shoulder. Then she ran through a door.

I looked behind me. There was nothing there.

It’s a residual. You know it’s a residual.

But she’d looked straight at me.

A trick of the light. Real ghosts don’t run down halls in blood-spattered clothes fleeing invisible killers.

Still...

I looked each way, then took a deep breath and started after her.

..... Five

That door the girl had run through? Clearly marked “Do Not Enter.” Of course I did. Of course it opened to reveal a set of steps leading down into a pitch-black basement.

I looked over my shoulder, making sure no one was around, then took off my heels, flipped on the lights, stepped onto the first riser and closed the door behind me. Before I did, I made sure it would reopen, twisting it and checking for locks, then closing and reopening, just to be sure. I’ve had ghosts play tricks before, leading me into places I can’t get out of.

I climbed down the steps. Given the amount of dust, I was sure no one had been down there in years. It certainly smelled that way. That made me particularly cautious on the wooden steps, but not one so much as creaked under me.

The stairs ended in a small room. Four doorways branched off it. Two were closed, two open. The girl stood just inside one of the open ones.

“Quick!” she said. “Follow me! He’s coming!”

“Are you talking to me?” I said. “Can you see me?”

Too late. She’d taken off. I looked back at the stairs, then at the dark room the girl had run into. She had to be a residual, but I

was down here now. I couldn't make a fool of myself if no one was around to watch me chasing an apparition.

The worst thing that could happen was that I'd witness the replay of a crime I'd really rather not witness. That wouldn't be anything new. As horrific as residuals could be, I'd learned to deal with them by reminding myself that the victims were safe now, and what I was seeing was nothing more than phantom photography.

The girl had already made it across the room and through a second doorway. I raced after her.

"If you're really a ghost, this isn't happening," I called after her. "It can't be happening. No one can hurt you now."

"He's coming! Please! Save me!"

Was she responding to my words? Or was the timing coincidental? Damn it. Everything in my experience insisted this had to be a residual. Chasing it was an amateur move, the kind of thing necromancers joked about—*hey, remember the time you called 911 when you saw a residual jump off a bridge?*

But this seemed different. So, against all logic, I kept chasing the girl, flipping on lights as I went, through the next room to another hallway.

"He's coming!" she said. "Quick! We have to hide!"

"There's no one coming. You're—" I paused. It's never fun to tell a ghost she's dead. Normally, though, that only happens if you have the misfortune of meeting one at the moment of death. From this girl's outfit, she'd been dead nearly a century.

"You can't be hurt," I said instead. "Tell me what you see and I'll—"

"He's coming! Hide!"

She darted through a closed door. I ran to it and turned the knob. It wouldn't open. I threw my shoulder against it, a move I'd seen Jeremy and other werewolves do all the time, one that works far

better if you have super-strength. Pain slammed through my shoulder. The door didn't budge.

On the other side, the girl screamed. I twisted the knob again and shoved the door. It flew open so suddenly I stumbled through, tripping, my heels flying from my hand and clattering to the cement floor.

The girl screamed again. I looked up to see her crouching in the shadows, the room lit only by the light from the hall. I patted the wall for a light switch but couldn't find one.

I started forward. "It's okay. Whatever you're seeing, it isn't real. You're—"

She screamed and fell back as blood blossomed on her beaded dress. A jagged hole appeared, blood seeping through. Then another one, as if an invisible knife stabbed her. I raced over, but there was nothing I could do. I couldn't see what was attacking her. I couldn't fight it. I couldn't drag her to safety.

I tried reaching out, but of course my hands just passed through her. All I could do was stand there, babbling that it wasn't real, she would be okay. The knife kept plunging in until the whole front of her dress was shredded and bloody. Then, finally, she dropped to the floor, and the blows stopped.

I stood there, breathing hard, shaking as I stared at her crumpled body, waiting for it to fade. Instead, her arms twitched. Then one reached out, clawing at the concrete.

"Help...me..." she whispered.

"If you can hear me, it's okay," I said. "Just hold on. It'll all be over in a second."

She lifted her blood-freckled face. Her dark eyes met mine. "Why didn't you help me?"

"I can't," I said, crouching. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what's going on, but you're...you're out of your time. Whatever happened to you it was very long ago—"

She reached for my foot, hand passing through it. Then she looked up at me with her tear- and blood-streaked face. “Stop him. Please stop him.”

She disappeared. I took a deep breath. Then I felt a draft behind me, a sudden whoosh of air, and I spun to see the door closing. I raced toward it, but it slammed shut, plunging the room into darkness.



I didn't give up on the door for a while. It hadn't wanted to open earlier, so I told myself it was just jammed again. As for how it slammed shut, well, I'd felt a draft, hadn't I? That or the foundation was crooked and the door swung shut because of that. When it comes to anything potentially paranormal in origin, I'm the worst skeptic, always searching for natural answers. That may seem perverse, but knowing the supernatural exists makes it too easy to jump on paranormal explanations. It's like people who religiously watch ghost shows and interpret every creaking board and groaning pipe as a sign that the dead walk among us.

So I kept yanking on the door. The handle refused to even turn. Next I searched for that missing light switch. The room was pitch dark without even a sliver of light coming under the door. I systematically felt my way along all the walls. Still no switch.

Finally, I did what some might argue I should have done when the door first shut. I took out my cell phone. Admittedly, the faint glow of the screen did help and I used that for another round of the tiny room, but saw no light switch or pull cord hanging overhead.

As for using the phone to actually call someone, that might be the obvious solution to my predicament, but I wanted to be absolutely certain I couldn't get myself free first. Getting locked in an inn basement was not going to help my reputation at all.

But the door wasn't opening, and the light was staying off, so I hit the speed-dial for Jeremy. A recording came on immediately, telling me my call couldn't be completed. I looked at my screen.

No service.

No service? How was that possible? I'd had a couple of bars upstairs.

I lifted the phone overhead as high as I could. Still no—?

"Run," a man's voice whispered behind me.

I spun so fast I almost dropped my phone, fumbling to catch it as I backed into the corner. I lifted the screen to shine in front of me.

"Who's there?" I asked.

No one, you fool. It's a small, empty room.

No, it *had* been empty. I'd had my back to the door when it slammed shut. Meaning someone could have come in and closed it behind him.

I pressed my back against the wall and waved the phone around. Nothing. I could see nothing.

"If someone's there—"

"Help me," whispered a voice from below.

I swung the cell phone light down to see the girl on the floor. She was rising, blood-stained hand reaching for me.

"Help..."

See, it's a residual. It's replaying.

But she hadn't reached up before. She'd reached out for my foot.

"Why didn't you help me?" she said. "Why won't you stop him?"

"Can you hear me?" I said. "If you can—"

"You need to stop him."

"Run," the man's voice whispered.

I wheeled, back slamming into the adjoining wall. My cell phone flickered. The light went out. I banged it against my thigh. I hit buttons. I held down the power switch. Nothing worked.

*It had a full battery when I left New York. There's no way—
The light. It drained because you were keeping the screen on at
full brightness.*

That was silly, of course. I had enough power. I know I did.

A click sounded, like the door opening. When I looked over, though, I couldn't see any light shining through it. With my back against the wall, I sidestepped to the door and ran my fingers over the edge. It was shut tight. I tried the handle. It still wouldn't—

Another click, as if the door had closed. I yanked my hands back. I hadn't pushed it shut. I knew I hadn't—

A whimper sounded behind me. I turned, instinctively lifting my dead phone. All I saw was darkness, but I could hear someone there, sniveling and crying softly. Then, slowly, I began to make out the edges of a faintly glowing figure. It was pressed against the far wall, as if hiding behind some invisible object. The figure came clearer. It was a girl—a young woman, maybe in her early twenties—dark-haired, with a chiffon head scarf and polka-dot Fifties-style dress.

Tears streamed down her face as she hid there, breathing so hard I could hear it. When I took a step toward her, she jumped, then looked up, eyes meeting mine.

"Hide!" she said. "Quick! He's coming!"

"Who's coming?" I asked.

She struggled for breath as her eyes filled with panic.

I walked closer. "Who's coming?"

"He's going to find me. I know he's going to—"

She let out a shriek, head jerking up, eyes rounding. Then she fell back against the wall, hands up. Blood spread across her dress as she screamed. The knife plunged in again.

"Help! Please help!"

I did. Not by running to shield her or pull her away. I couldn't do that. Instead, I focused on whoever was stabbing her, to see

him, to pull him through the ether. I tried every trick I knew to summon the ghost attacking her, and I didn't see so much as a flicker. An invisible force just kept stabbing her with an invisible knife until she lay there, heaped by the foot of the wall, eyes closed.

I turned to her and knelt. "Can you hear me? I don't understand what's—"

Her eyes flew open. "Help us. Stop him."

Before I could say a word, she disappeared.

A third victim came after that, this one in a cleaning uniform and ponytail, the exact period difficult to guess but obviously modern. She ran in, she saw me, she entreated me to help her, to save her, then “he” came and she died. Again I tried with all my power to pull her attacker through—to no avail.

Then it started anew, with the first victim. That time, I concentrated on trying to make contact with the attacker, to get him to speak to me. Still nothing. She died, the second girl returned. I asked her questions, begged her to reply. She didn’t. She looked right at me. She tried to get me to hide with her. But she wouldn’t—or couldn’t—answer me.

“I need you to talk to me!” I said, as she faded. “I can’t help unless—”

“You can’t help.” It was a man’s voice behind me.

I turned. “Show yourself.”

His laughter fluttered around me.

“Who are you?” I said.

No answer.

“What am I seeing?” I said. “What did you do down here?”

Silence.

“Are you showing me this? What do you want?”

“Run,” his whisper snaked past, raising goose bumps on my arms.

“You’re a ghost,” I said. “I don’t run from ghosts.”

His voice, right at my ear. “You will.”

I stumbled back in spite of myself.

“Help me...”

I looked down to see the first girl, on the floor, lifting her hand.

“Help me...” the girl from the Fifties appeared beside me, both hands reaching for me.

As I backed away, the cleaning girl whispered behind me. “Help me...”

“Help us,” all three said, all reaching for me, their hands covered in blood. “Help us or join—”

The doorknob rattled. I staggered away from the dead girls and pushed into the far corner. A crack, then the door flew open, light flooding through, and all I saw was a figure silhouetted there and I pushed back into the corner—

“Jaime?”

I ran into Jeremy’s arms.



The natural first question, on finding your girlfriend locked in a basement room, would be, “How’d you get in there?” or at least, “What happened?” Jeremy just held me until I got myself together. Then I told him the whole story.

When I finished, I walked over to the door and looked at it. “It was just jammed, wasn’t it?”

“We should go upstairs,” he said after a moment.

“The door. It wasn’t locked, was it? And don’t lie to make me feel better. There is no lock. I can see that.”

“Then the knob was jammed, because I had to break *something* to get in here.” He walked over and put his arms around me.

“You were trapped in here, Jaime. Don’t tell yourself you made a mistake. And don’t tell yourself those were residuals, either.”

I nodded, but said nothing.

“Residuals don’t talk to you,” he said.

“They didn’t talk *to* me. They talked *at* me.” I paused and shook my head. “I don’t know what they were. Maybe they were residuals and I’m just under a lot of stress and—”

“No.”

“It’s a new show and I—”

“No.” He took my chin in his hand and tilted my face up to his. “You have never hallucinated in your life. I don’t have an explanation for what you saw, but you saw something.”

“Can we stay somewhere else tonight?”

He chuckled. “We can absolutely stay somewhere else tonight. In fact, I insist.”

I paused.

“No,” he said.

“I was just—”

“There’s nothing here for you to do and you’re not going to feel guilty about leaving.”

“Maybe I should try to contact any spirits—”

“I’ll have Elena research past crimes connected to this inn. If we find anything, we can come back after the show and you can attempt a proper summoning. *After* the show. You saw three victims spanning almost a century?”

I nodded.

“I’m not even sure how that’s possible, but it means we aren’t dealing with a serial killer who’ll strike in the next three days. You can walk away.” He met my gaze. “Guilt free.”

I kissed him. “Thank you.”



“Is it haunted?” Mike asked as he followed us down the front inn’s steps.

I threw a look over my shoulder.

“Okay, okay,” he said. “There’s no such thing as ghosts. But that *could* be why you’re checking out. We could say that’s the reason.”

“I don’t think the inn would appreciate that,” Jeremy said as he steered me toward the parking lot.

“Then you’d be dead wrong, my friend. Pun intended. Being haunted is a marketing bonus with places like this. People love to stay in a haunted house. The trick is that you can only have a room or two with ghosts, so guests have the option.” He paused. “Which room were you in?”

“My room was not—”

“Of course it wasn’t. But imagine the publicity. Oh! Hold on. We need to *film* you guys leaving. We’ll use digital. Make it seem very spur-of-the-moment. You’re freaked out and fleeing—”

“Michael?” Jeremy said.

It may have been the use of his full name that stopped Mike mid-spiel, but I think it was the tone. It wasn’t loud or angry. But it’s a tone that’s been known to stop Clay mid-temper tantrum. It worked for Mike.

“I know this seems like a wonderful opportunity,” Jeremy said. “But are you certain it wouldn’t actually detract from the feature? If Jaime flees from an inn twenty miles from the set location, it’s clearly unrelated, and I would think it’s only going to dilute her reactions at the real house.”

Mike paused. “You have a point. How do I explain you leaving, though?”

“Don’t explain it,” Jeremy said. “There’s nothing wrong with a little mystery, particularly if you make it very clear that the inn did nothing to make her leave. Let people draw their own inferences.”

“Ah, that’s a good idea...”

“We’ll see you on set then.”

Jeremy left Mike standing there, thinking it through, and ushered me to his SUV.



We walked down the corridor to our new hotel room. I turned to say something to Jeremy and for a second, I forgot what. I just stared at him, that moment of “hot damn” that never seems to go away. I remember when we first got together, thinking, “Well, at least now I won’t be gaping at him like a love-struck teen.” Nope. Still was. Maybe always will be.

Jeremy was fifteen years older than me. With a werewolf’s slow aging, he doesn’t look it. Not that it matters. I think when he’s ninety, I’ll still be thinking “hot damn.” He’s good-looking, of course, not cover model material—thank God, had enough of those—but with the kind of face that catches your attention and holds it. Arresting. Dark eyes, dark hair, sharp cheekbones, sharp chin. A face more fox than wolf, which isn’t surprising. He’s also a kitsunegari, meaning he has Japanese kitsune—fox spirit—blood.

“Not exactly what you’re accustomed to,” Jeremy said, gesturing down the motel hall.

“I’ll live,” I said. “Amitiyville isn’t exactly booming with five-star hotels.”

We'd ended up in a Best Western or Days Inn or something like that. I hadn't paid much attention. We'd driven past a few mid-range chains before I chose one that seemed a little less run-down than its brethren.

"There was the Hollywood Motel in Farmingdale," I said. "Though it would have been a tough call, deciding between the Cheetah room and the Arabian room."

"Arabian," Jeremy said as he unlocked our door. "I'm not keen on cats."

I laughed and let him usher me in. "Well, the website did mention an exotic dancer room, too. Complete with stripper pole."

He paused in the open doorway. "Stripper pole?"

"And stage."

"How far did you say Farmingdale was?"

"Not far, but I think we'd better pretend it is. Considering I am officially in town..."

"*Jaime Vegas Checks into Stripper Room with Lover* isn't quite the headline you're looking for?"

"No, sorry. Especially since, by the time it got through the rumor mill, I'd have checked in with three guys, all half my age, and invited the rest of the motel to watch the show."

"Ah, well..." He pushed our bags aside and pulled me into the room. "I would defend your honor. In fact, I would go so far as to provide photographs proving that I was, indeed, the only person in the audience."

I laughed and put my arms around his waist. "That's very chivalrous of you."

"I would, however, for the sake of discretion, refrain from posting videos. Although, I've heard such things can make people quite famous, even if they lack any other discernible talents. For someone with your proven abilities, it could be quite a marketing coup."

“Twenty years ago maybe. I think my body’s a little past that.”

“Not unless it’s changed drastically since I saw you two weeks ago.” He slid his hands down my thighs and pushed the hem of my dress up to my hips, hands cupping my rear as he leaned over my shoulder. “Mmm, no, this half looks quite photo ready. As for the rest...”

One hand moved to unzip my dress. He tugged it off my shoulders and let it pool around my feet. His thumbs traced down my sides, sliding over my breasts before stopping to rest on my hips. Then, still holding me, he stepped back a bit for a better look.

“Definitely camera ready. And I have been told that my new phone takes excellent pictures.”

I laughed. “You are more than welcome to take photos anytime you want. Provided your phone is password locked and kept out of the reach of everyone at Stonehaven.”

“I just may take you up on that.”

“I hope you do.”

I slid from his grasp and circled around him, feeling his gaze on me as I walked across the room. I ran my fingers over the short post at the end of the bed.

“Not exactly a stripper pole,” I said. “And I don’t have much to strip.”

“Oh, you have enough. Those heels go very nicely with those stockings.”

I grinned over my shoulder. “I thought you’d approve.”

The heels were last year’s, but the rest of the “outfit” was new. It was a black-and-teal lace demi-bra, with matching garter and stockings and a very tiny pair of panties.

I reached up and pulled out the pins in my hair, letting it sweep down over my shoulders. Then I fingered the panties.



“These are supposed to go underneath the garter, but that means I have to take off everything. This way...” I plucked the side. “I can leave the rest on...if you’d like.”

I braced my knees on the bed and leaned over, shimmying out of the panties. Jeremy let out a soft growl and started toward me.

“Uh-uh,” I said. “Not yet.” I pulled the panties back up and reached one hand over to caress the bedknob. “I still need to figure out what I can do with this. Since we missed out on the stripper pole.” I moved closer, still rubbing it. “Umm, I don’t know. Any ideas...”

“I have plenty of ideas. None of them involve that bedpost.”

“Too bad.” I moved closer and rubbed the front of my panties against it. “Hmm, let’s see. What could I do...”

I lifted onto my tiptoes and straddled the post, then leaned forward, hands on top of the footboard, to give him the best view as I rubbed myself against the pole.

“Oh...Now that is a good...” I exhaled through my teeth. “Damn, I didn’t realize quite how much I missed you. That feels...” I shuddered. “Damn...”

I glanced back at him. He was watching intently, one hand gripping a chair against the wall.

“You can sit if you want,” I said. “Just relax and enjoy the show.”

“I am definitely enjoying. But I can’t help feeling a little jealous, too.”

“Hmm.”

I rolled onto the bed and popped the clasp on my bra. I slid it out from under me and flipped it across the room, then reclined on the pillows and slipped my hand between my legs, arching back and groaning.

“Better?” I asked.

“Same problem. While I can’t argue with the view...”

I eased to the edge of the bed and knelt on it, flipping my hair over my shoulder as I looked back at him.

“You’d prefer this one...?”

“That one will do nicely.” He undid his pants as he crossed the room, gaze fixed on me. “Thank you.”

“Oh, you’re very...” I gasped as he slid into me. “Very welcome.”

..... Seven

stretched out in bed, Jeremy warm against my back, sheets tangled around us. I idly pulled my knee up and fingered the protection rune tattooed on my ankle.

“Yes, it does appear to be defective,” Jeremy said. “The artist should give you your money back.”

I laughed softly and flipped over, curling up under his arm. “If it brought you to me in that basement, then it’s working just fine.”

“Actually, you left a scent trail.”

“Ah. Right. But if I hadn’t, you’d still have found me.”

“Perhaps. The tattoo, however, is only tangentially related to that.”

Both came from the same place—his kitsune blood—but they were separate powers. Powers he’d never comfortably rely on, having spent most of his life not knowing where they came from, only that he was different from other werewolves. Uncomfortably different.

He rose on his elbow and looked down at my foot.

“It works just fine,” I said. “The runes add protection; they don’t protect absolutely. Nothing can. Whatever I saw in the basement didn’t hurt me, just scared the crap out of me, and that only bothers me because it hasn’t happened in a very long time. I think I’m long past the point where a ghost can send me shrieking into

the night and then..." I shrugged. "It happens. It seems there's always something new lurking around the corner."

I glanced up at him as he settled back on the bed. "Did Elena say she'd have time to check the inn?"

Elena was a Pack werewolf, the Alpha-elect, to succeed when Jeremy stepped down. She was mated to his foster son, Clayton. Along with their five-year-old twins, they lived at Stonehaven with Jeremy.

Elena was a freelance journalist, with access to online media searches I didn't have. If there was a story on my dead girls, she'd have found it.

"She texted back while you were dozing," he said. "There's nothing."

Now it was my turn to rise, hair tickling as it fell over my shoulder. "Nothing?"

He pushed the hair back. "No murders at the inn. No hauntings at the inn. No crimes matching that description in Amityville or the surrounding area. Which means you were *not* seeing a residual."

"So I was hallucinating."

He met my gaze. "No, you were seeing ghosts. *Real* ghosts."

"But how? Why? What reason would ghosts have—"

He leaned down and cut me off with a kiss. "Questions for another time, though I strongly suspect I already know the answer."

"Which is?"

"They were doing what ghosts always do. Trying to make contact. With added drama to get your attention. They've piqued your interest. Now, when they come with their message, you'll be so curious that you'll listen."

That sounded good, but it left too much unexplained. Jeremy hadn't been there; he didn't know how real it seemed, trapped in

that room with their terror. Still, it was a possible explanation, one I'd accept for now.



I stood in the Amityville front yard looking up at the house. It really was a ringer for the famous one. I wondered how much of that was original and how much had been cosmetically altered. That may seem like a lot of wasted money, for a single episode, but it would still be a damned sight cheaper than the expenses incurred by a scripted show. Afterwards, they could likely sell it for a profit. All the creepstastic allure of living in the Amityville Horror home, without that icky tragedy.

I met the cast—the “real” folks who’d be joining us—briefly. Very briefly. As I was saying my hellos, Mike waved from the front stoop. It was time for my closeup. Only...not so close. I was about to detail that tragedy from the second-story porch. It was a tricky shot, but Mike had insisted.

So I was led through, my first time setting foot inside. It looked like a typical family home. Nothing the least bit spooky. That was, I suppose, the point. *Look at this house. So nice, so normal. Just like yours. But this house holds a secret. A dark, bloody secret—Oh, wait. Not this house. The one three miles away that looks just like it. Close enough.*

They set me up on the balcony as the cast and crew gathered below. An even bigger crowd—curious onlookers—waited beyond the security tape. I felt like I was about to deliver the Gettysburg address. Or start quoting Juliet. My Romeo was indeed below, off to the side, watching me, a faint smile on his lips. I returned it, then fixed on a proper look of gravitas.

“Many of us have heard the story of the house in Amityville,” I began, addressing the crowd. “How the horror truly began, on

an autumn night in 1974, when Ronald DeFeo Jr. murdered his entire family, urged on by voices no one else could hear. A year later, the Lutz family moved into what they thought would be their dream home. Instead, it turned out to be a nightmare few of us could imagine...”

Actually, “dream home” was a better description, if your dream includes exploiting tragedy for profit. Amityville was a hoax. Oh, sure, the Lutzs still claimed it was “mostly true,” but when they sued and were countersued, scrabbling for the profits, a judge decided, based on the evidence, that the book was a work of fiction. Maybe something did happen in that house, but there were no demon-pigs and secret Satanic rooms.

Of course, I was forbidden to mention that. Forbidden by contract. Also, by contract, I had refused to say anything to suggest I believed it. So the script was worded like a campfire tale. *They say that deep within that house, there is a room, painted red, not found on any blueprint...*

I said my spiel. Then I joined the crew on the lawn and it was Gregor’s turn. He’d been assigned the much less exciting task of telling other tales from Amityville’s past. Because we weren’t, you know, actually at *the* house, so we weren’t going to see *that* haunting. But who knew what other deep, dark secrets this sleepy New England town might hold...

No one. Because there weren’t any. Put haunting and Amityville together, and you got a certain Dutch Colonial home by the water. That was it. So Gregor’s script had to stretch. A lot. He mentioned a massacre of Native Americans in 1644 and a suicide cult in 1931. There were even Hollywood connections. Maurice Barrymore died in the Amityville Asylum and Jim Morrison’s Wiccan High Priestess wife, Patricia Kennealy-Morrison, grew up in the township. The researches had found another so-called Satanic connection—a

teen named Ricky Kasso, who'd held some kind of ceremony on the Amyville Horror house front lawn and later convinced friends to help him kill another teen as part of a ritual. Not surprisingly, Kasso was also an alumnus of the Amyville Asylum.

It should have seemed like a desperate attempt to find scandal in a quiet town. Yet Gregor managed to make it sound as if the Amyville region was a hotbed of horror. Part of it was just him, his bookish looks, his Russian accent, his slightly stilted diction, all giving the ludicrous script an air of academia.

I was making a mental note to congratulate Mike on choosing Gregor for the role—give credit where it's due—when Gregor said, "Yet there is one more tale, perhaps the most tragic, an untold story of Amyville: the disappearance of three young women, from three eras, connected only by the mystery of their vanishing. Or, perhaps, by their killer."

I glanced over my shoulder at Jeremy, staying off camera. He caught my eye and I caught the message.

Don't jump to conclusions. Relax. Listen to the story. Everything is all right.

Except it wasn't all right, because Gregor went on to tell the story of those three young women, one from 1924, one from 1952 and one from 1988. Clara Davis, the first girl, left a wedding reception and was never seen again. Polly Watson, the second girl, had been last spotted leaving a church dance with a young man. And Dawn Alvarez had disappeared while walking home from her job as a chambermaid.

And what had I seen in that basement room? A young woman from the Twenties in a formal dress, a girl from the Fifties in a party outfit and one from the Eighties in a maid's uniform.

I glanced back at Jeremy again. He stood poised, watching me. I waved for him to stay put. I didn't need to—he knew not to rush

to my side on camera unless I was convulsing on the ground. He nodded and texted me with, “I’ll have Elena look into it.”

Gregor continued, “These three young women all disappeared, never to be seen again. It would appear they are unconnected cases. How could they not be, spanning nearly seventy years? Yet it would seem there is indeed a connection, for after each, the local newspaper received a letter from a man claiming responsibility. Claiming to have killed these pretty girls. Claiming to have stabbed each one to death.”

I swallowed and struggled not to look at Jeremy again.

“Three murders. Decades apart. It could not possibly be the same killer. Yet all signs pointed exactly to this conclusion. Each letter provided details only the killer could know. How is this possible?”

Gregor paused and glanced surreptitiously to the side, where his script was displayed on a hidden screen. “That is what we hope to discover tomorrow. When we enter this house—the home of Polly Watson—the second young woman to vanish. We will enter this house, haunted by the spirits of these girls. We will speak to them. We will help them find peace. We will help them find their killer.”

..... Eight

When the cameras turned off, I tracked down Mike. He saw me coming and tried to evade, but I cornered him outside the makeup trailer. Well, actually, Jeremy cornered him, coming out the other side.

“I need to talk to you,” I said.

Mike lifted his hands. “I know, I know. You’re not happy with our cast of regular folks.”

“It’s a reality show that doesn’t even have a prize attached. You risk public humiliation for sub-SAG rates. Of course they’re stupid and self-centered. Who else would apply?”

“Well, actually, we did have some—”

“Strike that. Others may apply, but you’re sure as hell not going to cast them. For a haunted house show, you don’t want anyone who’ll stop worrying about their close-up long enough to notice the effects are all faked.”

“We are not going to fake...” He shook his head and waved us into the trailer.

“Can’t even finish that sentence, can you?”

He muttered under his breath. When we were inside, he shooed the one remaining makeup artist out, then collapsed on a chair and motioned for us to do the same. I took the one beside him; Jeremy opted for the one nearest the door.

“All right, so what *do* you want to talk about?” Mike asked.

“The girls we’re supposed to summon—”

He cringed. “Of course. Yes, murdered young women is a blatant ratings grab and feeds a disturbing cultural psycho-sexual interest. The beautiful victims, brutally murdered and violated. The stabbing only makes it worse, with the obvious sexual overtones. I knew you wouldn’t be happy. I remember the lecture I got after *Death*.”

It wasn’t a lecture. Just a forcefully stated opinion, when we’d met to celebrate the success of *Death of Innocence*. He’d lamented the fact that the victims were children. It helped the pity factor, but also hurt sales, turning off those who found children’s deaths too disturbing. If only they’d been young women...That would have sold much better. Particularly if they were young and attractive. That’s when he got the “forcefully stated opinion.”

A few years ago, I’d have kept my mouth shut. Hell, I’ve made a career out of using my femininity—and, yes, sexuality—to my advantage. But that doesn’t mean I’m not bothered by movie and television cameras lingering lovingly on half-naked, blood-spattered beautiful dead girls. There’s no law that says you can’t be a feminist and embrace your femininity. Or, if there is, I missed the memo.

So I let Mike blather on about how they were going to keep this tasteful, no graphic re-enactments of the alleged murders. When he was done, I said, “Good. And I’ll hold you to that. But it isn’t actually what I wanted to talk about.”

He paused, then cursed under his breath as he realized he may have sacrificed viewers, jumping the gun to placate his star. That dismay lasted about five seconds—as long as it probably took him to realize he’d only promised no re-enactments on the *show*. DVD extras were a whole other matter.

“I’ve checked all our correspondence on this show,” I said. “And there was no mention of these girls or their murders. There was certainly no suggestion that we were focusing on a specific crime connected to this house.”

“That’s the idea. You and Gregor knew nothing about the crimes until today, which means you had no time to prepare. Anything you say, then, will be an honest communication with their spirits.” He winked. “Or with your Internet connection in the next twelve hours.”

“Which brings me to point number two. Obviously I did my research on the house as soon as I got the address this morning. There was no mention of anything more than a domestic disturbance call in the Seventies. If Polly Watson was living there when she went missing, I’d have found out about it.”

“Er, well, she wasn’t actually living there at the time...”

“When did she live there?”

“The summer she was seventeen. She had some disagreements with her parents and went to stay with her aunt and uncle for a few weeks.”

I stifled the urge to comment. Of course, it was a ridiculous stretch, but it didn’t matter to me. Even if I’d been planning to contact the girl—which I’d never do mid-show anyway—she was no more likely to respond if I was in a place where she’d lived her entire life than if I used a place she’d spent a single summer. It doesn’t work like that.

“Gregor’s script said these girls vanished, never to be found. So what’s this about them being murdered? Some letter? I did a Google search after the taping and there was *nothing* online about that letter.”

He leaned back with a smug smile. “Because it’s a closely-guarded town secret. One that we are about to expose.”

“Uh-huh.” I beckoned for details.

He moved forward. “When we were planning the show, we were looking for some crime or scandal at any of the properties we were considering. We sent emails to local historians, reporters, bloggers. Finally, we got the Polly Watson link. That seemed the best we could do, so we bought the house, got things underway and then, a month ago, we get an anonymous tip from someone who used to work at the *Amityville Record*. He said a journalist there received a letter after each of those three girls went missing. A letter from their killer, confessing to the deed.”

“And what does the *Record* say?”

“It denies all knowledge of the letters. Threatens legal action if we accuse them on air.” He rolled his eyes. “Our lawyers are already on it. We just need to be careful what we say before we can prove a cover-up. Until then, the story is that we’ve been told someone at the paper received them—we don’t claim it went beyond that person.”

“What does our informant say?”

“Nothing. He sent copies of the letters and disappeared into cyberspace.”

“Maybe because he’s the one who received the letters. Or he’s a relative.”

Mike’s eyes gleamed. “You’re right. Driven by a conscience plagued with guilt—”

“Save it for the voice-over. Tell me more about the letters.”

As Gregor’s script said, they contained details about the victims only their killer could know—birthmarks, underwear and so on. A handwriting analyst confirmed all three were penned by the same person. Given the time span, that opened a whole lot of questions, none of which Mike could answer. So I got everything he did know and left.



We were walking from the trailer when a ghost dashed over. It was a middle-aged man dressed in modern garb, and I'd never have guessed he was a ghost if he hadn't run right through two set workers.

"Ms. Vegas," he said. "I need a message sent to my business partner."

I kept walking. Jeremy glanced over at the ghost. He'd say he was just responding to my reaction, however slight, and I'm sure that's part of it, but his kitsune blood gives him a few psychic powers, which I believe includes the ability to detect spirits. He can't see them or hear them, but he seems to know they're there.

"Necromancers do not appreciate being approached in public," Jeremy said, his voice conversational, as if chatting to me. "If you wish to speak to her, you'll need to contact Eve Levine."

"It's just a message. And it's urgent. He's going to sell my shares to my son, and that lazy good-for-nothing will ruin everything I built—"

I lifted a hand to silence him.

"You'll need to speak to Eve," Jeremy said.

"Bitch," the ghost snarled and stalked off.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed someone else had turned from a conversation and was gaping at us. I looked over. Gregor was staring at the spot where the ghost had been. He looked confused.

"Well, that's interesting," Jeremy murmured.

"He saw something," I said.

"Necromancer blood?" Jeremy said.

“It’s possible.” I paused. “Either way, we are co-hosting a show together and I haven’t said more than a few words to him. Do you mind if I ask him to join us for a drink?”

“Not at all.”



Gregor seemed pleased by the invitation. Relieved, too, as if he’d been unsure of his welcome. It wasn’t his fault I’d been duped. He wasn’t Bradford Grady and he wasn’t Angelique. I shouldn’t shut him out because of what happened to them.

As for whether Gregor had necromancer blood, it was hard to tell. He’d seemed to react to the ghost earlier. It’s also possible that I’d reacted to it myself, and he’d been looking confused about that. He didn’t mention it and there was no easy way to broach the subject.

There was no easy way to broach the subject of his “gift” either. You’d think there would be. After all, we’re professional spiritualists. I should be able to say, “So, how did you start seeing ghosts?” But it’s a tricky topic, because most spiritualists *don’t* see them. Of course, no one admits that openly. Some wouldn’t even confess it to their therapist. Others will do a little “nudge, nudge, wink, wink” with colleagues. There are some, though, who genuinely believe they have “the sight.” And they might.

I know a few spiritualists who seem to have necromancer blood. That’s still no guarantee of actual powers, and even then, it comes in varying degrees, from “I catch glimpses” to “I hear voices” to my full-on “I see dead people.” Most real necromancers know what they are, from their families, and wouldn’t dream of entering the business professionally. That’s just crazy...as I’ve heard many, many times.

Then there are the people who are, well, crazy. Or, more likely, had a breakdown at some point and saw ghosts. Non-supernaturals can detect spirits when the barrier between reality and fantasy is thin, during a mental break or in early childhood. In those cases, I think spiritualists honestly did see the dead once and never forgot that or stopped believing they had the power, lying dormant within them.

As for figuring out which type Gregor was, it wasn't as hard to get him on that subject as I feared. He started it, asking me point-blank about my own powers, when they started and so on, as if it was a normal topic of conversation.

I gave him my usual story, about first spotting a ghost when I was twelve. It's a funny little anecdote, one that suits my persona—more “stumbling over my powers” than having the finger of God show me the way. It's mostly true, even. Embellished, of course, particularly the “stumbling” part. I come from a family where most inherit the power. My father killed himself when I was little, but I was close to my paternal grandmother, who'd prepared me for the day when I might start seeing people who weren't there.

That doesn't mean it was a breeze. There's nothing that can truly prepare you for a lifetime of pleading and demanding ghosts. Most of my tales were nowhere near as funny as the one I told. But the horror stories are mine; the world gets the slapstick version.

Once I'd told my backstory to Gregor, it left an obvious opening for me to ask his, which wasn't nearly so cheery.

“My wife and I lost a child,” he said. “Our oldest daughter. She was three. She became very ill and did not recover.”

Jeremy and I offered sincere regrets for his loss, which he accepted with a nod, before continuing.

“After Liliya passed it was...not a good time for me. I was with her when she became ill. I worked from our apartment, as a tutor.

My wife taught at a school. So I was with Liliya and I was the one who did not think her illness was serious. I told my wife it was just a childhood ailment. When it became more..." He fingered the side of his glass. "The doctors said it would not have made a difference if she was brought to them sooner, but I did not believe that. I blamed myself. That is when I started to see ghosts."

"Her ghost," I murmured.

"No, that is what was odd. I did not see her. I saw others. Glimpses, mostly. Never her. I spoke of it to no one. I knew what they would say. 'Gregor is mad with grief.' I tried to make the ghosts go away. When they would not, I went to doctors. It did not help. They said I was punishing myself. I was imagining other ghosts to tell myself I was not worthy of seeing my Liliya."

He drained his drink, then shook his head. "That is the start of a very long story. It was five years ago that my daughter died. It is only a year ago that I began to offer my help to others who are grieving. In the middle, I told my wife and she was the one who said I was not going mad, not imagining it. She asked me to stop seeing the doctors and instead speak to others like me, like you. To help understand. So I did and now..." He spread his hands. "I am here."

..... Nine

By the time we returned from drinks, I had emails from Elena with links and attachments, along with a note to call her to discuss it. The kids hadn't gone to bed easily, so she and Clay were still up.

I checked a few of the links, then called before they headed off to bed. Elena ran me through the cases. In the background, I could hear the faint pop of the fire and the occasional clink of a glass or murmur of Clay's voice as he commented on something. I could picture them, on the sofa in the study, Clay sitting at one end, reading journals or research books, Elena stretched out, her back against him, fingers tapping on her laptop. It was a scene I'd witnessed many times on my visits to Stonehaven.

Elena hadn't found much more to the cases than I'd heard. Three young women had vanished from Amityville over the years. They'd been going someplace and they never arrived and no one ever saw them again. No notes. No witnesses. Nothing.

She did find photos. Were they the girls I'd seen? That should be an easy answer. But the pictures were old newspaper shots, whatever the family could grab at the time, rendered into black and white. They certainly looked like the same girls.

All three were over eighteen, with seemingly good family relationships and solid jobs. So they didn't appear to be teen runaways.

There were no angry ex-boyfriends or wannabe boyfriends. The second girl, Polly Watson, had been seen leaving her dance with a guy, but he was later found and exonerated. As for where Polly had gone...that's where the connection between the girls and my ghosts fell into place.

Polly hadn't left with a "boy." She'd left with a man—a thirty-five-year-old chaperone at the dance. He said he was driving her home, but the investigation found they'd made a pitstop at the inn where I'd seen her ghost. He'd admitted they'd stopped there, but only because she needed to use "the facilities." Which didn't explain the witnesses who'd heard them arguing because Polly changed her mind about getting a room. They fought. She took off. She was never seen again. Her "date" was questioned, but it seems that after the fight, he'd gone straight to the inn's lounge, gotten plastered and passed out. A half-dozen witnesses attested to it.

That was Polly's connection to the inn. The other two girls had one, too. The first, Clara Davis, had been attending a wedding reception in a rival inn, a street away, now long gone. The third, Dawn Alvarez, had worked as a chambermaid in the inn, and had vanished on her way home.

Little had been made of the connection. Given the decades between the disappearances, that isn't surprising. None of the three had actually been *at* the inn when they vanished. Maybe money changed hands to ensure the connection was left out of media accounts. People might like to stay in a haunted inn, but "resident serial killer" really doesn't have the same marketing hook.

"Which is why the cases didn't turn up the first time I searched," Elena said. "There aren't many references to the inn and, when there is, it's usually just called a 'local inn.'"

"Plus they aren't crimes," I said. "Just disappearances. I'd originally asked you to look for murders."

She made a noise in her throat, as if this didn't excuse the oversight. "Multiple missing young women is usually the first sign of a serial killer at work. Or a man-killing mutt."

"Could that be what we have? That would explain the time frame. Werewolves live longer."

I glanced back at Jeremy for his input. He was on the bed but didn't hear me. He was too busy sketching. Which meant he was worried. He doesn't only sketch when he's stressed—that would be a hard way for an artist to make a living—but if he is, it settles his mind. It also takes him someplace not quite reachable, which is why he missed the werewolf comment.

I turned my attention back to Elena as she said, "It's possible. A werewolf killer would explain the lack of bodies—he took them away to eat. But I can't recall ever seeing a mutt kill with a knife. It wouldn't satisfy the hunting instinct. They're more...hands on. And a mutt sure as hell wouldn't be sending notes to the papers. Again, that's classic serial killer."

"So what do you make of the notes?"

She paused. Clay rumbled something in the background.

"What's his verdict?" I asked.

"He thinks they're fakes. We only have one anonymous tipster claiming any knowledge of them, so that makes him suspicious."

"You disagree?"

Another pause. "I would, if I could blame the TV studio. Those ghosts weren't fake though, which makes it hard to reconcile with phony notes."

"How does Clay reconcile it?"

"He doesn't." A low rumble and Elena's voice faded as she moved the phone to speak to him. "Well, you don't. You just say they're obviously fake."

He said something, again too low for me to hear.

“Yeah, yeah,” Elena said. “Get back to us when you have an actual theory.”

“Do *you* have a theory?” I asked.

“Nothing but the obvious. The killer sends the note. The guy who gets it is a young reporter, who decides it’s a crank and files it away. Second note comes thirty years later, and he does an ‘oh, shit.’ He can hand over both notes and take his lumps. Or he can just hide the second. He picks option B. The third note comes thirty years later again, which means our guy is long retired. Still alive? Maybe. He gets it, hides it, and after his death a family member finds it. When the call goes out for stories on Amityville, whoever has the letters decides it’s time to bring them out, maybe make some cash.”

Clay muttered something.

She spoke to him again. “Like I said, get back to us when you have a better theory. Until then—”

A clatter, phone falling. Elena retrieved it.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Flying pillow?”

“Yeah. I’ll pay him back later.” The sound of footsteps, as if she was crossing the room. A creak as she settled into Jeremy’s chair. “That’s all I’ve got. As for the killer, you have a sixty-year span between three murders. Not impossible if he started young and ended old, but that would be unusual. Real-world explanation? Father-son team, son faking the handwriting or getting Pops to write the last one. Supernatural explanation? Lots of possibilities there, none of them very plausible.”

“Vampires,” Clay said, raising his voice loud enough to be heard this time.

Elena made a rude noise in response.

“Could be,” Clay said. “Explains the timeline.”

“But not the stabbing. Beyond that? Demons, spirits, magic... the list goes on.”

It did. That was the problem.



When I got off the phone, Jeremy was still engrossed in his sketch. I watched him off to the side, so he wouldn't notice. I've dated plenty of guys who, if they caught me looking, would have flexed and primed like a cover model. Jeremy was not one of them. He isn't particularly shy; he's just not good with direct attention.

He'd started undressing for bed. His shirt was off. His pants were mostly off, still on one leg, hanging over the edge of the bed, as if he'd been in the midst of removing them when he had an idea for a sketch. He was lying on the covers, which meant I had a very nice view of a very nice body. There's nothing quite like werewolves for drool-worthy physiques. Even if, like Jeremy, they don't work out beyond their weekly run on four legs, they have the kind of metabolism for which I'd seriously consider sacrificing virgins. Jeremy has a runner's body, hard and lean and definitely worth some drool.

I slipped out of my dress, then crawled into bed on his other side, being careful not to disturb him. He seemed to have frozen there, only the scratch of his pencil giving him away.

I resisted the urge to reach up and brush the hair from his neck. There wasn't much to brush anyway. Normally haircuts are one of those annoying necessities Jeremy skips as long as possible, but he'd gotten it done for my shoot. He always did, since a reporter once noticed him at one of my shows and used “bohemian” in her description. He decided that he was getting a little old for the shaggy look. I disagree. I love it when his hair gets

a little long, dark locks threaded with silver, hanging boyishly in his eyes and over his collar. Sexy as hell. But if it makes him self-conscious on a shoot, I keep my mouth shut and wait for it to grow out again.

The stylist—or, more likely, the local barber—had left a bit in the back, just a small lock that curled up, as if trying to hide. I wanted so badly to tug it out. But I kept still, resting there, until the pencil scratches stopped. He lifted his head and looked around, then craned over his shoulder to see me.

“When did you finish with...?” He sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I shifted up and leaned over him. “Can I see?”

He handed me the sketchbook without hesitation. I remember shortly after I met him, catching him drawing and asking to see it. He’d deflected and slid the book back into his bag before I could ask again. I’d been hurt by that. I’d come to realize, though, that I’d been rude to ask—it was a work-in-progress. He shared those raw beginnings only with his Pack, only if they expressed an interest.

This new sketch was of the twins, in a forest, watching a hole in a hillside. Logan lay stretched on his stomach in the long grass. Kate was perched over it, balanced precariously as she bent to look upside-down into the hole.

I smiled. “It’s adorable. Even if we know why they’re really looking in there. Sussing out a potential meal.”

“Actually, potential predatory competition. It’s a foxhole.”

I noticed the faintest outline of a snout deep in the dark hollow. “Seriously?”

“Yes. They found it when we were hiking upstate. A fox kit was in there. Cowering in terror, I think.”

I laughed. That only made the picture even more ironic. Kitsune are fox spirits. I imagine there were times, growing up

surrounded by boisterous werewolves, when Jeremy felt like that fox kit, shrinking back into his hole before he got trampled.

The twins knew Jeremy and their parents were werewolves. Elena and Clay decided to tell them last winter when it became obvious Kate and Logan weren't going to make it to teen-hood before realizing their family wasn't quite like the other kids'.

Were they werewolves themselves? It was hard to say. Unlike Jeremy, Clay and Elena were both bitten, not hereditary werewolves. But having two werewolf parents wasn't exactly normal either, and it was clear the kids had inherited at least some secondary characteristics. Even before they knew, they'd have been watching that foxhole, not quite sure why they found it so fascinating.

"You will do a painting of it, right?" I said as I scooted back.

"I will."

"Personal or for sale?"

"I'd say personal, but Kate has started asking why I don't sell any of her and Logan. I think she's starting to feel slighted."

"I can see that."

"Then you'll have to talk to her, because Mom and Dad cannot fathom why she'd ever want her picture hanging in a gallery." He picked up the sketch. "But this would be a good one. It doesn't show their faces, which is a must if I sell it."

"It'll amuse Elena, I'm sure. An adorable painting of her innocent little naturalists."

He smiled. "Yes, she'll like that. Perhaps I'll use it for shows, put an exorbitant price on it, so it will never sell."

"Oh, it will, and Kate will be thrilled that she's worth so much."

"She will." He put the sketchbook on the table. "Now, if we're done talking about the children..."

“You’re exhausted and want to sleep.”

His hand snaked over my waist, pulling me closer. “Not exactly.”

“Good.”

I slid into his arms.

..... Ten

I slept until almost noon. Considering I'd be up all night shooting the show, that was perfectly reasonable, but I'm not an early riser at the best of times. This just gave me a good excuse.

Jeremy was reading when I woke. He'd been an early riser even before there were little ones in his house. Today he'd already gotten up, quietly dressed, slipped out and grabbed breakfast before settling in to read.

I placed a quick call before my shower.

"Cortez Winterbourne Investigations," a voice sang. "When dead loved ones twitch, it's time for a witch."

"One of these days, you're going to do that accidentally. To someone who really shouldn't know what you guys investigate."

Savannah made a rude noise. She was the receptionist at the agency where her former guardians—Lucas Cortez and Paige Winterbourne—worked. Savannah is Eve's twenty-one-year-old daughter. We met a couple of years after her mom died, when I'd helped Lucas and Paige on a case. That's how I met Eve and got my guardian angel.

"So, what's up?" she said.

"I had a weird experience that I'd like Paige to cross-reference in the files."

“Weird? Huh. Let me guess. You’ve managed to go several years now without being kidnapped, and you suspect it’s a sign of the apocalypse.”

“Hey, you’ve tied my record.”

“No, I believe I’m still one kidnapping behind. So what’s so weird?”

I told her.

“Huh. You know who you should ask about that? The necromancer council delegate. She’s the expert. I’m sure she’d know... Oh, wait.”

“Do you still want that delegate to take you shopping in Paris this fall? I could ask Elena to take my place. You know she loves fashion almost as much as she loves shopping.”

“No need for threats. I’ll get on this right away.”

“Thank you.”



When I came out of the shower, there was a fresh, steaming cup of coffee waiting. Jeremy was at the tiny desk, on Skype with the twins. I got him to tilt the screen so I wasn’t flashing five-year-olds as I dressed. Once I was decent, I sat on the bed behind him so I could talk to the kids.

In public, Jeremy usually refers to the twins as his grandchildren. That’s easiest, though it does lead to some confusion from those who are quite certain he doesn’t look old enough to have them. To the kids, he’s just Jeremy. More parent than grandparent, a part of their everyday life, just as likely as Elena and Clay to be fixing their breakfast or driving them to school.

What does that make me? I’m not sure. When I’m there, I’m part of the family circle. When I’m not, I’ll talk to them a few times

a week. Maybe I'm like an aunt, maybe a grandmother. Maybe, as with Jeremy, the label isn't important. What matters is that I am *something* to them, more than the family friends who pass in and out of their days.

I like that. It fills something in my life. I won't say it fills a maternal hole, because I'm not sure I ever had one. I suppose, if we wanted, Jeremy and I could still have children, but the subject has never come up because it's moot, really, for both of us. We're past that stage in our lives and we're okay with that.

I don't think I miss not having children. If I'd had a child and resented that child for hampering my career, then I'd be no better than my own mother. I would never inflict that childhood on anyone. So I have the twins now, and they fill that gap, whatever it is.



After the call, we got ready and headed out for lunch, then to the set. It was still hours until showtime, but there were plenty of taped bits that needed to be done, so they could be spliced in through the show. For me, that consisted mostly of relaying past ghostly encounters, which they could insert when the action on screen was underwhelming.

The afternoon and early evening sped by. Finally, it was time to head into the house for a few last-minute things before the cameras rolled. They wouldn't film us actually entering. That had been done last night, a staged clip of us meeting for the first time, then streaming into the dark house.

I left Jeremy at one of the trailers, where he'd watch the taping. Naturally, I'd told him he didn't need to stay. Go have a nice dinner. Return to the motel. Read, sketch, relax. At the very least, he

didn't need to stay all night. He would, of course, no matter how boring it got.

Gregor and I headed to the house together. We were talking about a case he'd had in Russia, where he kept seeing a ghost who wouldn't make contact. I gave him some advice. It was honest advice, more like I'd give to a fellow necromancer than a fellow spiritualist. I still wasn't sure if he was the real deal, but he was earnest and sincere enough, and that prodded me to be the same in return.

"Hey!" someone called as we climbed the steps. "You can't go in there. Cast only."

A blond girl was coming up behind us. I recognized her as one of the "ordinary folks" who'd be joining us.

"Melinda, right?" I said with a big smile. "We met yesterday. I'm Jaime."

"You can't go in there, Janey. It's a closed set."

"I'm one of the cast. Jaime Vegas."

She stared vacantly at me.

"I'm a spiritualist," I said. "I contact the dead. We met last night." I waved to the side of the house. "Remember, I was up on that balcony?"

"Were you the one who talked about the dead girls?"

"No," Gregor said. "That was me."

She still looked confused.

"It's okay," I said. "We're part of the show."

I turned and climbed the steps. Gregor held the door for me.

"Hey, what about him?" Melinda called. "No one told me we could bring a date."

She stalked off to speak to someone about that oversight. Gregor stared after her.

"I do not understand," he said.

"Don't even try. Just work with it."



I won't mock poor Melinda for not remembering me. I can't, considering that I'm not even sure I was talking to Melinda. Apparently, we had identical twins in our cast. I'd probably been introduced to them separately and never figured out they were two people. So, yes, I can't mock Melinda. Or Belinda, as the case may be.

We went inside and chatted with the parapsychology guys. I was supposed to explain their equipment in a few pre-taped clips. I was running through my notes with them when the cast—the regular folks—filed in.

Becky had stopped by earlier and taken Gregor. He'd be tapping the bits about Cotard's and "throwing to" the victims' families. Sadly, it was hard to remember this was a charity event at all. I'd taped shout-outs to the victims and families, entreating viewers to make donations, and those would be added in with Gregor's pieces, but from where we stood, there was no sign of the charity angle. Although, given the nature of the syndrome, I should probably be happy—I shudder to think of how Mike would have incorporated it into the show.

"All right," Becky said, walking into the now-crowded parlor. "Jaime? Let's get you upstairs. We'll start with the EVP equipment."

"What's she doing?" asked Melinda—or Belinda.

They wore identical pink sweatsuits and had their blond hair pulled back in ponytails. If they weren't wearing a half-inch of makeup, I'd have thought they were ready to go jogging. There was no way to tell them apart. If I had to address one, I'd mumble the name.

"She'll be taping segments explaining how the equipment works," Becky said. "We can splice those in at the appropriate times, so the action on camera is otherwise seamless."

B/Melinda just stared at her.

A girl to my left sighed. It was Rory, the token Goth chick, a tiny girl with a shock of blue and black hair, wearing a tight black Poe tee. “Imagine the machine starts blipping because there’s a ghost. Are you going to stop screaming and running away so Jaime can tell us what the machine does?”

“You mean she gets extra screen time?” the other twin squawked.

“Um, yeah. ‘Cause she’s the star.”

“What?” Wade, the token jock, woke up from a standing nap. “Who’s the star?”

“Why can’t we do it?” the twins asked.

“Can either of you even spell EVP?”

“Why do we need to spell it? We can just say it.”

Cameron, the token geek, snickered.

“Maybe we should get one of the cast to help me,” I said. “That way I’m explaining to a person, not the camera.” I turned to Rory. “You know what an EVP is, I take it?”

“Electronic Voice Phenomena. It occurs when white noise, such as static or interference, sounds like a voice. Parapsychologists study the possibility that it’s the spirit world trying to communicate.”

“Show-off,” B/Melinda muttered.

Becky waved for us both to come along. When we reached the foot of the stairs, Rory said, “We should invite one of the guys, too, so it doesn’t look as if only the girls need explanations. I’d suggest Ricardo. He’s very pretty. And he barely knows any English, so he won’t say anything dumb.”

“He doesn’t speak English?” I said.

“The networks were getting flak for only picking English speakers for reality shows. Apparently, it’s better to have

non-English speakers standing there, lost and confused, looking like idiots.”

“I see.”

“At least he’s pretty.”

I turned to Becky. “Get someone to grab Ricardo.”

..... Eleven

The final pre-show step was splitting the cast into two groups, one to be led by me, the other by Gregor. It was supposed to be a random draw, but I'd texted my picks to Mike, who'd asked for them. Another concession to keeping his star happy.

I chose Rory, Cameron and Ricardo. Yes, Ricardo was pretty. Or I suppose he was, but I've reached that age where I see a hot twenty-year-old and a mental barrier leaps up in my brain, substituting *cute* for *hot*. As Rory said, though, he didn't speak much English and seemed content to follow us around, listening intently. Kind of like a puppy. A cute puppy.

Cameron was a student at MIT, which gave him his token geek status. He didn't know much about ghost-hunting, but he obviously had a brain, and he was as quiet as Ricardo, so he seemed a safe choice.

Rory had pulled off the science clips with aplomb and seemed shockingly normal for someone who'd sign up for a reality show. Yes, I suppose it's ironic that the Goth girl was the most normal one of the bunch, but in my experience, they often are, which just might suggest that my *normal* is a little skewed.

I did feel kind of bad leaving Gregor with the twins and the jock, whose combined IQ probably didn't hit triple digits. But I

figured if they asked stupid questions, he could always fake a language barrier and ignore them.

It wasn't yet dark when the show began. It would have been smarter to tape in the winter, when night stretches longer, so they'd get more footage. That's why they'd pre-taped us meeting and entering the house last night. Now, though it wasn't yet dark, they'd have us start in the basement and the attic, with the windows blocked out and we could pretend the sun wasn't shining.

The twins had a little trouble with that concept. "But it's still light out," they wailed. "Ghosts won't come out when it's light."

Gregor made the mistake of trying to explain that real ghosts don't care if it's day or night. That only made them start grumbling that he must not be a real ghost whisperer, if he didn't know how spirits worked. Which made me feel even worse about pawning them off on him. But not enough to offer to take them myself.

My team got the basement.

"Good," Cameron said as we headed toward the stairs. "The attic is bound to be dusty and I have asthma."

"Of course you do," Rory muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cameron said.

"Only that I really wish they'd make their tokens a little less token." She plucked at her shirt. "I don't even like Poe. Dude was a druggie boozier who married his thirteen-year-old cousin. I came dressed in a Scooby-Doo T-shirt, but they thought that was too cute for Goth Girl."

"Well, I do have asthma," Cameron said. "These glasses aren't prescription, though. They gave them to me."

"I rest my case." She looked back at Ricardo. "If you do speak English, go ahead. We'll just keep it off camera."

"¿Cómo dice?" he said.

She sighed and looked at me. "It was worth a shot."



Frank, our cameraman, waited downstairs to film our descent into the gloomy, musty basement. With him was Sal, our assigned crew guy. As we went down, I could see signs that it hadn't been so gloomy or so musty before they'd gotten to it. Judging by the fine scattering of drywall dust, it'd been a nicely finished basement. Reverse renovation. Because a basement with a big-screen TV and a pool table just isn't all that chilling. Unless you add teenage boys and a full liquor cabinet.

They'd gotten rid of most of the lighting, too, leaving us sickly yellow bulbs with dangling pull cords. I didn't even know they made those anymore. Quite impressive, really. It did add to the atmosphere. Even Rory shivered a little.

Ricardo pulled a light cord for us. It only made things worse, bringing the shadows to life. Then the light flickered and, with a pop, went out.

"Okay, that's not a little creepy," Cameron muttered.

Rory opened her mouth, doubtless to say they'd rigged it. My look silenced her. I nodded, though. Yes, it was rigged, but pointing that out would only get her on the fast boat off the island.

"It's rumored this is where the killer brought his victims," I said, shining my flashlight around the empty room. "Into the basement. Through one of those doors." I pointed each out with my beam.

Yes, *it was a basement*, I thought. *But not this one.*

I mentally flashed back to the inn. To that room. The girl racing in. The blood. Her screams. Her pleas. The door slamming. The voice behind me.

Run.



“Ms. Vegas?” Cameron said.

I found a smile. “Sorry. I was just thinking about those girls. The tragedy of their passing. I hope we’ll be able to make contact tonight and assure ourselves they’re safe and happy in—”

A scream cut me short. Cameron jumped back into the wall. I followed the noise overhead, where it had now been joined by the thump of running footsteps.

“Already?” Rory muttered.

I motioned for her to keep it under her breath. The cameras were still running.

I started up the stairs. The door at the top flew open and Wade thundered down, the twins behind him.

“He saw something,” Wade said. “That ghost dude. He saw something in the attic.”

“It was right there,” one of the twins said. “That—” She looked at her companions. “That...whatever it was. Right there. With us.”

I glanced up to see Gregor coming down.

“It was nothing,” he said. “I did not mean to startle them. I thought I saw someone, but I was mistaken.”

“You talked to it, dude,” Wade said. “You, like, had a whole conversation with thin air.”

“No,” Gregor said carefully. “I heard a creak. I saw a flicker. I believed it was one of the crew. I said, ‘Yes?’ I turned. I was mistaken, and I apologized for that mistake.” He looked to me for help.

I laughed softly. “Okay, I think we’re all just a little nervous. This place is definitely creepy.” I cast an apprehensive look around for the cameras. “Maybe we should stick together for now. We’ll explore the basement.”

I shone my weak flashlight beam toward the doors. “As I was saying, it’s rumored that the killer brought the girls down to one of these rooms. We’re going to check each one tonight. Later, we’ll

bring in the equipment. For now, though, we simply want to open ourselves up to the spirit world, let the girls know, if they are here, that we mean them no harm. Clear your mind and radiate peace and calm. Can we all do that?"

They all nodded. Rory arched her brows.

"Work with me," I mouthed off camera.

She sighed.



There was nothing in the basement. Not surprising, since I'd conducted a little ritual out back earlier, warning any spirit bystanders that if they bugged me during the taping, they'd be on my blacklist. And on Eve's track-you-down-and-kick-your-ass list, which was much worse. I'd noticed a few outside already, hanging around. I assured them that, post-filming, I'd give them an hour of my time, but they'd better make sure other ghosts didn't join the watch, or I'd never have time to hear them all. That was all the incentive they needed to play spook security for me. So, my haunted house was ghost free. Just the way I like them.

I timed it so we'd come upstairs after the sun had dropped. That gave us a few good shots of "kids being spooked by their own reflections in the darkened windows." Most of it came from the twins. Even after we explained what they were seeing, they'd shriek with every flicker. Finally, Becky stopped the taping and had the crew close the blinds.

Becky wanted us to split up again. Eight people had been fine in the basement, where they'd followed me about like a tour group. Up here, we were all just crowded into small rooms, jostling for elbow space.

“I would suggest that Jaime take her group to the attic,” Gregor said. “I was unable to make contact there. I am hoping she will be more fortunate. We will go back to the basement.”

“We’ve already seen the basement,” Wade said.

“It’s boring,” one of the twins said.

“And dirty,” her sister added with a shudder.

“Gregor’s right,” Becky said. “Let’s mix things up.”

I stepped toward Gregor. “Maybe check out that front corner room again. The one with the old carpet rolled in the corner. I felt something in there. A sadness.” I lowered my voice to a stage whisper. “I didn’t want to spook the kids, but I thought I saw spots on the carpet. They could be...” I dropped my voice a little more. “Bloodstains.”

“Blood?” Wade perked up. He looked at Gregor. “She’s right. That room did have a vibe.”

Gregor smiled conspiratorially at me. “I think you are right. I felt something myself, but I did not want to startle anyone again.” He turned to the others. “All right. We will return to the basement. If those young women were murdered in this house, we will find the place and put their spirits to rest.”

As they trooped off, Becky said, “You guys? Attic.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I shuttled my troops from the room, then slipped back to Becky. “Um, Gregor has the script for the attic. What’s the story?”

“Beats me. Wing it.”

..... Twelve

It was a walk-up attic, one that had, at some point, been finished into a third floor. The current owners had let it revert to storage, mostly stuffed into one room now for the taping. Following Becky's instructions, the kids, Sal, Frank and I headed through the first door, into the room she'd deemed "most attic-like." In other words, it was claustrophobic and dark, just bare walls, no dormer window, with a second door on the other side, leading to another room.

"Okay," I said as we stepped into our room. "We've tried the lights, but they still don't work. Gregor said they came on for a few seconds, then went out."

"Just like the basement," Rory said.

"Yes. We'll try not to read anything into that. These old places have electrical—"

A light in the next room flicked on.

"I think someone heard you," Cameron said. He laughed, but there was a nervous edge to it.

"Well," I said. "As long as that light's working, we might as well move into—"

The light turned off. I motioned to Sal to tell Becky to cut the theatrics. It was too obvious.

“Seems we aren’t welcome in that room after all,” I said. “Let’s go this way then.” I started toward the next doorway. “It’s rumored that—”

The other light turned on again. I shot an off-camera glare at Sal, who motioned that it wasn’t the crew doing it. Right. That’s the problem with these shows. Because I’m also part of the cast, they’re hoping to get a few startles out of me, too, so they sure as hell aren’t going to admit when the effects are staged. Best to just work with it, as I’d told Rory.

“Is that light a message from the spirits?” I said, looking up. “Telling me they’d like me in that room?”

No answer.

“Okay, but if the light goes off again, we stay out. No one likes a tease.”

Cameron gave a nervous giggle.

“We’ll move in there,” I said. “But be aware that if this is a manifestation, it may not be a friendly one. As I’ve been trying to say—”

“Run,” a voice whispered behind me.

I jumped, stumbling in my heels. Ricardo leaped forward to catch me.

“Okay?” he said.

“I just...” I took a deep breath. “I think I’m spooking myself.” I managed a smile. “Which is really not the point.”

“At least we didn’t all run screaming downstairs like *some* people,” Rory said.

I motioned Frank to cut the camera. Once it was off, I took a deep breath and rubbed my arms. The boys watched me, looking concerned. Rory’s gaze bore into me, her expression guarded.

“You okay?” she said. “Or is this part of the show?”

Cameron snapped, “If it was part of the show, the cameras would still be rolling.”

“I just got spooked,” I said. “It happens, even to spiritualists.”

I wanted to take a moment. Figure out whether I’d really heard that voice. But the cast and crew were waiting with growing impatience.

“Roll on,” I said.

When the camera was filming, I started toward the lit room. “It is rumored that the man who murdered Clara, Polly and Dawn has joined them in the spirit world, and he departed from this very attic. After killing Dawn, he came up here and hanged himself from the rafters. Perhaps...” I stepped into the lit room and motioned up. “These very rafters.”

It was all bullshit, of course. But Becky *had* told me to wing it.

“The family who lived in this house never realized they had a dead monster in their attic. Years later, it’s said that someone working on the house found his mummified remains, lying on the floor, rope still around his neck. The worker raced out and called for help, but when he returned with his supervisor, the body was gone. Worried that they’d be implicated in murder, they didn’t notify the homeowners or the authorities. But they told someone. Maybe a friend, maybe a spouse. And so the story was born. But without a body, it remains just that. A story.”

As stories went, this one straddled the border between ridiculous and ludicrous. I’m a performer, not a writer. As long as I framed it as rumor, though, I’d spare the studio from lawsuits, which was really all that mattered. So I blathered on about the tormented and demented killer, whose spirit was eternally trapped here. Or so I’d heard.

“If it’s true, then what we have here is a very strange and very dangerous situation,” I said. “In the basement, the ghosts of

the victims, searching for peace. In the attic, the spirit of their killer. Searching for mercy? For forgiveness? Or endlessly hunting for his victims—”

The door slammed shut. Everyone jumped.

“Th-that’s not funny,” Cameron said, his voice wavering. “Who’s out there?”

“Um, no one,” Frank said. “There was no one outside the—”

Another slam. Then another. Two more in quick succession. In the basement, one of the twins started to scream.

“What the hell?” Rory crossed the room and yanked on the door. It didn’t budge.

Frank laughed nervously. “Well, you kids wanted a haunted house.”

Rory strode to him. “Bullshit. You say no one was at the door? Show me the tape.”

She seemed startled when he lifted the camera without argument. Cameron and Ricardo edged in to watch, along with Sal, who’d been standing off-camera.

I walked to the door and tried the handle. No luck. I tried the other one, across the room. It had been closed when we came in. Closed and locked, as I now discovered.

I glanced at the others. They were watching the tape, saying “Look!” and “Seriously?” and “Play that again,” and I knew what they were seeing. A door slamming with no one behind it.

“Must be a draft,” Rory said. “Old houses are full of them.”

“A draft slammed *all* the doors?” Frank said.

Now, both twins were screaming in the basement.

“They must be locked in, too,” Frank said.

By this point, I was pretty sure I heard Wade’s screams joining the girls’. My team, though, stayed calm. Frank seemed the most panicked. Ricardo just looked confused. Both Sal and Rory were

at the door, trying it, muttering between themselves that it was a trick, it had to be.

“It is...ghost?” Ricardo said finally, his accent thick.

“No,” Rory said. “It’s a house built on SFX. Flickering lights? Fine. But locking doors?” She took out her cell. “That violates my civil liberties. I didn’t sign anything that lets them do that.”

She hit speed-dial, then lifted the phone to her ear. After a moment, she pulled it down, frowning, and looked at the screen. I knew what she’d see, but just stood there, blank-faced, bracing.

“Motherfucker! They’re blocking the cell signal.”

The others checked their cells. I did, too, for show, but I knew it was blocked. I glanced slowly around the room.

Ghosts can’t block a cell signal, Jaime. You know they can’t.

And they shouldn’t be able to slam and lock doors. But they had. At the inn and now here.

“Um, our phones have been blocked since we got here,” Cameron said. “I checked. Our contracts say no tweeting or anything, and they’re obviously using a blocker to be sure.”

I exhaled.

Great, but that doesn’t explain the door, does it?

As the others bickered, it was almost surreal. We were in a supposedly haunted house and, except for the cameraman, not one of them seemed to consider that this could be an actual haunting. That’s what I got for choosing the smartest of the bunch.

“You!” Rory said, wheeling on Sal. “You’ve got an earpiece. Tell that Becky chick—”

“I can’t tell her anything. It’s dead.” He took it out and handed it over. “Been dead since the door slammed.”

“Okay,” I said. “I don’t know what’s going on—”

“Of course you do,” Rory said. “It’s a setup to scare us silly. Only, unlike the morons in the basement—” She raised her voice to a shout. “—We aren’t scared. Just very, very pissed off.”

The lights flickered and went out.

“Yep,” Rory said. “Just what we needed.”

“Flashlights on, everyone,” I said. “We’ll just hang tight and wait. Frank isn’t filming, so there’s no footage coming.”

“Sure there is,” Rory said as we turned on our lights. “Hidden cameras.”

“Which work so well in the dark,” Cameron muttered.

“Infrared cameras.”

“Everyone, just stop arguing. Even if Rory’s right, no one is panicking, so we still aren’t giving them *useful* footage. If it’s staged, they’ll give up—”

A yelp sounded, muffled, as if from another room.

I shone my light around. “Where’s Ricardo?”

A panicked babbling in Spanish answered. It came from behind the second door, which was now cracked open. We all raced through.

..... Thirteen

Our flashlight beams bounced around the dark room, then all settled on Ricardo. He sat on the floor, clutching his side. Blood dripped through his fingers.

I made it to him first. I dropped and tugged his hand away. There was a slice through his shirt.

“Run,” a voice whispered in my ear.

I jumped but, before anyone could ask what happened, I gritted my teeth.

Yep, it's a ghost. Admit it. Accept it. Deal with it.

I raised Ricardo's shirt. The wound wasn't more than a shallow slice, but blood had soaked his shirt and his hand. More smeared the floor.

“How the hell did that happen?” Rory said, her voice rising an octave. “There's nothing in here to cut him.”

She was right. The room was empty.

“Does anyone have a tissue or—”

Frank passed me a handkerchief. I pressed it against Ricardo's side, then rocked back into a crouch. When my heels threatened to give way, I yanked them off and tossed them aside. I turned to Ricardo, who stared numbly as he held the cloth against the wound.

“Can you tell me what happened?” I said, speaking slowly, keeping eye contact.

He stared at me.

I fumbled in Spanish, asking roughly the same thing. I got a rapid-fire response far beyond anything I could interpret with two years of high school Spanish—failed high school Spanish.

“He says he doesn’t know what happened,” Cameron said. “He heard a noise and came in here. It was dark. The sound was coming from the other side. He walked across the room and something slashed his side. When he turned, no one was there.”

“Okay, that’s it,” Rory said. “We’re getting out of here. I don’t care if they rip up my contract.” She strode to a door behind Ricardo. “If the front way is blocked, there’s got to be a back—”

As she yanked on the handle, the door we’d come through slammed. Sal raced over to it as fast as his thick legs would take him. The door wouldn’t budge. Neither would.

“Okay, everyone—” I began.

“Help me,” whispered a voice to my left.

I looked over. It was Polly Watson, dressed in her party dress. She was pressed against the wall, her wide eyes fixed on mine.

“He’s coming,” she whispered. “Please, help—”

She let out a shriek. The first knife blow struck, and blood welled up on her dress front.

“What do you see?” Frank asked.

I yanked my gaze away and turned to see every flashlight beam and eye focused on me.

“You saw something,” Frank said. “What was it?”

“Nothing. I was thinking. Now, we need to just stay calm. We’re in a house full of people. We’re just fine—”

“No, we aren’t.” Frank gestured at Ricardo, still on the floor, eyes wide with shock. “Something is going on here. I don’t think any of us—” a pointed look at Rory “—can deny that now. This isn’t staged.”

“Then the plan is the same. We sit tight and wait—”

“And wait for this *thing* to attack someone else?” Frank stepped toward me. “You see ghosts. I’ve followed your career for years. You’re the real deal, and you see something in this room.”

I glanced toward Polly, now on the floor, dying. I swallowed and reminded myself she wasn’t dying, she was long dead, and I had no idea why I was seeing this, but there was nothing—

“What are you seeing?” Frank whispered.

“Nothing.” I paused as I felt their gazes, skeptical, even a little angry, as if I was keeping vital information from them. “I keep thinking I see something, but if it’s a spirit, he or she isn’t coming through. Now—”

Ricardo let out a stream of panicked Spanish and jabbed his finger toward the wall, right behind where Polly’s body was fading. I lifted my flashlight. There was blood on the wall. I’d seen it there earlier, when her ghost had been attacked. It was just like in the basement. Spectral blood spattering the walls and—

“Is that blood?” Cameron whispered.

They could see it? How the hell could they—

I looked again. The blood was different now. Earlier I’d seen spatters. This was thin lines trickling down, as if the drywall was sweating blood. I walked over and touched it.

“Jesus!” Rory said.

I turned. They were all staring at me.

“Guess you’ve seen this kind of thing before, huh?” Cameron said, trying for a laugh.

“Never.” I lifted my fingers to my flashlight. The red was faint. Without a werewolf nose, I couldn’t smell anything, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to taste it. “I can’t tell if it’s really blood.”

“I’m going to vote yes,” Frank said.

“Jaime?” Rory said. “Can you get us out of here? Please?”



I looked at them. Ricardo was still on the floor, but the other four were huddled close enough to touch shoulders, all watching me, faces pale, gazes shooting to the blood-sweating wall, then back to me. Waiting for me to save them.

Well, that's a twist.

I laughed softly under my breath.

"I'm glad you find this funny," Rory muttered.

"I wasn't laughing. I was—"

"Hide!" a voice said behind me.

It was Clara, the first victim. She raced past and "hid" in the corner, gesturing for me to join her. I struggled to keep my breathing even. Struggled not to think of what was coming.

"You *do* see something," Frank said. "Damn it, Jaime. I know you do. It's them, isn't it? The girls."

I took a moment to compose myself and to turn away from Clara. Turn my back on her. That's what it felt like. A girl was about to be killed behind me, and I was turning my back on her.

"I don't know what I'm seeing," I said. "I'm catching flickers—"

"Bullshit," Frank said.

My head shot up. "Excuse me?"

"You're seeing them. I can tell by your face. You're seeing those girls."

Cameron answered before I could. "Then why would she lie about it? She's a spiritualist. She's not going to pretend she *doesn't* see ghosts."

"She's scared," Frank said. "This isn't some stage act. She's seeing real murdered girls and—"

"Frank?" Rory said. "Shut it."

"I do see something," I said. "It might be the girls. It might be the killer. It might be a completely separate entity. Or it might be nothing at all. But I'm going to suggest—"

“A seance,” Frank said. “If these ghosts aren’t making contact on their own, they need help. Talk to them. See who they are and what they want.”

I argued against that, of course. But I was the only one who did. Even Ricardo chimed in, translated by Cameron, who apparently hadn’t failed *his* high school Spanish. Ricardo wanted to know what had happened to him. Conversing with the spirits seemed the best way to do that. It wasn’t as if anyone was coming to our rescue anytime soon.

We could hear the occasional faint voice below, as if someone was on the attic steps, but they sure as hell weren’t banging down the door to get to us. Hell, no. We were trapped in a room by supernatural forces. Real supernatural forces. I almost hoped there *were* hidden cameras, or I feared Frank would lose his job when they realized he’d stopped filming.

I didn’t like summoning real ghosts in front of non-supernaturals. What bothered me more, though, was summoning ghosts who weren’t acting like ghosts. Doors slamming and people getting injured suggested a telekinetic half-demon spirit, the only kind that could manipulate objects in the real world. But locking doors without obvious locks? Cutting someone without an apparent weapon? That made no sense, and I was reluctant to open the lines of communication when I wasn’t sure what I was dealing with. But that also seemed like the only way to find out what I was dealing with. So, with trepidation, I agreed.



Seance implies a lot of things to a lot of people. To most, it conjures up images of people sitting on the floor, holding hands,

burning candles and incense, maybe playing with a Ouija board. None of that is necessary. To talk to the dead, I simply...well, talk. I focus on opening my mind and making contact. Which is always a huge disappointment, so on the rare occasions when I agree to do a seance, I liven it up with props. That wasn't happening here. I did have everyone sit and join hands, though. It would make them feel better. Frank resumed taping, too.

When I started the seance, Clara's ghost had faded and Polly's hadn't yet arrived. So the room was spook-free. It remained that way as I entreated and cajoled any spirits to appear.

"Why are you doing that?" Frank said finally, as he paused the filming. "You know who they are, so why aren't you summoning them specifically?"

"That's not how it's done. You risk offending the ghost if you call it by the wrong name. Instead, you must remain open to all possibilities—"

"*What* other possibilities?"

Rory turned on him. "What the hell difference does it make to you? Is the studio paying you extra if she conjures a specific spirit?"

"Course not. But this seems silly—"

"The whole thing seems silly," she said. "But we're stuck with it. So, once again, shut—"

The light overhead turned on. Then it flickered out.

"What the hell is with that?" Rory muttered.

"I think—" Frank began.

"No one cares," Rory said.

I lifted my hands for quiet. "I'll go ahead and call the girls by name. It can't hurt."

When everyone settled in, I said, "I'm trying to contact the ghost of Clara Davis. If she's—"

“Run.”

I didn’t jump this time. I’d heard that disembodied voice often enough. But it did stop me mid-sentence. And it stopped everyone else, too.

“Did you hear that?” Cameron whispered.

I looked around. They’d heard it, too. *What the hell?*

“Keep going,” Frank said.

I took a deep breath. “I want to speak to the spirit of Clara Davis. If she can hear me—”

“Help me.”

Ricardo leaped up. “*¿Que eseco?*”

“It’s a woman’s voice,” Cameron said. “The first was a man’s. I think it was the killer.”

Frank motioned for me to keep going. Ricardo cursed in Spanish and pointed. The wall was sweating blood again.

“You need to talk to them,” Frank whispered. “They have a story to tell. Help them.”

I looked around. To my left, a shape flickered. It was Polly. Her mouth was working, but I couldn’t hear anything.

“If you’re trying to talk to me, then talk,” I said.

“Who is it?” Frank whispered.

I ignored him. “I want to know what happened to you. I want you to find peace. To do that, I need to speak—”

“He killed me,” she said.

I looked around the small circle. Everyone was watching intently, giving no sign they’d heard her.

“Who killed you?” I asked.

Frank leaned from behind his camera, mouthing for me say who I was talking to. I ignored him. I tried to get Polly to give me any details on her killer, but she started getting frantic, insisting she didn’t know. That wasn’t surprising. Violent death usually

wipes the last minutes from a ghost's memory. Merciful for the ghost; terribly unhelpful for crime solving.

I moved on to asking what she last remembered, but now my audience was getting restless. They were only hearing one side of the conversation—the boring “tell me more” side.

“What’s she saying?” Cameron asked. “It’s a she, right?”

Frank switched off the camera. “We need more, Jaime. The studio will kill us if you actually made contact with a spirit, and this is all we get. Let’s back up. Tell us who she is and what she’s said so far.”

I looked over at Polly. She was kneeling in the circle, skirt pulled demurely over her knees. When she heard Frank, she started to nod.

“I want to tell my story,” she said. “The whole story.” She met my gaze. “Only you can do that.”

Yes, only I could do that. I thought of her terrible death. She deserved peace and justice.

And yet...

My gut said there was more here. Given the choice between following my head and following my gut, there’s never any contest.

I motioned for Frank to roll the camera. “I’ve made contact with the ghost of a young woman.” I described Polly. “She says she was murdered. I’ve been unable to get details of her killer, which isn’t surprising, given that she probably can’t remember those final traumatic moments. What I’m doing now is trying to take her back—”

“You haven’t told them my name,” she cut in.

I turned to her. I said nothing, just turned and looked.

Her face tightened with anger. “I’m Polly Watson. You know that. *Tell* that.”

“What is your connection to this house?” I asked.

"I came to live with my aunt and uncle the summer I was seventeen."

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why did you come to live with them? What happened?"

"I had a fight—"

"About what?"

She floundered, mouth opening and closing, as she glared at me. "A boy," she snapped finally. "It was about a boy."

"Did your aunt and uncle have any pets?"

Her face screwed up. "Are you interrogating me?"

Frank flicked off the camera again. "What's going on here, Jaime?"

"She's making sure the spook is who she says she is," Rory said. "Like asking for ID. Nothing wrong with that."

Cameron nodded. "I looked up Polly Watson last night, after the show. Ask her—"

"*Get out!*" a man's voice boomed through the room.

The door behind Ricardo flew open with a bang.

"*Get out now!*"

Ricardo scrambled up and raced through the door. It slammed shut behind him. Everyone else was still sitting in the circle. Rory and I got to our feet. Cameron followed. We ran to the door and tried it. It was locked.

Fourteen

“Ricardo!” I said, banging on the door. “Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

“¡No!” Ricardo shouted. “¡Alto!”

“He’s saying stop,” Cameron said. “Something’s happening in there.”

Cameron tried to body-slam the door while Sal ran to the other one, shouting at the top of his lungs, “We need help! Hey! Help!”

“Fire!” Rory screamed. “Fire!”

That worked. I heard the distant sound of footsteps on the attic stairs. In the next room, Ricardo was still babbling for his attacker to stop.

“Serves him right,” Polly muttered. “Serves you all right.”

I turned to see the ghost standing there, her arms crossed.

“He’s going to kill him,” she said, smirking. “And it’ll be all your fault for not believing me.”

Ricardo screamed. Mid-scream, he was cut short, with an *oomph*. Then, “Who the hell are you?” and, “Hey! Put me down!”

Rory and Cameron both turned from the door to look at me.

“Is that...Ricardo?” Rory said.

I could hear someone working on the attic door now, yelling for tools. Then there was a sharp crack at the door Ricardo had

run through. It flew open. Jeremy stood there, holding Ricardo aloft by the back of his hoodie.

Cameron looked from Jeremy to the broken door. “How’d you get that open?”

“I work out.”

“That’s...your boyfriend,” Rory said, turning to me. “What’s going on here?”

“Make him put me down!” Ricardo yelled—in perfect English. “He’s assaulting me.”

“No.” Jeremy kicked a switch-blade through the open door. “I saved you from an assault. Self-inflicted.” Jeremy walked through, still holding Ricardo. “I found him screaming and getting ready to cut himself with that.”

“He’s possessed!” Frank said. “Quick! Pin him down before he attacks someone.”

I gave Frank a withering look. Jeremy lowered Ricardo to the floor but kept a grip on his hoodie. Rory slipped behind Jeremy and retrieved something from the next room.

“Ricardo’s cell phone.” She looked at him. “It seems to be voice recording. Do you want me to stop it?”

Ricardo scowled at her.

She checked out the phone. “Oh, look. Emails. From your editor. About the exposé you’re running here.” She turned to me. “We’ve got ourselves an undercover reporter.”

“He stabbed himself?” Cameron said. “Seriously? That’s fucked up, dude.”

“I suspect he did more than that,” Jeremy said. “There’s sound equipment back there, too, which I’ll wager explains the voice I heard when I was coming through.”

“I had nothing to do with that. It was—” Ricardo’s gaze shot toward us, then away. He squared his shoulders. “I’m still going to

expose this fraud. I know the truth. There were no ‘letters.’ There are no dead girls.”

“Sure there are,” Cameron said. “I found them online.”

“Missing girls. Not dead ones. That was all faked to see if you’d fall for it.” He gestured at me.

“But she didn’t,” Jeremy said. “I heard her. Jaime never said she saw the missing girls. No matter how strongly she was urged to do so.”

I slowly turned toward the guy who’d been *urging* me so strongly. Frank edged backward as I advanced. Rory strode past me.

“Hey!” he said as she reached into his pockets. “You can’t—”

She pulled out a remote. When she hit a button, a voice boomed, “Get out!”

She looked up at him. “Okay, you can say it now.”

“Wh-what?”

She glanced over at Ricardo. “You, too. Repeat after me. *I would have gotten away with it too...*”

Cameron grinned. “*If it wasn’t for you meddling kids.*”



We’d been scammed. It seemed, though, that our enterprising young journalist hadn’t orchestrated the scheme. Frank had discovered what Ricardo was doing and offered him a real scoop, in return for a little extra role-play.

The house had been rigged by Frank before we arrived. He’d put in a sound system with the “ghosts” heard by everyone. He’d added remote-activated locks to mechanically operate doors. He’d even gotten a special-effects buddy to set up the blood-sweating wall.

Yet there were things Frank couldn't have done. Namely, the ghosts.

Even more importantly, Frank lacked something else. A motive. He hadn't been hired by Ricardo. Even if he was lying about that, rigging this house took some serious cash. No journalist would have that kind of expense account—and no newspaper or magazine would knowingly pay for a false exposé.

So who masterminded this? I had an idea. As for motive, well, that wasn't quite so clear. But as soon as we got out of that room, I had Jeremy slip off to call Savannah with a few questions for Paige's database.

I let the kids handle the fallout...I mean, take credit for unmasking the villains. I figured it was a reasonable trade-off. I trusted they wouldn't make me look like an idiot, and I'd get my share of the limelight later. For now, I had to find the real man behind the mask.

As one might expect, the aftermath was chaotic. It was easy enough to tear Gregor away from the questions and the cameras.

With Jeremy accompanying us, I led Gregor to a second-level bedroom.

"I thought you might need a break," I said.

"Yes, thank you. It is...overwhelming." He sat on the edge of the bed and exhaled. "I am still trying to understand everything. There were no dead girls?"

"No, there were. That's what I came to tell you. I talked to Polly Watson."

"I thought—"

"No, it *was* her. I'm sure of it." I told him how I'd seen the girls at the inn and now here.

"That is terrible," he said, getting to his feet. "You must tell those reporters downstairs."

“Actually, that’s why I called you in here. I want you to tell them.” I beamed at him. “You have a gift, Gregor. A true gift, and your story really touched me. I’ve had my fifteen minutes of fame. Now, it’s your turn.”

He shook his head. “No, this is yours. You saw them—”

“I’ll tell you everything you need to know.” I took his arm. “Come on. I’ve already seeded the story.”

“Seeded...”

“Oh, I’m sure you know what that means. Your English is a lot better than you let on, which is what I’d expect from someone who lived in the States for most of his childhood.”

“Wh-what? I did not live...”

When he trailed off, I released his arm. “Not sure you want to finish that, considering it’s a matter of public record? So is your real last name. Demidov. I don’t know why you changed it. It’s such a great name. Did you know there’s a family of Russian necromancers by that name? Quite famous. They say one even worked for the Tsars, back in the day.”

“I don’t know—”

“Well, I do. I know you’re a necromancer. You came on this show hoping to make your name by crushing mine. You found Polly Watson’s link to the house and invented a story, which you leaked to Mike. Then you convinced—or bullied—ghosts who looked like the missing girls into putting on a show for me, complete with period costume and tragic death scenes. You hired Frank to help with the scheme. What is he? Half-demon? Telekinesis? Good at slamming doors? Doesn’t matter really. His main role was to persuade me to say on camera that I was seeing the dead girls and the killer. Then you’d refute my claims. When the truth came out, that the letters were fake, it would be obvious I was a con artist and you were the real deal.”

Gregor edged toward the door. “You’re crazy,” he said, dropping most of his accent. “I don’t know what—”

He bumped into Jeremy.

“Hello,” Jeremy said. When Gregor tried to duck past, Jeremy tugged him back. “Not yet.”

Gregor struggled, but Jeremy just stood there, casually holding him fast.

“You know,” I said. “You really need to do more research on the people you try to scam. Do you know who he is?”

“I don’t care,” Gregor said, backing into the room as Jeremy released his hold. “You can’t prove any of this wild story, and I’ll fight you if you try. I know people and—”

Something shimmered in the corner. Gregor noticed it. I did, too. Jeremy frowned slightly, sensing a ghost.

Light flashed, bright enough to make Gregor stumble back. A figure strode through. She was about forty, with long dark hair, and was dressed in jeans, boots and a white blouse. In her right hand she held a four-foot-long sword, glowing with a blue light.

“Goddamn it,” Eve said, striding toward us. “I did not need this. I really did not need this.”

Gregor backed up until he hit the bed. “Is...is that—?”

“An angel,” I said. “A very pissed off one, apparently. Let me introduce you to my spirit guide, Eve Levine. I’m sure you’ve heard of her.”

“What?” Eve said, turning her scowl on Gregor. “He’s a necromancer?” She squinted at his spirit glow, then swore under her breath and shook her sword at him. “You breathe one word of this—”

“I-I won’t say anything.”

“You know what this is?” she waved the sword as he backed into the corner.



“Sword of Judgment,” I said. “Used to send souls to purgatory.” I paused. “Is that blood on it?”

“Yeah, I’m racking up bonus points today.” She swung the sword on Gregor. “Don’t make me add to—”

“I-I won’t. I-I’m not going to say a word. I’m just...I’m leaving now.” He turned to me. “I’ll go back to Russia. You won’t hear from me again.”

“Good.”

Gregor stumbled out the door. I shut it behind him.

“Damn,” Eve said. “I’ve met some nervous necros in my day, but that guy’s a mess. Did he really think I’d run him through if he told anyone he saw an angel?” She shook her head. “Exactly how bad is my reputation these days?”

I sputtered a laugh. “That’s what you were warning him about?”

She plunked onto the bed. “I missed something, didn’t I?” She glanced at Jeremy. “Hey, Jer.”

“Eve says hi,” I said.

He returned the greeting and offered to make sure Gregor fulfilled his promise to leave quietly.

“Where the hell are we?” she said, looking around after Jeremy left.

“Amityville.”

“Of course.” She pulled her legs up to sit cross-legged. “I have a problem and I need your help. Leah O’Donnell escaped from her hell dimension.”

“Leah...” I paused. “*The Leah O’Donnell?*”

Leah had befriended, betrayed and then kidnapped Savannah as a child. She’d tried to kill Paige, and ended up being killed by her.

“Savannah’s home, isn’t she?” Eve said. “In Portland? Same with Paige?”

I nodded. “Jeremy spoke to both of them about twenty minutes ago.”

“Good. Leah’s apparently over here, on the east coast. If she wants to remain out of hell, she’ll stay far away from Savannah and Paige. She knows that’s the first place I’d look. So we aren’t going to tell them she’s out.”

“Are you sure that’s—?”

“I’m sure. They’d only worry and want to help. I want you to keep in contact with them. If they start reporting flying objects, we know our Volo has made her way west. For now, though, I have a bead on her and, with your help, I’m going to get her back to hell before Paige and Savannah ever know she was out.”



One case ending, another starting. Feast or famine, that’s the way it seems in this life. The show was over. Mike had flown to L.A. to meet with the studio execs and figure out their next move. I was sure they’d find a way to salvage this wreck, as they had with *Death of Innocence*. At least now maybe they’d believe I really was a reality-show curse. Unless, once again, they ended up making more money with the revised version than they’d hoped for with the planned one. Shit. I might have to lie low for a while.

Lying low wouldn’t work with Eve. She needed my help. Our relationship went both ways, with me doing tasks in the human world that her non-corporeal form wouldn’t allow. Luckily, a lot of that involved computers and telephones, which kept me out of any actual action. This time, considering who was involved, staying out of the action might not be so easy.

“I think I need more of these.” I sat on our motel bed, fingering my rune tattoo. “Do you have one for protection from TV reality shows? And guardian angels?”

Jeremy smiled and rubbed my foot. “Sorry. I’ll help with Leah, though. You know that. I can get Clay and Elena involved if it comes to that.”

“No, I don’t want that bitch anywhere near the kids.” I paused. “I mean Leah. Not Eve.”

He laughed and leaned over to kiss me. “She’s still tracking Leah, isn’t she? You don’t need to rush off yet?”

“I said unless she needs me, I could use a few days to wrap up the show stuff.” I looked at him. “In other words, I lied.”

“So we have a few days?”

“We do. And I have the stripper room at that motel booked for one of them.” I climbed onto his lap, straddling him. “So, anytime you want to leave...”

“Soon,” he murmured. “But not just yet.”

“Works for me,” I said and smiled as he pulled me down onto the bed.