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Veronica Wilde

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Halloween Hearts

Veronica Wilde

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Chapter One

Like so many haunted houses, the old Vandermortal house lay on the outskirts of town. It reared up against the starry midnight sky like a bad dream, its overgrown yard almost blocking the stone path that led from the rusted gate to the creaky porch. Its broken windows revealed nothing but darkened space inside, its chipped paint not quite concealing the former grandeur of the massive Victorian home. The wrap-around porch was still graced by an old-fashioned rocking chair and it seemed to rock a little in the October breeze. The faded "For Sale" sign in the front yard creaked on its hinges.

It's not really haunted, Tara told herself. *It just looks haunted, so people say it is.* But she felt a little uneasy, staring up at the darkened turret outlined against the full moon. She half-expected to see bats flying out of it. "Um... we're not really going in, are we?" she asked timidly. "I mean, there might be rats or spiders or... or bats."

Her boyfriend Eric playfully ruffled her long blonde hair. "Yeah, there will definitely be bats, and they're going to fly right into your hair."

"Quit it!" Tara yelled, wrestling away from him, but she was glad for the comic relief. She and her best friend Cindy giggled nervously as their boyfriends bravely opened the rusted gate and sauntered up the stone path.

"Come on, you wimps," Eric said cheekily. "Let's get this party started."

Tara's heart fluttered nervously as she followed them toward the house.

It was the October of her senior year of high school. Tara knew very well it was a tradition, almost a rite of passage, for the seniors to go into the old Vandermortal house around Halloween. Everyone had a different story about what happened when they went in. Some said the spirit of a lady had

appeared to them, some said they'd heard ballroom music, and one kid had said something had whispered in his ear. They had to be making it up, of course. She was a smart girl, she knew haunted houses and ghosts didn't really exist.

Or did they?

Bravely, she pushed her long hair back over her jacket and followed the boys through the front door. For a moment she felt as if a dark maw was swallowing them up. The only light on the first floor was the moonlight spilling through the windows and it took her eyes a moment to adjust. Everything around her smelled of dust and mildew.

Cindy's boyfriend, Robby, tried a light switch. "There's no electricity."

"No shit," said Eric. "No one's lived here in decades, doofus. Why would there be electricity?"

They stood in uneasy silence, then Eric said, "Well, let's not just stand here. Let's have a look."

Cindy and Tara grabbed hands as they followed them through the dark.

Was Tara crazy, or did she hear a waltz playing? It sounded so faint, like a music box. But the harder she listened, the less she heard it. She shook her head. They walked into what must have been a huge and busy kitchen at one time—old-fashioned appliances glittered in the dark, and an iron kettle still rested on the counter. In the corner was a round table for six, and for a moment, Tara was surprised to find herself thinking about the children who must have eaten breakfast here. She could almost feel them trying to climb out of their chairs and steal each other's biscuits, their mother admonishing them to sit still and eat. She smiled. This must have been a loving home for some family once. Probably they never dreamed their beautiful home would fall into such neglect and become the town's haunted house. The boys led

them into the parlor, which contained a round marble-topped table and faded velvet chairs. A dry and dusty fireplace dominated one wall. The smell of mildew was very strong here and Tara felt a pang of sadness that such rot and decay had taken over the classic mansion.

Robby sniffed. "Nasty. This place is rank. Let's go."

"No way, man," Eric countered. "We have to go upstairs, that's part of the deal."

There was a whisper from somewhere behind them. Tara and Cindy spun around, clutching each other's arms. "What was that?" Cindy squeaked.

"Rats," Eric said decisively. "Come on, don't wimp out on us now. Let's go upstairs."

Silently, they followed him up the stairs, with Tara wondering if at any moment, a step would break and send her plummeting into the basement. Just the thought of the basement and the dark horrors that surely lurked there made her shiver. It was probably overrun with insects and vermin.

Suddenly a brief scream broke the silence. Tara grabbed the banister for support, her heart pounding, and looked up at Eric at the top of the stairs.

"Oh Jesus," Eric panted, catching his breath. "It's a mirror. I thought I saw someone standing there."

"You idiot." Robby jeered. "You screamed like a girl at your own reflection?"

"Shut *up*. Let's get moving."

They moved down the dark hallway. As she passed the full-length mirror at the top of the staircase, Tara tried not to glance at it. But from the corner of her eye she saw someone else in the mirror—a woman in a long dark

gown with her hair piled up. She stifled a yelp and grabbed Cindy's hand. "I saw someone!" she said shrilly. "In the mirror! A lady in a long dark dress."

"Oh man," Eric moaned. "You saw yourself. It's dark in here. Would you girls quit getting excited over nothing?"

"You were the one who screamed," Tara muttered as they moved into the master bedroom.

Here, there was no furniture. The huge room was empty, and there were dark exposed areas of plaster on the walls where something—a bookcase or a desk—had been pried off its bolts. The floral-patterned wallpaper was peeling in places. Peering at it in the moonlight, Tara found herself wondering again who had picked it out, who had originally decorated and loved this home. This desolate bedroom had probably once been the scene of lovemaking and fights, perhaps even a wedding night. She wandered over to a door at the far end of the room and opened it to find a spacious closet. Then she walked alone into the hall and down to a back bedroom overlooking the garden. This had been a child's bedroom, she felt. A warm, playful energy surged at her as she glanced around. Spying the windows, she strolled over and looked down at the overgrown garden.

Two rows of pine trees stood sentinel by the garden walls. Within were weeping willow trees, their branches swaying dramatically over the twisting weeds and dead wildflowers of autumn. In one corner of the garden, an apple tree shed its half-rotted apples on the ground below. Like the rest of the mansion, it must have been lovely once. Beyond the garden, the still surface of a pond sparkled in the moonlight.

Suddenly, she thought she saw a woman in a long dress pass by the pond. Before Tara could take a second look, a cloud covered the moon and the woman seemed to disappear. Tara shook her head. Her imagination really was getting the best of her. She blinked. There was the flash of a dress again.

Wasn't that a woman vanishing behind the apple tree? Tara wondered if the woman was a vagrant who lived here. Perhaps she was homeless and she had run out back when she heard their car pull up tonight. Tara stared intently out the window, but the woman didn't reappear.

Then she sniffed. Suddenly, beneath the smells of mildew and dust, a faint violet perfume filled the air. She whirled around, but no one was there.

"Tara, what are you doing?" Cindy hissed nervously from the hall. "You shouldn't be wandering around up here by yourself."

Tara turned. "Nothing in this house is going to hurt us, Cindy."

"Are you crazy? There are rats in here, I've seen their droppings. And I keep hearing— well, I keep thinking I hear a music box or something playing. And you saw that woman. We need to get out of here, Tara."

Tara cast a last look at the garden and turned away. She whirled back. For a moment she'd seen the garden glow with candlelit tables, waiters in white bending over elaborately dressed guests. Now, it was just a lot of weeds in the moonlight again.

"You're right, we should go," she agreed. Strangely, she wasn't frightened as she joined the others downstairs.

"This whole thing is a bust." Eric threw up his hands in disgust. "This place isn't haunted. It's just old and smelly."

"Yeah, it does reek here," Robby agreed.

"I think it's haunted," Cindy insisted. "I can feel things here and so can Tara."

Eric and Robby looked at each other. "It's not haunted. But since we're here..."

"Since we're here what?" Tara asked suspiciously.

Robby ran out to the car. From his pocket Eric produced a lighter and two candles, grinning in the shadows. "Girls, it's time to party."

They groaned. "*Here?*" But Robby was already bringing in beer, blankets and a small radio.

Tara shrugged and accepted a beer. As the night wore on, and they talked and laughed in the downstairs parlor, she actually began to feel quite peaceful. There was something warm here in the old house. It liked having people in it, she thought. After her second beer, she even allowed Eric to kiss her and gently draw her down onto their blanket. Cindy and Robby had long since disappeared into another room, yet she felt uncomfortable as Eric slipped off her sweater. A decrepit old house was not her idea of a romantic atmosphere.

"Eric, hold on." Tara tried to grasp his fumbling hands. "Come on, we shouldn't be doing this here."

"What are you talking about? It's the perfect place. No parents are going to bust in on us here." He kissed her again, confidently unhooking the clasp of her bra.

"It's wrong." Feeling the chilly air on her bare breasts, she shivered. "I mean, it's creepy here. I don't want to do stuff here." She was afraid to say what she really felt, that messing around with her boyfriend seemed disrespectful to the house. This had once been a family's beloved home. It shouldn't be desecrated now as a hook-up joint for teenagers with blankets and beer.

"Come on, babe." Eric fondled her breasts. "Just relax. Let me make love to you."

After dating Eric for six months, Tara at eighteen was still a virgin. He had been pressuring her for a while now to go all the way, but somehow it never seemed like the right time or place. And was here—the old Vandermortal House, a town legend—the right place? It just seemed wrong. Still, she sighed with pleasure as Eric sucked her nipples into his mouth and rolled his tongue around them.

“It’ll be great,” Eric said huskily, unzipping her jeans. “Trust me, babe, it’ll only hurt for a second.”

“I just don’t want to do it here, Eric. Not like this...”

Eric ignored her and continued slowly sliding her jeans down to her knees. He began stroking her through her silk panties. Torn between pleasure and guilt, Tara tilted her head back and sighed. It did feel good. Maybe she should just go ahead. She glanced to the side and saw someone staring at her from the shadows—a tall woman in a long dark gown, her hair swept up elaborately.

She screamed.

“Jesus!” Eric tumbled off her and slammed his head on the floor, where he swore again. “Damn it, I wasn’t trying to rape you.”

“It’s not that— Eric, I just saw that lady again. She was standing right there.” Tara pointed over his shoulder.

“Whatever,” he scoffed. He got to his feet and brushed off his jeans without even bothering to look. “If you’re too immature to do it, just say so, Tara. You don’t have to cry wolf.”

“But Eric— I’m serious, she was right there.” Tara pointed to the now-empty parlor doorway, her heart pounding. She wrapped the blanket protectively around her.

Cindy and Robby rushed into the room. "What was all the screaming?" Cindy asked breathlessly. Tara noted her disheveled appearance, as well as Billy's unzipped pants.

"Only Tara being a little crybaby virgin," Eric said with disgust, picking up his keys and storming out of the parlor. "Come on, I'm done with this place. Let's go."

Cindy cast her a helpless, sympathetic glance before Billy pushed her out the door. Tara stared after them in insulted surprise. Blinking back tears of humiliation, she quickly gathered her discarded clothes. Inexplicably, they were wet. With a shiver, she thought of the pond behind the house and the woman she was sure she had seen walking around it in the moonlight.

For a few moments, pulling on her damp sweater, she was alone in the old Vandermortal house. As the moonlight shifted on the floor, she listened to the sighings and stirrings of the old house. Yes, something was here. A presence still lived here. She sighed heavily, wondering how the night had gone so terribly wrong. Then something creaked upstairs. Another creak, almost like a step, sounded on the top stair. And then on the next stair.

Something was walking downstairs.

Terrified to lay eyes on whatever was approaching, she sprinted out the front door as fast as she could. Under the full moon, Eric's car, already running and with its headlights on, was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. She jumped into the backseat, not caring how pale or terrified she looked, and shouted, "Drive!"

"Aw, did the little girl get scared again?" Eric asked nastily, backing out of the driveway. "God, you're so immature, Tara. See if I ever take you out again."

They rode in silence back to town. Neither Cindy nor Robby asked her what she'd seen. Silently, over tears she refused to let anyone see, she vowed never to speak to Eric Dayton again.

Chapter Two

Six years later

"And that was why I didn't speak to Eric for the rest of high school," Tara finished explaining to her laughing friends.

"High school! What about the four years after that? I didn't think you'd ever forgive me." Eric shook his head.

They were at Gilligan's Pub, the local tavern and their favorite hang-out. It was a hot August night, but the pub was air-conditioned and Tara shivered a bit in her halter top. Sipping her beer, she said, "You deserved to grovel."

Eric shrugged merrily. "I was a stupid high school kid. I probably deserved a good slap."

"No disagreement on this end." They looked at each other fondly.

So much had changed since high school. After finishing out their senior year in mutual hostility, Tara and Eric had gone off to separate colleges. She had barely given him a thought, other than as the total jerk she'd almost given her virginity to. That was how she referred to him when discussing old loves with her college pals in the dorm.

"I did have this one boyfriend in high school, but he turned out to be a total jerk. He got all mad at me because I got scared in this old house we were trespassing in. I probably would have gone all the way with him too, if I hadn't realized what an insensitive jackass he was." When she'd told her girlfriends the full story, they'd laugh and agree the ghost of the old Vandermortal house had saved her from giving herself to the wrong guy.

Then, her parents had died suddenly in a car accident her junior year at university. She had come home to take care of the arrangements, the funeral

and, ultimately, her little brother Irving. Only sixteen, he'd been too young to live on his own and so she had moved back to her small hometown. At twenty-one, she had felt like her life was over. There would be no more college parties, no all-night dorm chats, no dreaming of those future days when she had a glamorous job as a journalist. Instead, she lived at home with her brother, taking college classes at night and working at the local newspaper as an administrative assistant. She felt as if her youth had been stolen from her. There wasn't exactly a great nightlife scene in town. Not that she had time for dating or club-hopping anyhow. Classes and studying at night kept her busy, and taking care of her teenage brother wasn't all that easy.

One day, a card had come in the mail from Eric. She'd frowned as she'd opened it, recalling his boorish behavior that night at the old Vandermortal house. But the sympathy card, decorated with a simple iris, showed good taste. The message surprised her with its brevity and sweetness: *Tara, I just wanted to let you know how sorry I am about the death of your parents. I know I acted like a jerk in high school, but I have grown up a lot since then and I would love to catch up with you sometime.* She had never called the phone number written at the bottom of the card, but she had appreciated the gesture.

A year passed and one summer day, she'd come out of the drugstore and bumped into a tall, tanned young man with broad shoulders and thick blond hair. Excusing herself, she'd made her way to the car with a smile, wondering where such a gorgeous man had been hiding, when she heard a familiar voice.

"Doesn't your old friend Eric even get a hello?"

She'd turned slowly, lifting her sunglasses. He did the same, and with shock, she connected with those same baby blue eyes, which had melted her in high school.

"Eric Dayton," she said softly. "Oh my god."

"Yeah, I've changed a bit." He smiled. He took a step forward and surveyed her from her white sandals up to her tanned legs and blue sundress. "As have you, I see. You've really... become a woman, Tara."

She blushed. "Well, I'm not the teenage girl you knew anymore, Eric."

"And I'm not the dumb-ass teenage boy you knew."

There was an awkward silence, then he said, "Look, I don't blame you if you want nothing to do with me. I wasn't exactly a gentleman that night in high school. But teenage boys aren't known for their sensitivity, Tara, and I've grown up a lot since then. Would you at least let me take you to dinner?"

She'd hesitated, torn between the desire to spurn him coldly and the more pressing urge to say yes. She had dreamed of this moment so many times, when he would beg her forgiveness and she would coolly reject him. The tall, sturdy-shouldered man before her was only a distant cousin of the boy she still resented. She knew it would be foolish to hold onto a grudge when he was showing genuine remorse.

So she had said yes. In the two years since, she had discovered a very different Eric—one who considered her feelings, who respected her opinions, who went out of his way to surprise her not just on her birthday, but on random nights with picnics in the park or small gifts. An Eric who made her feel special, safe and secure. Despite that, he turned out to be the same Eric who liked to party and go to loud concerts that made her head ache, and he had a regrettable inability to resist a dare, no matter how stupid, when he was drunk. He could still be fun though, and most importantly she loved him. At twenty-four, she was old enough to know that no man was perfect. She hoped that, at twenty-four, Eric would soon be old enough to put away the reckless adventures he loved so much and settle down.

She looked affectionately into his blue eyes and ran her hand through his thick blond hair as she pulled herself back from her own memories. "You really were a jackass that night at the Vandermortal house."

He shrugged and sipped his beer. "That was pretty wild, though, wasn't it? I mean, you and Cindy heard stuff and you thought you saw that lady...."

"Wait a second." Billy, Eric's best friend, leaned forward. "So you guys actually did see something? I've always heard that place was haunted, but I've never been able to find anyone who encountered a ghost firsthand."

"I'd stake my life on it," Tara told him. "I caught a glimpse of her twice, once in the mirror and once in the doorway when Eric and I were messing around."

"No shit." Billy was impressed. "What did she look like? Were you scared?"

"She had long dark hair piled up, and she wore a dark dress, and yes, I was terrified. Especially when Eric ran out on me and left me alone in the house." She elbowed him sharply.

"Babe, I'm sorry. I would never do that if we went back."

Billy's eyes lit up. "We should go back. Tonight. Let's drive out there and see if anything happens."

Tara and Eric both groaned, then Eric said, "Billy, we're not in high school anymore. Come on."

"Oh, so what are you saying? We're too *mature* to go check out a haunted house? Come on, what's so much better about sitting around here and drinking?"

They looked around the bar. At ten minutes before last call, the place was emptying. The revolving neon glow of the jukebox washed over mostly empty tables and stools. "He's got a point," Eric admitted. "This place is kind of lame tonight."

"Eric, come on. We're twenty-four. Do you really want to go trespassing on a ghost hunt? It's late. Let's just go home."

"No way, babe, it's a beautiful night. Let's drive out there." Eric's eyes blazed with excitement at the idea.

Tara sighed, knowing it was impossible to talk him out of a scheme, no matter how hare-brained. Once someone came up with an outrageous idea for an adventure, Eric just had to explore it. She had yet to see him resist a dare, no matter how ill-advised or how much trouble he got in as a result. She collected her purse. "Fine, but I'm driving. You've had too much to drink."

As they left the bar, Tara noted that it *was* a beautiful night—warm and balmy, one of the last true summer nights before the coolness of fall crept in. Unlocking her green Honda Accord, her gaze met Eric's across the car and he winked. She smiled despite herself and when they'd gotten into the car, Eric threaded his fingers through her long hair. With his other hand, he slid in a Grinning Skulls CD and began to sing as they drove out of the parking lot.

"Eric, no! I hate this music," Tara complained. The heavy bass boomed through the car, overlaid with gothic chanting and bizarre lyrics.

"Come on, babe, it'll set the mood." From inside his sweatshirt, Eric pulled out a last beer he had smuggled from the bar. "Damn, this is a fine night."

Billy and his new girlfriend laughed from the backseat. Tara decided to go along with it, not wanting to look like an ogre in front of them. Despite the

obnoxious music, she began to enjoy the feeling of adventure. The glowing eyes of a fox and a raccoon from the roadside weeds told her they were leaving the town limits. As they hit the highway, the summer sky sparkled with a thousand stars and fresh country air filled the car.

The rural roads were devoid of traffic at two in the morning. A flutter of trepidation raced through her as they turned onto Stebbins Road. Slowly, they cruised up to the dark shape of the old Vandermortal house, outlined against the night sky. Something seemed different as they got out of the car.

"Holy crap!" Eric said. "This place is sold."

They all stared in shock at the SOLD label plastered over the old "For Sale" sign. It looked recent—very recent—no more than a week old.

"It's a joke," Eric declared. "This old dump has been sitting empty for decades. Who would buy it?"

"Someone who wants the land," Billy suggested. "The new owner will probably just tear this place down and rebuild something else. It's great real estate. Why not?"

There in the peaceful summer night, amongst the chirping of the crickets and the gently stirring grass, the land did seem like a beautiful piece of property. Tara felt a sudden flash of sadness that she couldn't have bought it herself. She had always had a secret dream of raising a family out in the country. Her children would have lots of trees to climb and places to build forts. She would plant a garden of flowers and vegetables. She could almost imagine it, she and her husband swaying in a hammock at night, after the kids had gone to bed, looking at the stars together. No honking horns, no fighting neighbors, just tranquility and peace.

Billy's girlfriend shivered. "It sure is ugly." She jerked her chin at the house. "It's so gothic and gloomy-looking. Look at that tower."

"It's a turret," Tara said shortly, surprising even herself with her curt tone. "And it's a beautiful house done in classic Victorian style. There aren't many of them left in these parts."

Eric hugged her to him. "Well, listen to you, my little architect. Maybe you should have bought this place."

"I would if I could afford it," she said, surprising herself again. "It's a great house."

They stared up at it in the dark. The windows were still broken, the paint still peeling, the yard completely overgrown. The new owner had obviously bought it too recently to make even the most rudimentary of repairs.

"Let's go," Eric said. "We don't want to get busted for trespassing, now that someone's actually bought this dump."

Tara remained silent on the drive back into town, letting the others speculate about who had bought the old house. For some reason, the sale made her sad, as if a piece of her own history would soon be demolished. She couldn't help but hope the new owner would renovate the house, rather than destroy it. After they dropped off Billy and his date, Eric turned toward her. "You sure are quiet tonight. What's wrong, babe? Did the Vandermortal house get you spooked again?"

She shook her head. "Not really. It made me a little sad, actually..." She trailed off, aware of how little sense she made.

Eric grinned. "Why, because it's the scene of our one and only break-up?"

She couldn't help but smile. "I wasn't even thinking of that."

"Oh yeah?" Eric reached and trailed a teasing hand down her chest. "I was thinking about it."

She laughed and pushed his hand away. "Don't tell me even the old Vandermortal house can make you horny."

"Sure, it did. Remember our night there? You, topless on the blanket...." He began to stroke her right breast in the way he knew she liked.

"Eric!" she squealed. "I'm driving...!"

"So pull over," he said huskily.

They didn't. Instead they made it the remaining five blocks to her house, where he was on top of her in the back doorway with a carnal hunger and heat that took her breath away. As he kissed her with pent-up passion, she allowed herself the delirious feeling of his tongue in her mouth for just a moment before pushing him back. "Eric, wait, I want to make sure my brother's not home..."

Eric responded by pulling off her blue halter top and lightly squeezing her bare breasts. "His car wasn't in the driveway." He flicked her nipples with his thumbs. "Come on, babe."

Despite herself, she arched her back, pushing her aching stiff nipples into his mouth. She moaned as he quickly tugged her shorts down to the kitchen floor, leaving her clad only in a silk thong. A late summer moon shone through the kitchen windows, and he held her back for a moment to admire her. "Goddamn, you're beautiful. I love you, Tara, you know that?"

She smiled. "I love you, Eric."

She reached forward and undid his jeans. As his erect cock stiffened in his cotton briefs, Eric pulled his t-shirt over his head, revealing his tanned

pectoral muscles. Tara caught her breath, struck as always by the sight of Eric in just his underwear. Here in the moonlight, all those hours he put in at the gym showed. His cut physique, browned from the summer, was without flaw. She ran her hands over the light blond hair of his chest, then down to his abs. Tentatively, she stroked his hard cock. It felt velvety and firm in her hands. She sighed deeply.

Eric took his cock in hand and moved the head of it teasingly across the silk of her panties. Almost dizzy with need, she spread her legs. "Don't tease me," she begged. "Please, Eric..."

"What was that you said?" He waited, his blue eyes very serious.

"I said please." Her mouth was dry. Unable to stop herself, she pushed the soft mound of her pussy against his cock. "Eric..."

It was all he had wanted to hear. Scooping her up, he carried her off to her bedroom, where he tore off the silk thong and spread her legs before proceeding to bury his face between them. As he tongued and kissed her pussy, Tara's cries filled the dark. She and Eric had their disagreements, they occasionally had the knock-down, drag-out fight, but sex was the one thing that had never been a problem between them. She knew his body like he knew hers—expertly, passionately, devotedly. Her blood heated and the pleasure built to a swelling climax, and as her throbs broke in his mouth, she howled out her pleasure. Then Eric moved up her body, his blond hair damp with the sweat of his own arousal. Tara wrapped her arms around him as the stiff head of his cock pushed against the tender pink lips. She bit her lip as he entered her like warm marble in liquid.

"Oh god," he groaned. "Oh Tara, oh my god..."

She shook her head, beyond words. As he drove into her again and again, she broke into her second orgasm, the rush of ecstasy almost electric.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him and clung to him with all her might, moaning, "More, Eric, more, more, more...."

Chapter Three

She slept fitfully, and ominous dreams disturbed her throughout the night. When she awoke yet again before dawn, she noticed Eric had already gone home. She fell back into another dream, one about the old Vandermortal house. She walked nervously through its darkened rooms, aware she wasn't alone in the house. Someone—or something—moved through the other decaying rooms with a muffled, rustling tread. Her heart pounded as she tried to find her way out of the house, but every hall only led to another room. Water dripped onto her from the ceiling and collected in puddles on the floor. Her panic mounted as the rustling steps began to descend the stairs. *She's coming.* Her blood went cold. All of the rooms began to change and brighten, suddenly transforming into a lush, old-fashioned scene of stuffed chairs and cheerful gas lamps.

The steps echoed and finally reached the bottom of the stairs. She willed herself to turn around, knowing she would be face to face with the ghost. Instead of a woman in a long dress, she found herself staring at a man—a tall, noble-looking man with long brown hair.

She gasped and sat straight up in bed, her heart pounding.

It's a dream, just a dream. Nevertheless, the puzzling images of the dream stayed with her as she went downstairs to fetch the paper from her front porch.

Shivering in her cotton pajamas in the brisk air, Tara sniffed the coolness with appreciation before retreating inside. *Autumn's coming.* She loved autumn. She couldn't believe it wasn't everyone's favorite season, with the golden-red leaves, crisp nights, and the smell of bonfires dancing on the air, not to mention Halloween, Tara's favorite holiday. Every year she looked

forward to carving pumpkins for the front porch and passing out home-baked goodies to the neighborhood kids.

"Morning." Her nineteen-year-old brother Irving yawned sleepily as he trudged into the kitchen. "Man, am I beat. I was playing video games at Rusty's till three in the morning. What time did you get home last night?"

"Late. After last call at Gilligan's, we actually drove out to the old Vandermortal house, if you can believe that."

Irving stared at her, suddenly looking both alert and betrayed. "You did not."

"We did." She poured freshly brewed coffee into a mug.

"Tara! I've been asking you to go out there for months with us and you've always said no."

Tara sipped her coffee guiltily. She had actually forgotten Irving's request, or rather his "project," as he called it. Irving and two of his friends were interested in the paranormal. They had been since high school. Eric privately called them a bunch of geeks more interested in video games and UFO's than girls, but there was no denying Irving knew his stuff. He'd read every ghost book in existence, and he and his friends were determined to form a paranormal investigation group. The first logical site for an investigation, of course, was the local haunted house. They had been urging Tara for months to go out there with them, both to show them where she herself had encountered the ghost, as well as to write up their investigation as an article for the town paper. That way, they reasoned, they would get the publicity they needed to be hired for more investigations. Tara, however, felt too embarrassed to be affiliated with such nonsense.

"It was a spur of the moment thing, and I went along for the ride," she confessed. "Look, Irving, I know you guys want to do the whole ghost hunt thing—"

"We're *going* to do it. And if you would just help us out, we could investigate other sites. Why won't you do it, Tara? All we need is one article for publicity. It'd be good for your career too. Maybe the editor would realize what a good writer you are."

She smiled sourly. She'd been pitching story ideas to Henry Hansen, the newspaper editor, for two years now. She knew though that, until she finished her college degree, something that was going very slowly, given her full-time job, he wouldn't even consider accepting a story from her. That frustrated her, because she didn't think the staff writer was any better, but she had no choice but to accept his decision.

"Your faith in me is touching, Irving, but I'm a secretary at the paper, not a journalist. I've told you before the editor is not interested in my work."

"He would be if you wrote a cool article like this," Irving insisted. "Come on, let's go out there tonight."

Tara sighed. She loved her little brother dearly, but she often felt he had no idea how the real world worked. Since the death of their parents, her brother had immersed himself in a world of comic books, video games and this absurd fascination with the paranormal. Since graduating from high school, he had attended classes at the local community college and worked part-time as a hospital orderly. He hadn't had to worry, as she had, about paying their bills and making sure they kept a roof over their heads. As a result, he tended to have a lot of fanciful ideas about both her career and his, whatever it was going to be.

"We can't," she told him, watching his face. "The old Vandermortal house has been sold. It's private property now, and it would be trespassing to go there."

His smile dropped under the weight of his disappointment. "S-sold? To who?"

"No idea. In any case, it's off limits. Sorry, kid."

Irving looked stunned. "But the place is falling apart. No one in their right mind would buy it. It's been sitting empty for years."

"Well, now it's probably going to be torn down. Look, Irving, if you really want to 'investigate' it so badly, you could have done so a long time ago. Now it's too late." Hearing the blunt harshness of her words, she tried to soften her tone. She didn't quite understand her little brother's fascination with ghosts, but she often suspected it was somehow related to their parents' deaths. Perhaps Irving's paranormal interests were simply a way of proving to himself that somewhere, their parents still existed.

"No, it's not. We'll go out there tonight, before the new owner moves in. It'll only take an hour. Not even."

Tara raised her eyebrows. "We?"

"Yes, we. Come on, Tara. You *said* you'd go with us some day. You owe us."

She sighed. "Fine. But we are going in, then out, no dawdling. I'll show you where I saw the ghost, and I'm out of there. Understand?"

He nodded, eyes shining. "Totally."

"One more thing. We go while it's still light out. I don't want to be in that house after dark." Recalling her dream, she shuddered.

Irving looked disappointed for a moment. Then he nodded. "Okay, Tara. Whatever you say."

* * * * *

I must be crazy, Tara thought as she stepped through the weeds in front of the Vandermortal house.

As sunset approached, Irving and his two friends had spent an unbelievable amount of time checking batteries and flash attachments and some kind of ghost device they called an EMF detector. They also carried notebooks, a tape recorder and a video camera.

"Let's start on the grounds," Irving decided. "That old withered garden back there looks pretty spooky."

They walked back to the apple tree where Tara had once thought she'd seen someone... or someone's shadow. As the team began snapping photos of the overgrown weeds, she walked over to the pond and stared down into its murky depths. Then she frowned. The water's surface began to ripple, even though there was no wind. "Guys, over here."

Excitedly, the team converged by the pond, but the water had gone still again.

"Nothing's showing up on the EMF detector," Irving said in disappointment.

"Nothing on the digital camera, either," one of his partners added.

Irving checked the settings on his equipment. "Let's go inside."

She shrugged and followed them into the house. It looked so ominous in the setting sun, its shadows stretching across the yard. The front door still

hung half off its hinges. Apparently, the new owners hadn't had time to do anything to the house besides buy it. Tara cast an uneasy glance at the road before following them in. Part of her feared the new owners would show up and bust them for trespassing. Part of her even hoped they would, just to spare her another walk through the spooky old house.

Irving whistled as they entered the dusty foyer. "Pay dirt. This place is awesome."

Tara glanced around at the first floor she'd only seen by moonlight years earlier. In the fading light of sunset, it was far creepier. Now she could see the old-fashioned wallpaper peeling from the walls, the half-rotted furniture and decrepit floorboards. Affixed to the walls were black iron candleholders she hadn't noticed before and a small footstool rested in one corner. Rat droppings were everywhere. Then she noticed an ancient handkerchief in the corner. She swallowed nervously, wondering who had dropped it there and how many decades it had been waiting in the dust for its owner to find and reclaim it.

"So where was the ghost, Tara?" Irving asked. "Help us out. We're not getting anything here."

She paused before answering. Was that a whisper she'd just heard? The looks on their faces told her she was the only one who had heard it. She shrugged and pointed to the spot on the parlor floor where she and Eric had spread their blanket. "We were right there when I looked back at the doorway and saw her." Amused, she watched them scurry to the doorway and begin recording. "There's also a mirror at the top of the stairs where I saw her in."

"Spooky shit, man," muttered one of her brother's friends. "Oh wait, man, we're getting something. The EMF reader is going crazy."

Tara squinted at the odd-looking device in his hand. "What is that thing?"

"An electromagnetic field detector. It detects fluctuations in electromagnetic fields, which could indicate a ghost."

"Electromagnetic what?"

"Energy sources." Irving rolled his eyes at her ignorance. "The theory is that ghosts manifest by drawing energy from their surroundings, which alters the electromagnetic waves. So if there's a sudden fluctuation, especially between two point zero and seven point zero, that's a good indication you've got a ghost standing there."

Tara frowned. "But where is the electromagnetic stuff coming from to begin with?"

"Microwaves, electrical outlets, refrigerators, you name it," Irving said. "Even the weather and other people. Sheesh, Tara, haven't you ever taken a science class in college?"

She bristled. "I'm a journalism major, not a scientist."

"You're not a very good ghost hunter, either. Normally we sweep the area for a baseline reading of all the appliances, so we can tell if the fluctuation is suspicious—"

"Uh, guys, really," his partner broke in. "I think we've got something here."

A small alarm was beeping on the EMF detector. They all watched the reading rise in silence. "Five point zero," one of the others murmured. Tara felt her hackles rise.

"Are you saying there's a ghost right in this room with us?" Irving whispered. "That is intense, man!"

"It's coming from over there." His friend pointed next to Tara.

"Ssh." Irving hissed. "Let's see if the tape recorder picks anything up."

Tara moved away to stand by the windows. In the early evening light, the old apple tree bent its dark branches to the ground, silhouetted against the pink sky. Something wet touched her neck and she whirled around. "Cut it out! If you guys are going to start playing tricks, I'm leaving."

They stared at her from across the room. "We didn't do anything!"

Yeah, right. She stalked into the dining room. What had she been thinking, coming here with her little brother and his geeky friends? She touched the old pine dining room table, its wood softened with the dampness of years, then peered into the kitchen. It was such a big kitchen, almost restaurant-sized. Then again, the home had revolved around the kitchen back when these houses were built. There were no tidy modern microwaves and bread machines back then. Instead, there were big steaming kettles and fresh poultry killed and plucked, and bread kneaded out on the long flat table. Why, she could almost see it...

Something wet dripped on her arm. "I mean it!" she snapped, turning around. No one was there. An involuntary shudder ran through her. She looked at her arm. Yes, drops of water had fallen on her, seemingly from nowhere. It wasn't just plain water either. The drops were dark and brackish.

It was water from the pond.

Biting back a scream, Tara raced into the parlor. The team had gone upstairs. She was fast on their heels, glad to see the second floor was brighter than the first. The wrap-around porch cut off a lot of natural light to the

downstairs rooms, she realized. Soon, she caught up with her brother and his friends, who were wandering in and out of the empty bedrooms, letting the tape recorder and video camera record in the master bedroom. In the smallest bedroom, the EMF detector went off again. With great excitement, Irving and his friends moved the equipment. A faint violet perfume floated through the room, but only Tara seemed to notice. She fearfully glanced around the room.

"That's enough," she begged. As the house sank further into shadow, a sense of unease grew in her and she was becoming desperate to leave the property. "Come on, it'll be dark soon. Let's go get dinner."

"Just hang on." Irving said with excitement. "I want to take a few more pictures... You can use them with your article."

"Check this out." One of his friends looked proud. "These are new batteries, and they're totally drained."

"What does that mean?" Tara asked nervously.

"Ghosts are thought to drain batteries," her brother told her. "It's a good sign there are other presences here."

"Fantastic," she said sarcastically. "Look, Irving, I don't mean to be a pain, but I told you I didn't want to be here after dark. Can we please leave before we get arrested for trespassing?"

Only a dull glow pervaded the first floor as they trooped downstairs. Passing the full-length mirror, Tara hesitantly glanced in, fearful of seeing the tall woman staring at her. But all she saw was a girl in jeans and sneakers, her long blond hair spilling down over her polo shirt. *Hardly the expert ghost-hunter, more like a frightened amateur.*

Irving's friends seemed disappointed as they collected their equipment in the foyer. "Man, I really thought we were going to see something," one muttered. "This place was a bust."

Tara couldn't believe her ears. "You just said the batteries were drained and you got good EMF readings. What did you think was going to happen, that the ghost was going to welcome you in and offer you a drink?"

The other one shrugged sullenly. "We were looking for a *good* ghost. Something impressive." They went out the front door after casting a betrayed look at Tara.

She turned to her brother in annoyance. "I know for a fact there is a ghost here, whether or not your amateur friends can pick up on it. I've seen it myself. In fact, the last time after everyone left, I stayed inside and some footsteps began to come down the stairs."

Irving brightened. "Seriously? That's pretty cool."

They both waited in silence. Nothing happened.

"Forget it." Irving sighed. "I guess the ghost is gone." He moved toward the door. "Maybe it left when the house got sold."

The front door swung shut behind Irving, leaving Tara in the early evening shadows. *Come on*, she called silently. *I know you're here. Why play shy now?* A definite chill was building around her, but she refused to be frightened. Instead, she walked into the parlor and cast a last look around the place. *I'll never be able to come back here again. I guess this is goodbye.*

She turned to see a tall man with long brown hair staring at her from the foyer.

It was the ghost from her dream. Her breath caught in her throat with a dry rattle. A cold trickle of sweat snaked through her hair as she tried to control the pounding of her heart, tried to get her feet to move. They wouldn't. She was frozen with terror.

"I apologize for not being a good ghost." A hint of sarcasm rode his voice. "You see, being flesh and blood is sort of an impediment."

She couldn't speak.

"And of course, where I come from, hosts aren't required to put on a show for trespassers. All the same, I'm sorry to have disappointed you and your friends."

"You— you—"

"I'm Justin Bremington." His faint British accent made his words sound even more curt. "The new owner who's apparently chased away the ghosts."

He walked out of the shadows and into a ray of fading sunlight. Now she could see him for what he was—flesh and blood. And how. His long silky chestnut hair was loose, framing a tanned but cynical face, and his full mouth held a hint of sensual cruelty. This was not a gullible boy she could flirt with or charm into forgetting the error of her presence here. He was quite a bit taller than her, at least six foot three inches, but it was his amber eyes that mesmerized her. In the glow of sunset, they looked almost golden, like a wolf's. Wide and clear with a thick fringe of dark lashes, they held a deadly intensity.

"I'm— I'm sorry," she sputtered. "We didn't know..."

"That the house had been sold? There's a bright red sign on the front lawn."

"I know. But we— Well, my little brother has been wanting for years to come in here and so we thought this was the last chance—"

Justin continued to gaze implacably at her. Her mouth dried up as she realized how absolutely bereft of excuses she was. At last he spoke. "Yes, I heard the house has been a dare of sorts for the local kids. The realtor told me I might have to contend with that. And now that I've met one, you can tell all your little high school friends for me—stay out."

The sharpness of his tone took her aback. It was a moment before she processed his words. "I'm twenty-four!" she flared. "How dare you call me a 'little high school kid'."

His brows arched. "Isn't twenty-four a bit old to be skulking around haunted houses on dares?"

"We were ghost-hunting!"

He burst into laughter, making her cringe. "That's even worse, isn't it? I thought most adults over the age of twenty-one were smart enough to realize ghosts don't exist."

Now her blood boiled. "I've got news for you. They do exist. And I hope the ghosts in this house prove it to you."

Now he wasn't laughing. He leaned forward and looked her in the eye with his intense amber gaze. "No, I've got news for you. Ghosts don't exist, because if they do, *I of all people would know.*"

The force and passion in his tanned face scared her. Backing toward the front door, she scrambled outside and toward the car, running from the old Vandermortal house for the second time in her life.

Chapter Four

Tara's heart still thudded as she soaked in a lavender bubble bath that night. What was worse, encountering an actual ghost or being snapped at by a maniac stranger? Okay, a very sexy maniac stranger, but still. After all, she and the boys hadn't meant any harm. What was he doing, skulking around in there anyhow? How had he come in without them hearing him, and where had his car been parked? What was the meaning of his cryptic last remark—that if ghosts existed, he of all people would know? What was that all about? Besides being insufferably arrogant, it was a strange thing to say.

With a sigh, she sank further into the warm sudsy water and reviewed her plans for the night. Eric had left her a message on the answering machine asking her to "come over to the party at my place". She knew from experience his idea of a "party" was having a few friends over for beer and maybe shots, while everyone would play whatever new CDs they had bought that week. It wasn't a bad way to pass an evening, but she did wish they could go out more. She wanted to go to plays and concerts or even check out the occasional new restaurant up in the city. Do something different once in a while, something a little more sophisticated than a keg party. Eric hated those kinds of things. His idea of a social life was shuttling between his house, the local bar and every hard-rock concert at the nearby stadium.

Her thoughts drifted to Justin Bremington, the new owner of the Vandermortal house. Arrogant as he'd been, somehow she doubted he spent his Saturday nights around a keg. With his haughty accent and cultured air, he probably spent his weekends at operas and glittering cocktail parties. Then again, it was unlikely someone with such sophisticated tastes would choose to move to their small town. Why was she thinking about him anyway? He'd been appallingly rude to her. What did she care about his social habits?

Eric wasn't really that bad. "It could be worse," she told her reflection as she stepped out of the tub. Like other guys around town, Eric could be a cheater or a chronic gambler. As it was, he was just a little immature. Funny how they were both twenty-four and yet had such different approaches to life. Tara was committed to her career as a journalist and had completed her night classes for years with assiduous devotion. Furthermore, she felt she and Eric weren't far from taking the next step in their relationship—living together or talking about marriage. They would be twenty-five soon, after all, and Tara wanted to have her first baby before she was thirty. It took time to plan a wedding, but Eric acted as if they had all the time in the world. He still lived at home, and though he had a decent enough job working for his father's office supply company, he kept whatever hours he pleased and put in the minimal amount of effort required. He didn't even want to think about having kids, he said, for years.

Well, at least he was honest. Maybe in a year or two he would have some of his partying out of his system.

Toweling off, Tara caught sight of her flushed face in the bathroom mirror. Assessing her body with an objective eye, she felt good about herself. Her breasts were modest in size, but firm and well-shaped with delicate, pink nipples, and she had a very nice waist tapering into rounded, slender hips. *Not a bad body, not bad at all, but that Justin Bremington sure didn't seem impressed.* But why was she even thinking about such a rude, unfriendly man? Unpinning her long hair, she resolved not to think about him again.

Eric's driveway was already full of cars when she pulled up. With a sigh, she parked and entered through the back door. She knew Eric's home as well as her own and his parents had become like her parents since they'd been dating. When she found Eric's dad in the kitchen, she gave him a hug.

"Tara." His eyes lit up with pleasure. "You look nice as always, honey. Would you like a beer?"

She shook her head. "Just a soda is fine, thanks."

"Eric's out back catching up with Mandy, I think." He handed her a diet cola.

"Mandy?" She raised her eyebrows at the unfamiliar name.

"Oh sure, you haven't met Mandy yet, have you? Well, hell, Eric himself hasn't seen her since they were little kids. They're cousins. You go on out back and meet her, honey."

Eric had a cousin named Mandy? This was the first she'd heard of it. But his family was huge, with more cousins and stepsiblings and aunts and uncles than she could possibly keep track of. She walked out back to the patio with a ready smile prepared, but she couldn't find Eric among the many friends sipping beer and listening to the stereo.

"Hey, Tara." Eric's best friend Billy rose from his seat to give her a clumsy hug, smelling of beer. His girlfriend of the previous night was nowhere in sight, but that wasn't a surprise. Billy went through women like Kleenex. "You look great tonight. You looking for Eric? He's down by the pool with Mandy."

"Thanks." She moved on down the stairs to the pool deck.

She saw Eric leaning against the redwood pool fence, arms folded across his bare chest as he listened with a serious expression to the tall slender redhead before him. Obscured by the shadows, Tara watched them for a moment as the redhead repeatedly put her hand on his arm to emphasize her remarks. So that was his cousin Mandy? Funny, they didn't look alike at all. Whereas Eric was blond and broad, with sunny blue eyes, this girl was rail-

thin with russet hair. She glanced to the side for a moment, exhaling cigarette smoke, and Tara caught a glimpse of her face—sharp-featured with dark, knowing eyes. She looked a little older than Eric, perhaps twenty-eight. Something in Tara instinctively recoiled. She wasn't sure she was going to like Eric's cousin.

Well, she couldn't stand in the shadows all night. "Hi sweetie," she called, walking into the deck lights.

Eric's face lit up. "Tara! I wondered when you were going to make it. Guess who this is?"

"Cousin Mandy," she answered lightly. "Your dad told me inside."

"Nice to meet you." Mandy offered her hand. "Wow, you *are* pretty. Eric, you weren't kidding."

"Thank you." Tara laughed politely, though the compliment didn't sound heartfelt. Mandy's dark eyes studied her, as if assessing her, and Tara had the odd feeling she was being searched for weak points. "It's nice to meet you too. Boy, you two don't look alike at all."

Eric and Mandy exchanged a look. "Actually we're third cousins," Mandy said with a smile. "I was just telling Eric that, legally speaking, we could even get married." They both laughed.

Tara laughed as well. Inwardly, she thought, *What kind of bizarre comment is that?* She took a subtle but thorough look at this new cousin of Eric's. Sure, she was attractive enough, in an artificial kind of way. Her long auburn hair was clearly colored, and the two round melon-shaped breasts spilling out of her top hinted more at a surgeon's skill than nature's design. In fact, her implants looked oddly disproportioned atop her thin frame, and her deep tan emphasized the falseness. She was dressed more for a Las Vegas showgirl audition than a laid-back Saturday night in their small town.

"What took you so long, babe?" Eric asked. "I called and called, but you weren't home."

Recalling her visit to the old Vandermortal house, she shivered. "You won't believe this, but Irving talked me into going back out to our favorite place on a ghost hunt. We were out there when you called."

"Ghost hunt!" Mandy said. "Sounds fascinating. Did you find any ghosts?"

"No, but I found the new owner. He was a real jerk to me, Eric. I mean, I know we were trespassing, but he was so mean about it."

"No shit!" Eric looked interested. "Who is he? Why did he buy that broken-down death trap, anyhow?"

"He didn't say. He just told me to get out and tell my *high school* friends to stay out too. Oh, and he assured me ghosts don't exist. God, he treated me like an idiot."

Eric laughed. "Well, it could've been worse. I mean, it's his property now."

"True." She shrugged. "But you had to hear his tone and see his awful, sneering face—"

"Oops, time for another drink," Mandy said brightly, and without excusing herself, walked back to the patio.

"Excuse me for boring you," Tara muttered, but she was glad to have Eric to herself again. "Eric, who is Mandy? Where did she come from all of a sudden?"

"My dad and her dad are cousins. She's great, isn't she? All the guys got excited when she walked in tonight." Eric laughed. "I guess we played

together a few times when we were little, but I don't remember. They moved to California when Mandy was ten, and she just came back to town."

"Fascinating." She heard the snideness in her tone and tried to sound friendlier. "Why exactly did she—"

She was cut off again by a call from the patio. "Yoo hoo! Ricky, did you need another beer?"

They turned to see Mandy leaning over the railing, her fake breasts bulging from her low-cut halter top. Eric laughed awkwardly. "Uh, I'm okay. Thanks."

Tara turned back to face him accusingly. "*Ricky?*"

He shrugged guiltily, sipping his beer. "That's just her nickname for me."

"Whatever. I could think of a few nicknames for her."

"Tara! God, she's my cousin."

"She's your *third* cousin," Tara reminded him. "*Legally marriageable*, remember?" She rolled her eyes. "Look, I'm just saying I don't flash my cleavage at my cousins that way."

Eric playfully swiped at her chest. "That's because you don't have any to flash."

She slapped his hand away and stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"I'm just kidding, Tara. Damn, what's wrong with you tonight? You've never been self-conscious about your small chest before."

"You've never made jokes about it before. What happened, did Miss Hooters make you realize what you've been missing?"

Eric stared at her in disbelief. "Tara, I don't know what I did to start this, but I'm sorry. Third or first, Mandy is my cousin. I would never look at her that way. Or any girl. I love you, Tara. You know that."

After a moment, she sighed. "I'm sorry, Eric. You're right. I don't know what got into me." Sliding her arms around his neck, she gently kissed his full lips.

"No big deal, babe. I just don't want you to have a problem with Mandy. She's a lot of fun, and I'm hoping we can all be friends."

Great. Nevertheless, she put on a happy smile. "Of course."

There was the snap of a lighter, then the faint drift of cigarette smoke. A sultry voice cut through the dark. "Am I interrupting?" They turned to see Mandy coming through the shadows toward them, holding a foamy cup of beer. "Here you go, Ricky. I brought you one anyhow." She dragged off her cigarette.

"What do you know, I'm thirsty too," Tara said shortly and returned to the patio. She couldn't help noticing that while Mandy had allegedly gone off to get her own drink, she had really just gotten a beer for Eric. She wondered just how much of their conversation Mandy had overheard. Probably just enough to know Tara was threatened by her. *Wonderful.* Still irritated, she abandoned her diet soda and poured herself a beer. Tonight of all nights, she needed to take the edge off her nerves.

"Hey, Tara." Unknowingly, she'd moved to stand beside Billy. "What'd you think of Mandy? Is she gorgeous or what? I'm gonna see if I can get Eric to fix me up with her..."

She sighed and drank more beer. All of the guys on the patio were looking down at Mandy by the pool. Like it or not, she was the biggest splash

to hit their little pond for some time. "Billy, what about the girl you were with last night? Can't you stay with the same girl for more than a weekend?"

"Not if I don't have to. What do you think? Would Mandy go out with a big ole loser like me?"

"You'd have to ask her yourself." She could just see it. Billy would ask out Mandy, and they'd have to double date all the time. *Stop it. Mandy's probably a nice person, and you're being snarky for no reason.* Deep down though, she didn't believe that. She finished the rest of her beer.

"Whoa, go easy there, girl." Billy steadied the cup in her hand. "You never drink, Tara. What's going on?"

She shrugged moodily. "I'm just in the mood to indulge tonight." She handed him the empty cup. "Can you get me another one?"

As Billy fetched her second beer, she watched Mandy and Eric chatting down by the pool. They sure seemed fascinated by each other. True, they were family, sort of, but they hadn't seen each other since they were kids. What could they have to talk about? As Billy returned with her beer, she drank it down in a hurry. Tonight she was in the throes of jealousy, and she'd do anything to dull the feeling.

* * * * *

A shaft of morning sunlight cut through the curtains like a sword. It slashed into Tara's eyes like a golden spear, forcing her awake.

She groaned, clutching her head.

She had gotten drunk last night. Very drunk. She had had a second beer, then a third. Then a fourth, and after tripping on the deck stairs and skinning her knee, a fifth. She didn't remember much after that. There had

been music playing. There had been Eric undressing her and putting her to bed.

She looked down. Yep, she was totally naked. How humiliating. Eric had undressed her like a helpless drunk, the way she had helped him off with his clothes so many nights before when he had had too much to drink. What had she said last night? Had she made a fool of herself? Had she said anything bitchy to Mandy?

She groaned again.

"Rise and shine, Morning Glory," Eric sang, walking into the bedroom with a cup of coffee in his hands. "How do you feel today?" He was grinning from ear to ear, and she knew that part of him enjoyed this.

"Like an idiot," she admitted. She pushed her long hair back and tried to concentrate. "My head is killing me. What happened last night?"

"You just had a little too much to drink. No big deal, babe. Here, have some coffee."

Tara sipped it gratefully. "Seriously, Eric, tell me the truth." She set down the cup. "I remember falling on the stairs. What else happened?"

"Not much. Pretty much everyone got tanked last night." He yawned. "Mandy was tired from traveling so she went to bed early. That's about it."

Tara felt partially relieved. "So I wasn't the only one drunk?"

"Not by a long shot. Don't sweat it, babe."

After another sip of coffee, she climbed out of bed. Groping for the shorts and madras shirt she'd worn the night before, she thought of his parents. "You didn't tell your parents how drunk I got, did you?" She had a

long-standing relationship with Eric's parents and couldn't bear for them to know she had actually passed out in their home.

"No, I just told them you decided to sleep over. In fact, Mom made that coffee cake you like." Eric watched her get dressed. He ran a hand up her hip. "Uh, were you going to take a shower before you went downstairs? If so, I think you could use someone in there to help scrub your back."

She smiled at him as she stepped into her shorts. "Not when your parents are right downstairs, Eric. Come on."

The bedroom door suddenly swung open, and Mandy peeped in. Tara quickly covered her exposed breasts with her arms. "Oops, sorry!" Mandy shut the door without going in. "Sorry, Tara, didn't realize you were getting dressed," she called before her footsteps pattered away.

Tara frowned. "Hasn't she heard of knocking?"

Eric shrugged. "She probably just didn't think of it."

"It's your bedroom, Eric. What if you had been getting dressed?"

Eric just shrugged again, apparently without answer. Tara put on her bra and blouse in silence. Eric could act as casual as he wanted, but she just didn't trust Mandy.

Chapter Five

Working the administrative desk at the *Somerset Chronicle* could be a lot of fun most days. Most everyone in town came through their double glass doors at some point to dictate a classified ad, request a copy of a photo or submit a gossip item for the “Sidewalk Talk” section. Tara was usually the first in town to hear the latest scandals, such as the high school principal having an affair with the football coach or the bank president being found passed out drunk on his own lawn. She also got to be the first to hear complaints and accusations of vandalism, speeding in school zones and unfair business practices. Whatever didn’t take place in the *Chronicle* offices took place in the police station and town courthouse, both located in the building across the street. She saw it all during business hours: court dates and lost dogs and middle school kids arrested for shoplifting. She loved it, loved being in the center of small town life. True, this wasn’t the life she had imagined for herself before her parents died, but she was working toward her dreams and one day soon—after she finished her degree—she would be out there in town as a journalist, covering everything from school board disputes to domestic violence.

Or so she hoped.

“Tara, I want these proofed and finalized by one.” Henry Hansen, the *Chronicle* editor, dropped a thick manila folder of article drafts on her desk. “I also need you to review the unpaid classified ad invoices and send the outstanding ones to collection.”

She stifled a groan, looking at the folder. There went her lunch hour. Henry Hansen had a talent for giving her deadlines in the late morning and late afternoon, effectively destroying her chances of meeting Eric for lunch or even leaving on time.

"Oh, and Meredith has some notes she wants you to transcribe." He hesitated. "If you want to go over them, feel free."

"I'll see what I can do," she said coolly. Meredith was a staff writer and Henry's girlfriend, which was the only reason Meredith still had the job. She certainly couldn't write for squat. Henry often asked Tara to proof Meredith's work, which really meant he wanted Tara to edit it. She had done it the first few times to showcase her journalistic skills. Then, she realized his only interest in requesting her help was in acquiring cheap labor to cover his girlfriend's incompetence. "Uh, Henry, can I speak with you later?"

He stroked his tie, staring out at a family walking into the courthouse. In his late forties, Henry had a thin brown comb-over and spectacles that perpetually needed cleaning. Unfortunately, his personality was as plain as his appearance, and Tara found it difficult to talk to him. "About what, Tara?"

She cleared her throat. "As you know, I'm almost done with my degree. This fall is my last semester, and in December I will have my Bachelor's in journalism."

He said nothing, and she flushed. *Would it kill you to congratulate me?* She went on with dignity, "Of course, the college offers job placement services, but my first career choice would be working here. Do you foresee any staff writer positions opening up?"

He coughed lightly and looked at the carpet. "Well, I can't say that I do, Tara. This is a small paper we run here and between Meredith and I—"

"Understood." She smiled graciously, though she longed to scream out an insult about Meredith. "I just thought I'd check before I begin my job hunt in earnest."

Now he looked upset. "Are you saying you'd leave us?"

"Well, yes, Henry. I've earned a degree, and I intend to use it. I don't want to stay an administrative assistant the rest of my life."

A wounded expression crept over his mouth. "But we've come to depend on you, Tara."

You've come to depend on my editorial skills. Having a secretary around who was able to fix his illiterate girlfriend's spelling and grammar was indeed a bonus for him. Not to mention she also served as the paper's photographer when needed. Well, that was going to end in a few months. "I have to do what's best for me," she told him gently.

"Yes, yes. I see." Still stroking his tie, he frowned.

Meredith appeared in the door. As always, Henry straightened up at the sight of her, a happy smile spreading over his face. Tara found it both amusing and sad how much Henry adored her. In her mid-thirties, with black bobbed hair and sharp features, Meredith wasn't a beauty queen. Nevertheless, she possessed an attractively chic style that put her out of Henry's league, and he knew it. He worshipped her. Everyone in town knew Henry's story, how his wife had run out on him years ago and he'd lived a bitter, loveless existence until Meredith had entered his life. He seemed almost pathetically afraid she too would leave him, and that might explain why Meredith got away with a lot of things—sloppy stories, scathing put-downs and overt flirting with other men right under his nose.

Now, as they left for lunch, Meredith flashed a condescending smile at Tara. "I'd appreciate it if you could finish the stories by the time we get back, Tara."

She sighed and opened the manila folder. So far it was a typical Monday, and for that she was grateful. It pushed all thoughts of ghosts, Mandy, and the old Vandermortal House out of her mind. "Let's see," she

muttered, looking through the misspelled articles. "School is starting, the hospital is reminding everyone to get a flu vaccine early this year, there's a dog show next weekend—" A shadow fell across her desk, and she looked up.

It was Justin Brenington. Clad in a white t-shirt and faded jeans, the new owner of the Vandermortal House didn't look quite as otherworldly as he had Saturday evening. His long chestnut hair, pulled back in a ponytail, made him look like a musician or an artist. He couldn't be more than twenty-eight or so, she realized. All the same, she was unsettled by the silence with which he had entered the offices. And those amber eyes were staring at her with a slightly incredulous frown. After an awkward moment, she assumed a chilly professionalism and asked, "Can I help you, sir?"

He didn't reply for a moment. Instead he came closer to her desk and studied her without apology. Then he said, "It's you. By god, you look different. I could have sworn Saturday you were just a kid."

She stood up, determined to seize the advantage. "I dress more casually in my off hours." Dressed today in a violet shift, her long blonde hair up in a French twist, she knew she appeared far more sophisticated than she had in jeans and sneakers at his house. She felt very glad, for Justin Brenington was too good-looking to be easily impressed. No wonder he'd spoken so curtly to her last weekend. He was probably accustomed to women groveling before him. With that in mind, she adopted a haughty expression. "How can I help you?"

At her repeated request, Justin's cynical face broke into a lopsided grin that lit up his face with such unexpected charm she almost forgot he was supposed to be a conceited narcissist. "Aren't we the consummate professional. Yes, you can help me. When I closed on the house, the realtor told me a fair amount of gossip had already begun to swirl about myself and

the property. As you know, there's some local legend about it being haunted and people keep driving out to, well, see who bought it, apparently."

Tara noted the echo of a British accent again. Perhaps that was responsible for his intimidating aura. "It's the town haunted house," Tara told him. "You may not have known when you bought it, but the old Vandermortal house, uh, I mean, your house, is part of Somerset's history."

"I realize that now, which is why I want your paper to do an article on me."

The request was so unexpected Tara paused. "Why?"

"Because the crew I hired for renovations doesn't want a lot of gawkers and kids wandering the property or hiding in the garden. I thought an article could explain to everyone at once who I am and what I'm doing with the house and lay all those questions to rest."

She wanted badly to tell him it was just a tad arrogant to think his house purchase would be front-page news in their small town, but the truth be told, it was. There wasn't much excitement in Somerset and once word about the sale spread through town, the rumors would fly fast and thick. Apparently, they were already beginning.

"I see," she said cautiously. "Well, I'll have our staff writer contact you."

"Staff writer?" His eyes ran over her again. "Isn't that you?"

Tara bit her tongue. "Not yet. I'm finishing my degree this fall. Right now, I'm strictly support staff." She gestured to her desk, a chaos of legal pads, folders, staplers and sticky notes.

"Too bad. I thought your *personal* interest in the house would add a note of enthusiasm to the article." He was smiling for real now, amusement dancing in his luminous eyes.

"Look, I'm not interested in your house," she told him tartly. "The only reason I was even there is because my little brother has some ridiculous ghost-hunting group he wants to put together—"

"And he just forced you to come along?" Justin's lopsided smile grew patronizing now, and she itched to tell him off.

"No, but I had promised him I would show them where I saw the ghost—" Too late, she remembered his last words to her in his house on Saturday. She would have given anything to retract her last words now. "I mean, back when I was in high school— Well, we were drinking and I— It was a cold autumn night, and we were just kids..." She faded in her explanation, trying to think of the right way to put it.

"Oh, is that what happened? The story sure was clear as a bell." He smiled insolently. "You'll make a fine reporter someday."

Another surge of irritation spiked in her. "Listen, normally I'm a little smoother than this, but you..."

He waited. "Yes?" A condescending amusement gleamed in his eyes.

What's wrong with me? She couldn't help the blush that spread across her face. It wasn't like her to be so tongue-tied. What was it about this man that rendered her unable to complete a cogent sentence? "For one thing, I'm smoother on paper than in conversation, but after seeing you Saturday, I'm afraid I'm still a little flustered."

"Because you thought I was a ghost." His smile deepened.

"Yes, and you don't believe in them. So, given your skepticism, you obviously wouldn't want a cretin like me writing the article on your house." He was laughing now, but she went on angrily, "I think the most appropriate action would be for you to leave your card, and I'll have our writer contact you for the story. Unfortunately, she's at lunch at the moment."

He held up his hands, laughing. "Listen, I'm sorry if I offended you. You're quite eloquent when you're angry, do you know that?"

"I'm eloquent most of the time," she said cuttingly. "Now if you'll excuse me—" She gestured grandly to her desk, which suddenly looked pitifully small.

"Of course. I'm sure you have lunch plans."

She shrugged, unwilling to admit she didn't. "Your card?" she repeated.

He pulled one from his wallet. "So you say you're going to be a staff writer after you complete your degree?"

"I hope so. It's a small paper, and they don't necessarily need another writer, but we'll see."

"But you've taken journalism and media classes."

"Yes, I also do most of the paper's photography."

He pulled up one of the chairs before her desk. "Great, then you can do the leg work. I'm pretty busy, you see, and I don't want to set up another appointment with a journalist if I don't have to. Why don't you take notes and she can write them up?"

Tara sighed, knowing how offended Meredith would be at the idea of writing up any notes she happened to take. "We can try, I guess, but I can't guarantee she won't want to see you herself." Especially when word got

around of how good-looking he was. A handsome bachelor was big news in Somerset. Then again, maybe he wasn't a bachelor. "Are you married, Mr. Bremington?" she asked as she reached for a steno pad.

"No," he said curtly. "What the hell does that have to do with an article on my house?"

She looked up, startled by the sudden change in mood. "I didn't mean to intrude. But, well, Somerset is a small town and the first question people are going to have: Is a big family moving into the old Vandermortal house or a single guy?" *A very hot single guy*, she added silently, noting the tanned biceps framed by his white t-shirt.

He relaxed a bit. "Neither. I will be living on the premises, but I'm turning the house into a restaurant."

"A restaurant!" She stared at him.

"That's correct. My family has been in the business for years. My parents run a steakhouse up in the city, and I trained at my uncle's bistro in London." That explained his faint accent. "Until last summer, I had my own restaurant on the coast. It was in a big old-fashioned house much like this one. I figure there are enough chain restaurants everywhere these days. People want a classic dining experience in a beautiful setting, something unique they can't get anywhere else."

"What happened to your old restaurant?"

"It burned to the ground." Suddenly, the heat and enthusiasm lighting up his face disappeared. His eyes turned cold and unreadable. "I'm making a fresh start, you could say."

She nodded. "It sounds lovely." Clearly something had spooked Justin Bremlington, and it obviously wasn't a ghost. It was probably best to let his sleeping dogs lie for now. "Can you tell me what kind of restaurant it will be?"

Justin visibly relaxed as he described his vision of an outdoor dining patio in the garden and a cozier dining room in the parlor and dining room. "I'm calling it La Traviata, after my favorite opera." As he outlined his renovation plans for the first floor and grounds, Tara couldn't help but picture the dusty, shadowy rooms that had frightened her. She suppressed a shiver. Justin didn't seem to notice, so enthused was he with his vision for his future restaurant. "I know it looks decrepit now, but structurally it's quite sound. I've gone to great expense, having engineers and designers in to look over every inch of the place. I can't believe it's sat empty for so long—the moldings and architecture are extraordinary."

"I love the turret," Tara told him, feeling a spark of his excitement. "I always thought it would be a beautiful home once it's fixed up."

"Some of the furniture is quite valuable." His tanned face became alive and passionate again, she noted. "We found an 1800's ottoman that might have been embroidered by the lady of the house herself. And, it turns out that the table in the parlor was carved by John Henkle, the famous craftsman."

Recalling the dust-coated furniture, Tara mustered an unconvincing smile. "So when do you see the renovations being finished?"

He smiled ruefully and brushed away an escaping strand of silky brown hair. "Good question. Ideally, I will be open for business by winter. Of course, it means I have to wait until next summer to use that beautiful garden for outdoor dining. So, I'm paying my contractors serious overtime to get everything done by October. That way, I can have my opening on Halloween out in the garden."

Tara caught her breath. "I love Halloween! It's my favorite holiday. I can just see it, spooky lights strung up in the trees—"

"—and big torches burning on the sides of the garden. I'm even thinking of hiring a band dressed up as skeletons to play on opening night."

"That's fabulous!" She could almost smell the scene—crisp bonfire autumn scent overlaid with candlelit pumpkins and an exquisite gourmet meal. "Justin, this restaurant is going to be incredible. I can't wait to write this story!"

"Story? You're writing a story? Please tell me more," said a voice from the doorway.

Tara wilted as she caught sight of Meredith and Henry returning from their lunch. Hands on her hips, Meredith surveyed Justin Brenington, and it was obvious she liked what she saw. It was apparent from the new gleam in her eyes and the way she smoothed her black bobbed hair as she approached them.

"I'm Meredith Copley," she said in a softer voice, extending a limp hand to Justin. "I'm the chief staff writer, I'm the one you're looking for. Tara is just a secretary."

Justin glanced back at her. "Well, actually, Tara and I were getting a lot done—"

"I'll take care of you." With not so gentle hands, Meredith guided him to the back of the office.

Tara sighed. She looked up at Henry Hansen, who was watching Meredith's and Justin's backs with a hurt expression. Suddenly, Tara felt sorry for him. "Would you like me to give my notes to Meredith?"

“What’s that? No, that’s okay, Tara. In fact, why don’t you type up what you do have and give them to her later?” He glanced back to where Meredith’s black head inclined dangerously close to Justin’s and quickly followed them.

Chapter Six

It was late that night when Tara finished her story. After staying in the office to proofread three of Meredith's articles—all misspelled and awkwardly written—Tara had typed up her notes from her informal interview with Justin. In the process, she'd gotten so interested again in the vision he'd presented that she wound up writing the article. In five brief paragraphs, she summarized the classical, antique setting and the unique dining experience he hoped to provide in his restaurant.

Sick of chain restaurants and predictable menus? Ever wish you could enjoy something new and unusual in Somerset, like a gourmet meal in a lushly authentic Victorian setting? Then get ready for a trip to the past this fall when Somerset's newest restaurateur, Justin Bremington, turns the old Vandermortal house into "La Traviata." That's right, Somerset's most legendary haunted house is about to become its most exciting gourmet restaurant.

The story practically wrote itself, the charge of her excitement coursing through her pen. Though the clock was ticking toward seven in the evening, she typed it up and printed it off, then slid it in a blank manila folder. Perhaps she could show it to Henry tomorrow as an example of the kind of work she could do. If he compared it to whatever article Meredith came up with, he might see that Tara really did deserve a position as staff writer.

Her thoughts turned to Justin. What an unusual man he was. On the one hand, he seemed like a typical pampered rich boy, accustomed to the benefits his good looks and successful restaurant connections brought him. Yet, at the same time, he was undeniably passionate about his work. She couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to date such a driven, fiery man instead of an overgrown adolescent like Eric. What would someone that

intense be like in bed? She could almost imagine it—the burning lust in those amber eyes and the heat of his skin on hers as he slid off her thong...

The office phone rang. She jumped. Heart pounding, she reached for the phone.

"Damn, babe, what are you still doing at work?" Eric asked. "We're doing Mexican tonight. Meet us downtown at Taco Heaven."

"I got stuck on a story. Who's 'we'?"

"Me, Mandy, Billy and you. Maybe some of the guys. Will you be done in a few?"

"Sure." Suddenly the energy of her work went out of her and she longed to be home. She kicked off her heels and began to rub her feet. "I need to get changed though."

"No, you don't. Come on, just meet us for some margaritas."

She glanced at the clock. "Okay. I'll be at Taco Heaven in a few minutes."

She cleaned off her desk, turned out the lights and locked up the offices. The municipal buildings were quiet and the parking lot deserted as she walked to her car. Suddenly, she smelled the violet perfume from the Vandermortal House and felt a strange chill, almost as if someone were right behind her.

She whirled around. "I've got mace!" The parking lot stood empty. Feeling foolish, she unlocked her car and drove away. "This ghost stuff is getting to me," she muttered. "I don't know why Irving is so obsessed with it."

As she pulled up to Taco Heaven, she could hear the music drifting out of the place as someone opened the door to go in. Through the crack, she

caught sight of Mandy's auburn head. All of a sudden, her spirit deflated. In her excitement over Justin and the restaurant, she had forgotten all about Eric's trampy new cousin. She ran a quick brush through her hair, squirted on some perfume, and touched up her makeup. Maybe it was silly, but she didn't want to look plain next to such a flashy woman.

"Hey, babe." Eric rose from the booth as she walked in. His eyes glowed with pride, and for a moment, she was pleased with both of them. She knew Eric liked seeing her dressed up. Slipping into the booth, she noted Mandy's eyes on her.

"You look so sophisticated, Tara!" Mandy exclaimed, as she put out her cigarette. "Now, what is it you do again? Secretarial work?"

Somehow, she made it sound like an insult. "For now, but I'm finishing up night school this fall, then I'll have my degree."

"Great," Mandy cooed. "Ooo, I love this song. Who wants to dance with me?" Sliding out of the booth, she ran to the center of the empty dance floor, where to Tara's astonishment, she began to twist and writhe by herself, as if dancing with a phantom lover.

"Eric, your cousin is crazy!" Billy hooted. "And I mean that in a good way, man!"

All of them watched Mandy dance seductively as if in a trance. Tara stared in exasperation at the ceiling. Why did this woman always have to be the center of attention? And why did these guys fall for it all the time, as if they'd never seen a set of fake boobs before? As Mandy jiggled at the dance floor, Billy clumsily stumbled out of the booth and began to dance with her. The mess of glasses and pitchers on the table made it obvious they'd all been drinking for a while.

"So listen," Tara began to Eric. "I talked to the new owner of the Vandermortal house today. And guess what? He's turning it into a restaurant. Can you believe that?"

"Huh?" Eric didn't take his eyes from Mandy.

"He's turning it into a restaurant." Tara kept on talking, hoping to draw Eric's eyes away from the slut. "I think that's really cool. He's not as big of a jerk as I thought. In fact, he's not bad once you talk to him. I think he's just had some unpleasant experiences with his old restaurant. Apparently, there was a fire or something."

"Huh," he said, drinking his margarita.

"Did you guys eat yet? I'm starving." She opened a menu. "Anyhow, so he's doing major renovations on the place, not tearing it down like we thought. Don't you think that will be cool?"

He didn't answer.

"Eric?"

"Yeah?"

She waited to see if he would notice her silence. He didn't. Instead he laughed with delight as Billy slipped on a wet spot on the floor, then yelled, "Sit down, you drunken doofus!"

Summoning her self-control, Tara got up and went down the hall to the back bathroom. *Okay, so he's a little drunk. It's not a big deal. He's worked hard all day, and he deserves a little fun.*

But just once, she wished they could unwind from their day together over a quiet meal, and not over beers or margaritas in a downtown pub.

"Tara!" a drunken voice hollered.

She turned to see Billy lurching down the hall toward the men's room. Wincing, she avoided him as he tried clumsily to hug her. "How's my best friend's pretty girl?" She frowned, waving the alcohol fumes from her face as he squeezed her waist. "Lookin' good, Tara... I love it when you're all dressed up for work. Goddamn, you have a nice body." He fell against the wall.

"Get a hold of yourself, Billy! Come on... I'll help you to the bathroom." Looping his arm around her shoulders, she guided him down the hall. She decided not to make an issue of it when his hand brushed her left breast. "There. Now for god's sake, lay off the drinking tonight... You're drunk already."

"Sorry," he mumbled. His fingers moved over her breast again, and she shoved him away, disgusted.

She went into the ladies' room, wondering how she could tell Eric she was going home. Heating up a frozen pizza in front of the TV was preferable to hanging around here tonight, but Eric would feel rejected. "Help me," she told the mirror. The blonde girl staring back at her looked tired and hungry. She needed to go home.

The door opened and Mandy walked in, dressed from head to toe in black. Tight leather jeans and a sleeveless tank top showed off every inch of her trim, dancer's physique, as well as her ample cleavage. "Hi!" she said in a sugary voice. "That's such a nice color on you, Tara. Lavender suits your innocence."

Whatever that meant. "Thanks. Black suits you as well." Let Meredith interpret that however she wanted.

Mandy fanned herself, flushed from dancing. "God, it's hot in here! So what do you think, Tara? Ricky's got some cute friends. Who do you see me with?" She winked.

Anyone who lives far, far away. "What's your type?"

"Hmmm, good question. Well, I love blue eyes in a man, and I love blonde hair. I also like guys who know how to have fun, who aren't too serious about life."

She had just described Eric. "Well, Billy has dark hair, but he's a lot of fun. He's single."

"Yeah, Billy's okay." Mandy came closer and stared at her with her enormous brown eyes. "So, how serious are you and Ricky?"

"Pretty serious," Tara said shortly. "I love him and he loves me. By the way, he may have been called Ricky as a child, but these days, he goes by Eric."

Mandy lit a cigarette, ignoring her last comment. "The two of you are so different, but hey, that can work, right?"

"It does work. It works for us."

Just then, the door to the ladies' room swung open and Billy stumbled in. "I need another drink," he slurred. "Who's with me?"

Mandy began to laugh. "Billy, you're so crazy!" As Meredith assisted him, Tara slipped out and returned to the booth, where she told Eric she was going home. Predictably, he was annoyed.

"Aw, man, you never want to have any fun." He pouted.

"This isn't fun for me, Eric. Look, I just want to go home. Call me tomorrow, okay?"

His goodbye kiss was distant, but the relief she felt driving away from Taco Heaven was worth it.

* * * * *

The nights are definitely getting cooler, Tara thought as she drove home with the windows down. Turning onto her tree-lined residential street, she noticed fewer kids roaming the sidewalk, fewer of her neighbors gathered on their front steps with bottles of beer or glasses of lemonade in their hands. School started the next week, and for that, she felt relieved. September was always a good time for the paper, with lots of school activities to write up and photograph, and the usual summer vandalism went down as kids got busy again. Of course, her own last semester of college was also starting. She was determined to ace her journalism courses this semester to bring up her respectable GPA even more. When she graduated, she was going to be aggressive and ambitious when seeking a good job, just like any good journalist would be trying to get the scoop.

She saw her little brother Irving and his friends sitting on the front porch when she pulled in. She suppressed a sigh of exasperation as she realized they were waiting for her. Would this day never end? She felt as if one person after another had needed something from her all day.

"Guess what?" Irving blurted as she got out of the car. "We got something on film!"

"No idea what you're talking about," she replied as she walked past them into the house. The boys dogged her heels, but she ignored them. Turning on the kitchen lights, she put her purse down and looked at the clock.

It was after nine and she still hadn't had dinner. She picked up a peach from a bowl of fruit and nibbled it. She didn't have the energy for anything more.

"The photos at the old Vandermortal house!" Irving practically shouted. "Look!"

Sighing, she sat down at the table as they unfurled an array of photos of the old house. Trying to be patient, she glanced through the photos of the garden, the pond, the empty rooms. "All I see is a rotted staircase and peeling walls."

"No way, man. *Look,*" urged one of Irving's friends.

He tapped a photo of the small bedroom where the EMF detector had gone off. Then she saw it. A faint shadow against the wall. It looked like a person. She felt a shiver run down her back and was immediately annoyed with herself. It was a shadow, so what? It was probably a trick of the light.

"And then look at this one," the other friend bragged.

She looked at a photo of the parlor. Or rather a photo taken from the parlor. There at the bottom of the staircase was a barely perceptible white shape. Mostly transparent, it bore no features of any kind, and yet the shape of it was all too familiar. The tall, slender form. The shape of a long gown. The outline of an elaborate hairstyle piled on top of the head.

A cold knot of fear formed in Tara's stomach. She pushed the photo away. Then, fascinated despite herself, she reached for it again. There it was, finally documented for everyone to see: proof that the ghost she had seen really existed.

"Hold on," Irving said. "You haven't seen the photo of the pond yet." He slid before her the most disturbing photo yet, for it featured her looking into the water. Everything appeared normal at first. Then, she saw her shadow,

cast by the setting sun. Another shadow lay across the grass right next to it—yet, there was only empty space where its owner should have been.

She shuddered, unable to stop herself. Okay, this couldn't be denied. The old Vandermortal house did have a ghost. It had to, whether it made sense or not. She swallowed uneasily, looking again at the disembodied shadow next to her in the photo. Once she showed this to Justin, surely he would see that despite his personal beliefs, something very supernatural was afoot at his new restaurant.

Then she realized she couldn't show this to Justin. She would destroy whatever credibility she had established with him this afternoon.

As if reading her mind, Irving said, "Tara, we have to go back. You met the guy—can't you call him and explain? I mean, the dude's going to want to know if his own house is haunted."

She shook her head. "No, Justin doesn't like any ghost talk. He made that very clear."

"But Tara, look at these pictures! You can't deny—"

"No, Irving," she said firmly. "Look, you wanted to investigate the house and you did. Now it's time to move on."

"But we got pictures," moaned one of his friends. "And there's a voice on the tape recorder."

She paused. "What voice?"

Smiling, Irving took out the tape record and pushed "Play". There was silence, or rather the rhythmic thump of the cassette unspooling, then suddenly, there was a whisper—"not here". Or so it sounded to her. She replayed the tape.

Veronica Wilde

Not here.

A bone-quiet whisper, neither male nor female, and it gave her chills to hear it. She played it again.

Not here.

She shoved the recorder away. "That's freaky." She was trying not to shake.

"Don't you see?" Irving said. "The ghost was trying to communicate with us!"

She gave him a disdainful look. "Yes, I believe she was telling us we didn't belong there. Basically she was saying, get out!"

They exchanged a look.

"What?" The realization hit her. "Oh no. There's more, isn't there?"

Irving pushed "Play".

More silence unspooled. Just as Tara's mind began to wander, there was a voice on the tape. "*In the water.*" It was clear as a bell.

In the water. Tara remembered the drops of pond water sprinkled on her arm during the investigation. Her skin turned cold. The ghost wanted something from her or wanted her to know something. Something about the pond. But what?

Irving replayed it. "Did you hear it?" He began to rewind it again for another replay. "It sounded like the ghost said—"

"Yes, I heard it!" Tara felt almost sick. "Look, the whole thing is creepy. I don't need to hear whispers from beyond the grave to know we were trespassing."

"But the whisper said, '*In the water.*' What do you think that means? Maybe something valuable is buried there." Irving's face was alive with delight, and she realized this was his shining hour. Finally, he had proof that his beloved ghosts existed.

"Or maybe someone died there." As for her, she wanted nothing to do with the Vandermortal ghost again. She wanted to forget the haunted house and its watery ghost and pretend this had never happened. It was just getting too creepy. "Look, I had a hard day and I don't want to talk about this anymore," she said tersely. "I'm going to bed." Leaving them with crestfallen faces, she picked up her bag and went upstairs. Once in bed, she tried to think of anything but ghosts, but she couldn't shake the feeling that somewhere out there, a ghost was thinking of her.

Chapter Seven

When Tara arrived at work the next morning, the office hummed with commotion. With just one day before they went to press, Henry bustled around in a flurry of nervous activity in his office, scouring articles, ads and layouts for flaws. Meredith was out covering the repairs on the town bridge. The graphic artist, who did their layouts, was running in and out of Henry's office, trying frantically to satisfy all of his complaints. Outside, the late summer rain fell, and the customers coming in to buy ads and submit "Sidewalk Talk" items dripped water from their umbrellas and slickers.

Just a typical Tuesday at the *Somerset Chronicle*.

Tara was locking up her purse in her desk drawer when she noticed something. The folder with the story she'd written and printed last night about Justin's restaurant was missing. She went back to Henry's office. "Uh, good morning. Henry, I had a manila folder on my desk last night with an article in it. Did you take it?"

"Tara, I don't know what you're talking about," Henry said anxiously. "Have you seen my red marker? I can't find it. And did you get the proofreading done? I need it now. We're only a day from press, a day from press."

"I know," she said gently. Henry always worked himself into a tizzy on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, though he'd been getting the weekly paper out on schedule for two decades now. "The proofs are on your desk right there. As for your red marker, I'll get you a new one."

"I want my old one!" wailed Henry. "That's the only one I can edit with, you know that!"

What a baby, Tara thought in disgust. She shut his door and walked back to the woman waiting at the front desk. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I have an item for 'Sidewalk Talk'." The woman's face was glowing and not just from the rain. "I heard that—well, don't tell anyone!—but I heard the old Vandermortal House has been sold! The old haunted house, can you believe it?"

Tara stifled a smile. "That's actually common news at this point. In fact, we're running a feature on it this week." Suddenly, she realized Meredith hadn't left her the article on it to proof. Maybe they would go to press with it next week.

"Oh." The woman looked disappointed. "But I heard it was a big secret!"

Tara shrugged. "The 'Sold' sign is right on the front lawn. I think a lot of people know by now."

The day passed in a flurry of proofs and layouts and last-minute phone calls. Sometimes, Tara felt like she worked at a big city paper, rather than a sleepy small town gazette whose big stories were the local 4-H shows and high school football games. Henry was a perfectionist, however, and held the paper's standards to journalistic excellence very highly. *If only it extended to his girlfriend*. After lunch, she remembered her story and printed it out again for Henry's review, even though she knew he wouldn't have time to see it until they went to press.

Meredith didn't return until the afternoon. Barely acknowledging Tara, she went into her office and shut the door. A few minutes later, Eric stopped in.

"Hey, beautiful." He looked a little sheepish and she knew he felt bad about last night. "How about you let me take you out for a coffee?"

"Can't right now." They kissed hello, and she continued on to the filing cabinets. "I have a ton of things to do today, Eric. It's Tuesday, remember?" She had told him repeatedly that Tuesdays and Wednesdays were her busiest days when she absolutely could not goof off and had to work late, but he never seemed to remember.

He shrugged. "Okay. Well, maybe Thursday night we can go out. Get a nice dinner, just the two of us."

Surprised, Tara blinked. It was so rare it was just the two of them, without all of his friends around. "That would be great, sweetie." They kissed again and he left to return to work.

The rest of that day and Wednesday passed quickly. As always, once the paper was put to bed, the exhausted crew celebrated by ordering a pizza. This was Tara's favorite time of the week, when they all sat around and talked shop. She felt she learned more about journalism on those nights than any other. Even Meredith wasn't so bad as she drawled through amusing stories of whoever she'd had to interview that week. Tara sometimes entertained everyone with stories of the "Sidewalk Talk" submissions, but this week Meredith dominated the discussion. Did they think Justin Bremington's restaurant would be a success? How could that old moldering house possibly be renovated, and in time for Halloween?

"I don't know," Henry said, "but I do know you have a date for opening night." He smiled shyly at her, but Meredith was clearly occupied with her own thoughts. Tara felt bad for him. Despite Henry's flaws as a boss, he was a lonely man who worshipped the ground Meredith walked on. If only she appreciated him, maybe the office environment would be a little more relaxed.

"The Bremingtons are a well-known family in the business," Meredith went on thoughtfully. "So he must know what he's doing, despite his young age. He said his restaurant on the coast burned to the ground. I wonder if

somehow I could find reviews for it online. It would give us an idea of what to expect from him and—”

“Meredith, leave the man alone,” Henry said peevishly. “We’ll find all that out as time goes on.”

“But I need to know now!” Meredith said silkily. “Honey, I’m an investigative journalist. I’m meant to be curious, remember?”

“And I love you for it,” Henry cooed, leaning over for a kiss.

Gag me.

Tara threw out the paper plates and empty pizza box when everyone finished. Henry, Meredith and the rest of the staff vanished out into the drizzly night as Tara vacuumed up the crumbs and stacked the empty soda cans in the recycling bin. As she locked up the silent office, she felt a wave of depression come over her. True, she would have her degree in a few months, but who was to say anything would change? Maybe this time next year, she would still be cleaning up after everyone and proofing other writers’ work without credit.

Feeling lonely, she drove home through the drizzle. On a night like tonight, she could almost see why her little brother and his friends were so fascinated by ghosts. It was something magical, something different from the mundane world, which was slowly numbing her soul.

* * * * *

The next morning, Thursday, she awoke feeling better. Remembering she had a date with Eric that night—a real date, a romantic dinner, not some beer fest involving his friends—her heart immediately lifted. Padding downstairs in her pajamas, she yawned. An early autumn rain was hitting the windows, a sure sign summer was over. As she brewed the coffee, she went

out and picked up the *Somerset Chronicle*. As always, she felt a brief pride in the role she played in producing the newspaper. Maybe she wasn't the staff writer yet, but she still contributed in many valuable ways.

Then she saw the headline. *Haunted House or New Restaurant?* Meredith's byline was beneath.

Quickly, she scanned the article. Her eyes bugged out as she read the first few lines.

Sick of chain restaurants and predictable menus? Ever wish you could enjoy something new and unusual in Somerset, like a gourmet meal in a lushly authentic Victorian setting? Then get ready for a trip to the past this fall when Somerset's newest restaurateur, Justin Bremington—

It was the article she had written! Meredith had swiped it from her desk and turned it in as her own! Her blood surging with anger, she finished the article. Not a word had been changed. Meredith hadn't even tried to cover her tracks—clearly, she didn't consider Tara's anger any real kind of threat.

She stormed off to the office that morning before her coffee was cold. Meredith was in Henry's office, the two of them discussing the "Sidewalk Talk" items in low voices. Tara barged in. "Just the two people I want to see. Henry, why did Meredith get the credit for my article on La Traviata?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Henry said in a thin voice, "Tara, what are you talking about?" He rubbed his head as if she was giving him one of his ever-present headaches.

"I'm talking about *this*." Tara pointed to the article. "I wrote it, and I left it on my desk Monday night. In fact—" She looked for the folder she had left on Henry's desk on Tuesday. "There it is. After it vanished from my desk, I reprinted it for you to look at." *Not that you ever would.*

He sighed. "Tara, I don't know what this is about—"

"It's about Meredith stealing my La Traviata article, Henry! Will you at least look in the folder?"

After a moment, Henry did. Meredith had gone very stiff next to him, but Tara could feel her mind working feverishly. "Okay..." His brows furrowed as he read. "Yes, it's the same article, so what?" Then he realized the implications. "Oh."

"'Oh' is right. The paper didn't come out until this morning, so I couldn't have seen Meredith's article. She stole it from me, Henry."

Henry turned nervously to Meredith. "Sweetie, can you explain this mix-up—"

"I believe I can." Meredith's voice was poisonously sweet. "Tara, I did take some articles from your desk Monday night, articles of mine that you had proofed. Apparently, I grabbed the La Traviata one by mistake." She indicated the paper. "I guess I turned it in instead of my own by accident. I'm so sorry, Henry."

"Oh! Well, then." Henry laughed nervously. "I knew there had to be some explanation. Well, look at that, Tara, your work got into print! You should be proud!"

Meredith grinned up at her with a nasty look.

"It doesn't have my byline under it," Tara said quietly. "It has hers. By the way, Meredith, can I see the article you wrote?"

Meredith raised her eyebrows. "Tara, it almost sounds as if you're calling me a liar."

You bet your thieving ass I am. “Not at all!” Tara said, adopting Meredith’s sweet tone. “I just want to compare the article a real journalist would write to my own. You’re such a good writer, after all. Don’t you think that would be a great idea, Henry?”

As always, Henry was disarmed by any compliment for his beloved. He beamed. “Absolutely! Sweetie, go get your article. It’ll be a great learning experience for Tara.”

Sure it would. Tara wasn’t surprised in the least when Meredith never returned with the article, as Tara was sure it didn’t exist. Not that she would let her forget it. Oh no. She wanted full credit for her abilities and talents, and it was becoming markedly obvious she’d have to fight for it.

The main newspaper line began to ring around eight-thirty and never stopped. Everyone in town wanted to know more details about the old Vandermortal house. Some were excited at the prospect of a new restaurant, and some were outraged over the loss of the town haunted house, but all of them wanted to know more. Tara answered as patiently as she could.

It was still pouring at one o’clock when the door opened. For a moment, the sound of teeming rain hitting the street filled the office, then a tall man stepped in, shaking out his long wet hair over an expensive-looking coat. Tara half-rose from her seat, so shocked was she at seeing such a good-looking stranger in Somerset.

After a moment, she realized it was Justin Bremington.

“Hey there, Tara.” He grinned his lopsided grin, and despite herself, she felt a nervous fluttering of attraction in her stomach. With his long chestnut hair loose and wet, he looked like a Greek god come to life—and less like the coldly intimidating man who had chastised her last week for trespassing. His amber eyes were luminous as they rested on her, and she

wondered if he was just pleased about the article or if he could just possibly feel the same connection between them that she did. "How are you doing?"

"Great." She decided the glow in his eyes was due to the rainy day outside, rather than her. She adopted a professional tone to mask her delight at seeing him. "Can I help you with something?"

He laughed. "Are you always so efficient? Actually, I stopped in to see Meredith. I just wanted to thank her for writing such a great article on La Traviata. The tone was exactly the note I hoped to strike."

Tara felt herself color with anger. "Uh, that was actually my article you read. They just put Meredith's byline under it. So, thank you."

"Really! Huh." Justin seemed surprised. "You're a good writer. Do you normally pen articles for the staff writer?"

"Only when they're stolen off my desk in the dead of the night," she replied wryly. "Can I get you a towel? You look pretty wet."

"That'd be great." Justin still seemed puzzled as she disappeared down the hall to the office kitchenette. Calming herself, she was looking in the cupboard for a clean towel when she heard a voice.

"Justin! What are you doing here? Oh, you're all wet. You poor thing."

She could never mistake Meredith's sugary tone. Curious, Tara crept to the door and listened. "Is that a Burberry jacket?" Tara knew exactly what Meredith was doing—fondling or stroking his coat. It was Meredith's idea of subtlety. "Oh, I love Burberry coats on good-looking men. So, what can I do for you?"

"I just stopped in to see Tara," Justin answered. "I wanted to thank her for the article."

Meredith simpered. "Oh, do you mean my article? It's gotten a lot of positive response so far. I think we can promise you a big opening night, Justin."

"It was my impression Tara wrote the article."

There was a moment of silence.

"She helps edit the articles sometimes," Meredith said finally. "But she's just a secretary really. So listen, do you have time for lunch?"

Tara decided it was time to cut in. Returning down the hall, she feigned surprise at seeing Meredith. "Here you go," Tara said sweetly, handing the towel to Justin. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Henry approaching and realized it was the perfect opportunity to bust Meredith. "So, did I hear you two were heading out for lunch?" she asked in an innocent tone.

"Lunch?" Henry repeated in a troubled tone. He looked anxiously from Justin to Meredith.

"Oh, I'm afraid I can't." Justin squeezed some of the water from his long hair. He looked as uncomfortable with Meredith's flirtations as Tara had hoped. "I really just stopped in to say hello."

Henry was clearly relieved. "Great! Listen, Justin, the article on your restaurant has been a big success. The phone's been ringing off the hook. I was thinking we could do a running feature on it—regular updates on the renovations. What do you think?"

"I think it's an awesome idea. Certainly it would keep interest high. It'd be great publicity for the opening."

"Excellent. Tell you what, I'll send Meredith out there next week—"

"I'd prefer Tara," Justin said calmly.

Tara looked out the window at the rain, trying not to blush.

"What?" Henry's eyes darted around the room, and Tara could tell the approaching conflict was already giving him a headache.

"I understand Tara wrote this morning's article," Justin stated.

"Well, uh, she did but that was a publishing mistake—"

"She grasped exactly what I wanted to say. I want her to do the updates," Justin cut in calmly.

There was a moment of silence. The plinking of raindrops against the glass filled the room. Then Henry coughed. "I'm afraid that's not possible. She's not a staff writer. Tara is just our secretary."

Justin shrugged and set the towel on the desk. "Never mind then. It'd probably be too much of a bother anyway, having journalists disturbing the contractors—"

"Well now, wait," Henry said with another anxious cough. "Maybe we can work something out. Tara does handle our photography sometimes. Maybe we could do a series of photo essays."

The phone rang again. Tara answered it, only to be confronted with another question about the old Vandermortal House. This woman wanted to know, would he still keep the ghosts after opening the restaurant? Tara stifled a laugh as she told the woman quite seriously that ghosts were notoriously difficult to control.

"I guess you're right," the woman said sadly.

"You're Somerset's newest celebrity," Tara told Justin as she hung up. "I can't believe our call volume this morning."

Henry wrung his hands, still looking anxious. "I never dreamed people would be so interested in this. Tara, can you go out with Justin this afternoon to take some pictures? It'd be good to get some before major renovations get underway."

Tara swallowed. The idea of being alone with Justin in that house on a gloomy day disturbed her a little, though she refused to show it. Not only would she be alone with the sexiest man she'd met since dating Eric, but she would be returning to the ghost's territory. Remembering the voices on her brother's tapes, she repressed a shudder. But that was silly, wasn't it? If she really wanted to be an intrepid photojournalist, she couldn't let a few ghosts scare her away.

Besides, Justin didn't believe in ghosts. So either their little jaunt would go smoothly or he would be in for an unpleasant surprise.

"Sure, I can go anytime." She noted with satisfaction that Meredith was glaring at Henry.

"Let's hit the road then." Justin flashed his mysterious smile, and they left.

Chapter Eight

What a thrill to leave behind her secretarial duties to set out on a real assignment! Having expected a day behind her desk, chained to the endlessly ringing telephone, Tara felt she was getting a vacation. Justin guided her through the drizzle to a silver Lexus parked at the curb. She tried to conceal her surprise. So Justin was pretty well-heeled, was he? She glanced at him as they pulled away, wondering again how old he was. For someone who had already built and lost a restaurant, and acquired the money to buy another, he sure looked young. Despite the weariness in his eyes, his tanned face was smooth and his tumbling hair was thick and full. At the same time, there was a seriousness to him that made him seem years and years older than Eric.

Then again, she herself felt years and years older than Eric sometimes.

When they were in the car and driving away, she glanced at Justin's hands on the steering wheel. Maybe it was the confident way he drove, but even they seemed more experienced and active than Eric's hands. Again, she caught herself wondering what it would be like to have sex with someone that bold and dynamic.

The downtown streets were empty, everyone having been driven indoors by the rain, but as they left the residential neighborhoods and moved into the country, the rain lightened. Tara lowered her window, inhaling the fresh scent of wet wildflowers and damp earth.

"Country girl?" Justin asked, throwing her an appreciative glance.

"No. I live in town, not too far from the paper actually."

"And you live... alone? With your parents? A boyfriend?"

"With my brother. The one I was at your house with." She blushed, recalling the ridiculous spectacle she had been, skulking around an abandoned house with cameras and tape recorders.

"Right." Justin smiled. Flipping his hair over his shoulder, he accelerated as they hit a long stretch of empty road. "Did you turn anything up that day? Catch any spooks or ghouls on film?"

Catching the mockery in his voice, she said quickly, "Hey, it wasn't my idea. My brother's the one who's interested in ghosts. I just went along for the ride." She wondered if she should mention the voices on tape, or the odd shadows and shapes in the photographs. *No*. Justin was sophisticated and well-traveled. He'd already made his disdain for ghosts very clear. She'd only sound like more of a small-town fool if she told him those things.

"But you said you did see a ghost there when you were in high school."

She shifted in her seat, reluctant to share the story with him. For one thing, he would laugh at her. For another, it would entail telling him about Eric, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to do that. "What do you care, Mr. Skeptic?"

He smiled again. "Fair enough."

"Anyhow, given that you don't believe in ghosts, how are you going to deal with the restaurant diners who are going to go there because they want to see a ghost?"

"Am I being interviewed?" His voice was still teasing, but she shrugged.

"It's a valid question. I don't think you realize what a big deal your house is to this town. It's like a landmark. Kids from all over the county go in at night and look for ghosts. Once it's open to the public—"

"Sounds like it has been all along."

"—a lot of people will want to go there out of curiosity alone." She thought of something. "Is that why you bought it? To exploit its reputation?" She glanced at his profile, wondering if he was more calculating than she thought.

"I didn't know about its reputation when I saw it." They turned onto Stebbins Road, which was lined with big oak and hawthorn trees already beginning to turn color, and she felt her heart quicken with anticipation. "I just knew it was the right house, and at the price they were offering, I'd have been a fool not to take it."

Once again she cast a quick glance over the leather interior of the Lexus. Despite his casual jacket and jeans, he didn't look as if he cared much about bargain-hunting. Maybe the house had had the same initial mesmerizing effect on him as it had on her. "And you've never been, you know, spooked?"

He swung the car into the driveway. She averted her eyes from the house, which managed to look especially foreboding against the gray sky. "Not once."

Her heart raced as she followed him in through the back door. It just felt too odd, walking into the haunted house of the town's nightmares as if—well, as if it was someone's residence or a business. But it would be both now. Finding herself in that massive kitchen she'd admired before, she was surprised to see it had been almost completely dismantled since her last visit. Cupboards and drawers were pulled from walls, and everything was covered in a light dust of plaster. In one corner was a pile of old cooking utensils—the copper kettle and old pots and pans.

"We're going to hang them as part of the décor," Justin said in answer to her glance. He tossed his jacket over the table, and she averted her eyes

from his well-muscled arms. "Here, let me show you what we've done in here."

He led her through the dining room and parlor. The old velvet chairs and marble-topped table had been removed, along with the wall-mounted gas lamps. The faded wallpaper had been stripped from the walls and the floorboards were covered with dust. A gaping hole loomed in one corner of the floor. Tara peered doubtfully into what was apparently the darkness of the basement.

"I know right now it looks like an earthquake hit it, but six weeks from now, this place is going to be restored to its old glory. You won't recognize it. Shouldn't you be taking some photos?"

"Oh, right." Embarrassed, she began fumbling with the camera, avoiding his amused amber eyes. "So you said you'll be living upstairs? That must be difficult with all of the renovations going on. Doesn't the noise keep you awake?"

"Since I'm an insomniac, that wouldn't be a problem. I rarely sleep." His voice sounded bitter again, and she wondered if anyone besides her seemed to hit his sore spots so frequently. Having a conversation with Justin was like crossing a verbal minefield. "As it happens, I'm staying at a hotel for now. The second floor won't be inhabitable for another few weeks."

"That's too bad." She raised her camera and snapped a picture of the dismantled parlor, and as she did, the low battery light flashed on her camera. She tried another photo, but it was no use. As she watched in astonishment, her camera went dead.

"Old batteries?" Justin asked, noting the dark camera.

"No, they were brand new." As she opened the battery door, she recalled Irving's comment about how spirit activity drained batteries. The

same thing had happened on their investigation. She put the camera away, refusing to be spooked. "Sorry. I really wanted to get shots of the house at this stage too. I guess your crews are working pretty fast, huh?"

"Almost round the clock. I have two, a day crew and a night crew."

A cold breeze wafted behind her. She shivered, conscious of her long damp hair plastered against her shirt. "You know, it's almost a shame. I'm kind of going to miss this place... the way it was." She turned to Justin, expecting to be mocked, but he was looking around with a sentimental expression.

"I feel the same way," he admitted.

He looked so good standing in the shadows, his long hair hanging wetly around his shoulders. She tried not to look at him, aware of her desire to pull off his shirt and bury her face in the warmth of his bare chest. For a moment, only the sound of fat raindrops hitting the windows filled the house. For no reason at all, she remembered Eric's clumsy seduction attempt here that night in high school. How ridiculously crass and adolescent he'd been. Now, if he'd brought her here on a rainy afternoon, that might have ended differently. She could just see it, blankets to warm her against the late summer chill and Justin slowly pulling off his t-shirt in the glow of the flickering candles...

Or rather, Eric pulling off his t-shirt. *Eric*. What was she thinking? Her face burned with embarrassment, and she turned away.

A muted roar of trucks approached. "Sounds like the day crew is back from lunch," Justin said. "Would it help if you use my camera? It's a decent piece of equipment."

"We can try."

His camera was the most expensive she'd ever handled, but it too went dead in her hands. Tara had to suppress a giggle as Justin frowned and worked on it. "Isn't that the damndest thing," he muttered. "It was working fine yesterday... Well, at least let me give you the tour."

They headed up the winding staircase. The full-length mirror where she'd first seen a ghost all those years ago still stood at the top, and she avoided looking in it. However, she noticed immediately that the barren second floor was so clean it practically sparkled, all cobwebs and broken toys and peeling wallpaper long gone. Otherwise, it looked as faded and ancient as before, not having yet undergone the same reconstruction as the first floor. The smaller bedrooms were full of boxes and trunks, and the master bedroom was absolutely empty.

"This will be my room, so I'm doing this one first," Justin explained. "It won't require much work, but the bathroom needs a complete overhaul." He showed her the rusty claw-foot tub. "I love old Victoriana, but a modern bathroom is one essential I insist on. I might even knock down a wall and put in a Jacuzzi." He knocked against the wall in question, but all she could think of was Justin, wet and naked and rising from a bubbling pool. God, what was wrong with her? She was practically engaged to Eric.

"Do you have any other cameras?" she asked, making her voice detached.

"There might be a digital camera downstairs. Let's look."

They returned downstairs, where the day crew was busy ripping up the parlor, and Justin went in search of the camera. Somehow, it seemed bizarre to Tara to see these men dressed in their flannel shirts and drinking cups of coffee in such an antiquated setting. Through the windows she could see other workmen moving through the wet, overgrown garden. Suddenly she

remembered the vision she'd had so long ago—tables in the garden with white-coated waiters bending over guests. Would that really come to pass?

She thought of the voice on the tape whispering. *Not here. In the water.* She also remembered the drops of pond water falling on her arm seemingly from nowhere. She shuddered, wondering what had happened in the pond so many years ago, not to mention what horrible surprises the ghost might have in store for La Traviata's future customers. She wondered if the ghost resented Justin. At least he was preserving the flavor of its old house. When it was renovated, it would look as lovely as it ever had. Was that why the ghost had yet to make itself known to him?

Justin emerged from the kitchen with a digital camera. "Let's see if this works."

It did. For the next hour, she snapped photos of the torn-up parlor and kitchen as well as the workmen dismantling parts of the walls. Then they went outside, where she photographed the front yard, the barn and the wet, dismal garden. The rain had lifted, leaving a fragrant breeze wafting from the damp fallen apples. There was more to the estate than she knew. Behind the pine trees bordering the garden stood a decrepit equipment shed, and the lifeless pond connected to a burbling creek. Though these photos wouldn't run in the paper, she photographed everything, knowing Justin would enjoy them as a visual record of the renovations. He walked at her side, pointing out the old elm tree and the weeping willow with its branches sweeping low to the ground, the architecture of the turret. Then he pulled her back suddenly, a finger on his lips. A rabbit had hesitantly hopped out of the field, its brown fur ruffled by the breeze. Quietly she snapped its picture and smiled with delight.

"You enjoy the country," Justin observed as the rabbit took refuge in the weeds. "So many people don't."

Pushing back her long hair, she checked the camera settings. "I've always wanted to live out here. It's so beautiful."

He frowned. "Here, as in.... here? This house? Or the country in general?"

"Both." She glanced at him, wondering how much of her connection with the house she should reveal. Would he be offended if she told him of her strange attachment to the property—and its resident ghost? "I mean, I always liked this house, even when it scared me. I was kind of disappointed when I saw someone had bought it."

That same violet perfume wafted past. That was *not* a ghost, she insisted to herself. Yet she couldn't help surreptitiously glancing around the pond for wildflowers. The ground was bare. *It's just the wind*. But at that moment she thought she saw something move behind the apple tree—a shadowy figure. She thought of the harsh whisper on the tape—*in the water*—and shivered.

"You're getting cold," Justin said, misinterpreting her shiver. He rubbed her back sympathetically. "Come on, let's go inside."

She looked quickly away, knowing her face might betray the swift arousal that flooded her.

Back in the house, he led her upstairs and wrapped a thick cable-knit sweater around her shoulders. She avoided his eyes, ashamed of her body's treacherous response to his touch. Justin Bremington was not her boyfriend and he wasn't even her type, despite his good looks. He was way too wealthy, way too volatile and way too complicated. Just last weekend, he'd snapped at her and made her feel like a fool. So why was she so attracted to him? Emotionally, he baffled her, but physically he excited her to an almost demonic degree.

Suddenly, there was a sound of a motor outside. Justin sighed. "Another ghost-hunter. You weren't kidding about the curiosity factor."

She smiled weakly. "Somerset is a small town, Justin. It doesn't take much to get us excited."

"You don't say," he said wryly. "Here, come down with me as I chase them off."

Amused, she followed behind him down the stairs. *Who would it be?* A bunch of high school seniors hoping to complete their senior dare? Those busybodies from the Somerset Historical Society?

But after a firm step on the front porch, a blond head poked in the door. "Tara?"

It was Eric. Eric had actually come here looking for her.

Chapter Nine

"Um, hi sweetie," she said after a moment. Her tongue was tied, but she knew she had to say something fast. No one had to tell her how bad this looked—to both men. Why hadn't she mentioned Eric to Justin? Now, it would look like she'd deliberately concealed the fact she had a boyfriend. As for Eric, well, seeing her bounce downstairs behind a good-looking guy like Justin wasn't going to please him. In just his t-shirt and with his long hair, Justin looked more like a male model than the grouchy home owner she'd described last weekend.

Justin glanced at her. "You know him?"

"Yes." She avoided his eyes. "Eric, come on in. This is Justin Bremington, the new owner."

Justin shook his hair back and offered his hand. "Nice to meet you, Eric."

Taking his measure coldly, Eric shook his hand. Then without another word, he addressed Tara. "What the hell are you doing out here? We were supposed to have dinner tonight, remember?"

She glanced at her watch. Damn, was it really after five? "We never go out until six or seven..."

"I didn't even know where you were. I called the paper and they said you'd ... come out *here*." Eric pronounced here as if Tara was visiting a prison or a slaughterhouse.

"The assignment came up kind of suddenly, but we're done now." She handed the digital camera back to Justin. "Uh, Justin, since I don't have the software for this camera..."

"I'll download the photos and email them to you at the paper. Thanks for coming out, Tara."

"No, thank you." She glanced at Eric, praying he'd wait until they got to the car before picking a fight, but no such luck.

"I don't understand why you're here in the first place," Eric said huffily. "Shouldn't Meredith be handling stuff like this? You're just a secretary. Since when do you go out on assignment?"

"Just a secretary?" Tara stared at him. "I run that entire office, Eric! And for your information, that was my article about this place on the front page today! And I—"

"Eric, Tara, I hate to interrupt, but I need to be going," Justin interjected smoothly.

Tara was suddenly aware of the arriving night crew watching their little spat. Humiliated, she walked out the front door into the chilly evening. Why had this had to happen? Somehow, the mutual respect and rapport she'd established with Justin this week seemed to have completely evaporated, and she felt like a stupid kid again, which was exactly how she'd felt last weekend. Why did Eric have to show up here acting like a jealous adolescent? And calling her just a secretary? That was unforgivable. He had to realize this job was her first good chance to move up at the paper.

Eric was silent until Justin got into his car and drove away. He stared at her in the encroaching dusk. "So what the hell is going on, Tara?" he finally asked. "I come out here and find you upstairs with some pretty boy who drives a goddamned Lexus and—"

"Eric, shut up! I was out here on a job. This is a good thing, not something bad. Why do you have to make it sound like I was doing something wrong?"

He made a skeptical noise and got into the car, slamming the door. She did the same before he could drive off and leave her there.

"And what the hell is the deal with you putting me down in front of him?" she asked. "You know damned well I'm trying to work my way up at the paper, Eric. This is big deal for me, getting to cover a story like this. So why would you try to make me look like some incompetent office clerk in front of him?"

Eric snorted, but didn't say anything.

"Answer me. I did nothing wrong today, Eric. I wasn't late for our date. And for you to bust in on me on the job like that was asinine. *Asinine.*"

Again, he didn't respond.

Fine. Play your childish games.

They drove back into town in silence.

Tara was forced to speak as he pulled up without a word in front of their favorite Chinese restaurant. Apparently their date was still on, but it didn't feel all that special to her, given her damp blouse and limp hair. Even her shoes were uncomfortably wet from traipsing around Justin's garden. She had hoped to go home and freshen up first.

She glanced at Eric. "Uh, sweetie, are you terribly hungry? Because—"

"Yes," he said shortly before he slammed the car door. Without waiting, he stalked into the restaurant.

Wow. She hadn't seen him this jealous in—well, she'd never seen him this jealous. Eric just wasn't the jealous type. If anything, they had had their worst fight this summer because she didn't feel he was jealous enough. They'd been at an outdoor concert where several of the girls had taken their tops off,

and he had encouraged her to do the same. She'd been aghast at his casual attitude. *You really don't care if all these men see me topless?* she had asked. But Eric had been eager to show her off. And *that* had bothered her. There weren't a whole lot of young single men in Somerset and certainly none that she'd want to date. He knew that, knew he didn't have to worry about losing her to another man.

And now here she was with another man on her mind, a man whose sweater was still wrapped around her shoulders.

Suddenly feeling guilty, she shrugged it off and hurried into the restaurant. Eric looked morose as he sat at their favorite table. Quickly, she deposited her keys in front of her chair, kissed him on the head, and said, "Be right back."

She raced off to the bathroom. Yep, she looked as bad as she thought—smeared mascara, no other makeup and rain-tangled hair. After some fast repairs, she walked back to their table, took a deep breath and sat down.

"I'm sorry about this afternoon," she began.

"No." He held up a hand to stop her and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I acted like an ass."

She smiled, a warm relief flooding her. She hated fighting with Eric. "It really is a good opportunity for me, sweetie, but I realize now I shouldn't have stayed out there so long without letting you know."

He shrugged despondently. "I guess I was just surprised to see *him*. I don't know, somehow I was expecting some old guy. But he's what, twenty-eight? So yeah, it looks a little odd to me, Tara. He blows into town, drives a fancy car, talks with that pretentious accent, and when he needs a reporter out at his house, he asks the cute blonde secretary to come with him instead

of the regular middle-aged reporter. *Not* that I think you're unqualified!" he added quickly to stave off her anger, but Tara was too amused at the description of Meredith as *middle-aged* to be angry. "It's just that I know how men think, babe. You're not thinking of him that way, but he's probably thinking of you that way."

But she was thinking of him that way. Feeling guilty again, she dipped a Chinese noodle into a little dish of sweet and sour sauce.

"I'm sorry for getting mad," she said after a moment. "But Eric, I was so proud of the article I wrote. Everyone loved it, and they all think Meredith wrote it. I just want to be recognized as a good reporter, you know? So if this guy thinks I have the chops to cover his story, then, yes, I want to do it. It's not just flattering, it's a big chance for me to prove myself."

"I completely understand," Eric told her, covering her hand with his. "And it was an incredible article. Mandy and my parents loved it. They can't wait until the restaurant opens."

Mandy. Suddenly, she remembered that while Eric was getting upset with her over an innocent job, he had a hot-to-trot distant cousin staying under his roof. A distant cousin who wasn't quite distant enough. "Oh right, Mandy," she said, trying to sound positive. "Whatever happened with her and Billy that night?"

"The night at Taco Heaven when you went home early? They hooked up. Apparently, she rocked his world." Eric laughed dirtily, annoying her. How was it that Mandy was enough of a cousin that she could stay with his family and sleep in the next room from his, yet she wasn't so much of a cousin that he couldn't listen to sex stories about her? Not wanting to be drawn into an argument, Tara refused to show her disgust.

"Well, it's nice they're dating. Too bad she's leaving." Recalling Billy's wandering hands at Taco Heaven, she thought he and Mandy would make the perfect couple in some ways.

"Oh, she's not leaving. She's going to stay for a few months, maybe permanently. She really likes it here." Eric enthusiastically helped himself to the noodles.

A stone sank in Tara's stomach. Mandy was staying here? In Somerset? "Really?" She strove to keep her voice light. "Somehow she seems a little, well, flashy for Somerset. I'd think small town life would be boring for her."

He shrugged. "She says she likes it. She says she's looking to settle down."

Sure she was. Tara couldn't shake off a bad feeling about Mandy. All she said was, "Then maybe she and Billy will work out."

Eric chuckled. "Maybe they will and maybe they won't. Billy's still got some oats to sow, you know. Hell, I think if you and I weren't together, he'd be hitting on you. He's always saying how hot you are."

Gross, Tara thought in disgust. She'd never been attracted to Billy or his beer-sodden lechery toward women, but she said nothing.

When their meals arrived, Tara began to relax. *Forget Justin Bremington, forget Mandy, forget Meredith and the paper and everything else in this town.* Looking across the table into Eric's loving blue eyes, she felt reconnected to the love and the history they shared. True, he could act like a witless child sometimes, but Eric loved her. In the end, he was always there for her. That was what mattered.

"I love you," she told him, kissing him in the car.

"I love you too." Running one hand through her hair, he smiled tenderly at her. "So what's it going to be? I know your car is still parked at the office. Do you want me to drop you off there and meet you back at your place?"

She began to agree, then remembered that her brother's ghost-hunting group was meeting at their house tonight to discuss their "findings." "Yikes, we'd better not. How about your place? Do you think your parents are asleep yet?" Nights like this reminded her of why it was such a pain Eric didn't have his own place.

"They're out of town, and Mandy's out with Billy. We'll have the place to ourselves." He gently caressed her leg, and Tara felt a current of excitement race through her.

"Oh yeah?" she asked teasingly. "What do you have in mind?"

He smiled. "It's a little cold out to go swimming, but there's always the hot tub."

The hot tub. Now that posed some interesting possibilities. Eric's parents had installed it last spring, but they hadn't yet had the chance to break it in, so to speak. Every time Eric and Tara thought to use it, his parents had been home, forcing them to be on their best behavior. Tara smiled. "Gee, I'd love to, but unfortunately I forgot my bathing suit."

"Darn. Guess you'll just have to go naked then." Eric sighed.

"Guess I will."

Bluish moonlight bathed the backyard as they disrobed on the back porch, then walked outside to the warm, bubbling tub. The crisp September night caressed her bare skin with a chill, so that sinking into the hot water was ten times as heavenly. She let out a deep sigh. All of the day's discomforts fell away in that moment—finding her article under Meredith's name, the damp

clothes and wet shoes from tramping around Justin's garden, the argument with Eric. None of it mattered anymore.

She opened her eyes to see Eric gazing tenderly at her. "You are so beautiful." The underwater lights of the hot tub cast an aquatic glow on his face. His bare chest gleamed above the water, his lower torso murky. Tara swallowed at the sight of him, and then his eyes drifted southward to her topless breasts. "Show me," he whispered. "Show me what you want."

She swallowed again. It was always difficult to touch herself in front of Eric, but it was also arousing. He seemed to understand that, his blue eyes narrowing with lust as hesitantly, tentatively, she began to caress her own breasts. The familiar heat flooded her face as her fingertips circled her nipples. Softened by the warm water, they now stiffened into two pink erect points.

"Come over here," Eric said roughly, "and put those in my mouth."

She slid through the water, the warm solidity of his body meeting hers, then her stiff nipples were in his hot, soft mouth. Eric tongued and sucked them until she moaned. She arched her back, feeling a liquid heat spread through her body. As two of Eric's fingers began to stroke her pussy, a line of fire descended directly to her clit. It was going to be fast tonight. "I need you," she gasped. "Oh Eric..."

He raised a wet, lust-drunk face from her tits. "Feel this," he breathed and wrapped her hand around his hard seven-inch cock. The feel of him made her gasp again, and without thinking, her thighs opened wide. With a wide grin, he lifted her hips and positioned the tip of his cock against her softness. She bit her lip. Then he slowly lowered her body, until she groaned at the feeling of that hard, muscled rod sliding into her.

Eric made a low guttural noise. "God, you feel good." His hands squeezed her ass, and he shoved her gently in a little closer, driving himself

further inside her. Tara gasped again at the feel of his entire seven inches filling her, his balls resting gently against her. Then Eric pulled her back, laughing at the expression of disappointment on her face as his dick withdrew from her body.

"Eric," she begged.

"All in good time, babe. All in good time."

He loved to tease her. Slowly, he lowered her again onto his body, causing her to close her eyes in pleasure at the feel of being filled again. She let out a long sigh of contentment and worked her knees around him for more control.

"Oh no, you don't," Eric said, guessing what she was up to. "I'm in charge here." He pulled her up again, and this time as he left her pussy, she let out a howl of frustration.

"Eric!" she whined. "Come on!"

"Come on what? Tell me." A merry lust danced in Eric's eyes.

She dropped her head, letting her long wet blonde hair cover her burning face. "Fuck me," she whispered. "Fuck me good."

"That's what I want to hear." Gripping her hips, he slid her back onto him, impaling her until his hot seven inches were buried deep inside her. She began to moan as with arms of muscled steel, he began to lift her up and down as easily as a sack of flour, gradually picking up speed until she was almost out of her mind with sexual frenzy. As she bounced up and down on his lap, her breasts jiggled wildly in his face. Eric gazed at them with fascination, his balls tightening beneath her. A molten heat circled through her body, collecting in her pelvis, then suddenly, her every muscle went rigid with tension. Her orgasm coursed through her like hot white light, making her howl

and bite Eric's neck with need. Her pussy shuddered relentlessly, closing around Eric's cock, until she felt him gasp and spurt inside her. Her throbbing intensified anew, and she gripped the edges of the tub to dispel some of the energy coursing through her.

"Oops!" said a coy female voice.

Tara went cold with shock and embarrassment. Trying frantically to cover herself, she rolled off Eric, who quickly covered his fading erection with his hands. Shaking her wet hair back, she turned to see Mandy standing over them on the patio.

Mandy was clad in a sheer, short white nightgown. In the greenish hot tub lights, every detail of her nude body was exposed under the see-through chiffon, from the erect pale brown nipples on her perfectly round breasts to the shadow of pubic hair between her legs.

"Oops!" She giggled again. "Just came out for a smoke... Didn't realize you guys were out here!" The short hem of the nightie was just grazing her thighs, and as she stepped back toward the door, it lifted just enough to reveal her pussy for a brief moment. Eric made a small, unconscious noise in his throat.

Bullshit, Tara thought bitterly, wiping her wet hair from her eyes. They'd been making enough noise for anyone to have heard them. Mandy had deliberately staged the whole thing. She'd probably come home, heard them out here, and quickly put on that short, sexy nightgown. She'd do anything to shift the attention back to herself. And how long had she been standing there? How much had she seen? It made her sick to think of Mandy watching her ride Eric with such abandon, moaning helplessly.

"Don't leave," Eric begged in a low voice, grabbing Tara's wrist as she wrapped a towel around herself. Mandy had gone back in the house, but Tara

couldn't help noticing he was hard again. Even for Eric, that was pretty damned fast, and she couldn't help but wonder how much of his erection was due to getting such a good look at his nearly-nude cousin. No matter what his intentions, Eric was still a twenty-four-year-old man, after all, and he had just seen his first live naked woman besides her in almost two years.

"Why? Seems like a full house to me," she said tersely, hooking her bra. "I thought she wasn't going to be here, Eric."

"She said she was spending the night with Billy, she must've come home early."

Tara cast a withering glance at his erection and felt sick. There was no way she wanted to have sex with him again tonight. Not only had her own amorous mood been destroyed, but she'd be wondering the whole time if he was picturing Mandy instead of her. Not that she thought Eric wanted his cousin, or rather, his third cousin, but after Mandy had waltzed out on the porch flashing her pussy and DD-breasts, it was only natural.

"Come on, babe," Eric pleaded. "Spend the night with me in my arms, like we used to."

She shook her head. "I don't think so." The sour taste in her mouth lasted all the way home.

Chapter Ten

September began in a glory of golden-red leaves and cloudless blue skies. As school started, Tara found her photography skills in demand for quick assignments on the high school football team, the cheerleaders and the Harvest Festival at the elementary school. She began spending more time out of the office than in it. *Just like a real reporter*, she thought with pride. At least once a week, she drove out to Justin's house to document the renovations. The *Chronicle* readers loved the photo essays and Tara got a kick out of seeing her name in the credits.

At first, she had thought Justin was kidding himself in planning for a Halloween opening, but the crews he had hired worked quickly. Already the old Vandermortal house was just a memory. In its place stood the beginnings of La Traviata, the freshly painted, newly wired and extensively reconstructed restaurant everyone was sure would be a success. The interior of the house was like new, the polished wooden banisters gleaming, the newly laid floors solid under thick oriental carpets. The fireplace had been cleaned out, revamped and would soon burn nightly to warm the dinner guests. In the garden, the spooky overgrown weeds had been cut, the soil overturned, and the perimeter of pine trees trimmed. The following spring it would bloom with flowers, but for now it was barren, and the old apple tree and elm tree had been left to add an appropriately gothic touch.

The second floor, however, looked almost as untouched as it had the first time Tara had entered the house in high school. Like the rest of the house, it had been cleaned and rewired, and the old wallpaper stripped from the walls, but other than the master bathroom, absolutely no renovations had been done. Given that this would be Justin's home, Tara found the delays confusing. Why wasn't he eager to move into his dream home? Was he going to live at the hotel forever?

"This will be stunning when you get around to furnishing it," she said pointedly one day as he showed her old clippings he had found on the Vandermortal house. They were up in his "office," which was really just a small room of boxes and unpacked files.

"I hope so," he said casually. "What do you think, Tara? I was going to frame these clippings and mount them on the foyer walls. Give the waiting diners something to read, a sense of the house's history. Oh, and look at this!" He pointed to a small footstool. It looked incredibly old but in good condition. "That's the antique needlepoint ottoman I was telling you about. It's from the late 1800's. The lady of the house might have done the needlepoint herself. I just had it appraised. It's still stuffed with the original horsehair. How about that? I'm thinking of placing it in the dining room for atmosphere."

"It's very beautiful." She walked over to examine the ottoman closely. How cool to think that this might have belonged to the ghost herself. Then she glanced down the hall at the unfurnished rooms and could not longer contain herself. "Justin, why aren't you doing anything up here yet? If this was my house, I wouldn't be able to wait to start painting and redecorating. It's a beautiful house. Aren't you just, I don't know, *itching* to dress it up?"

He smiled absently, wiping his neck. The early autumn coolness had given way to a humid Indian summer. "All in due time, Tara. All in due time."

She couldn't figure out his reluctance to move into the house. He had to be spending a fortune on hotel bills, and he was at the house all the time anyhow, but she had learned not to press Justin for secrets he obviously wasn't willing to surrender. What was behind those brooding amber eyes? Something complicated, something painful—of that, she was sure. Behind the discipline and control, and the seemingly boundless energy with which he was creating *La Traviata*, there was something wild in Justin Bremington. She saw it looking out of his eyes sometimes, a raw and primitive emotion he never

once expressed. Was it grief? Heartbreak? Or rage? She didn't know. She only knew that it often lessened in his eyes after she'd been around for a while, that she seemed able to bring a genuine smile to his lips and a light to his eyes that no one else could. At other times, when she turned toward him unexpectedly to find him watching her, she even thought she saw a heated hunger in those eyes. Or so it seemed to her.

Despite the chaos on the first floor dining area, Justin had already hired some restaurant staff—a head chef, a sous chef, and a few servers. He had also hired a manager, a rather gawky-looking local girl named Becky who was so enthusiastic about running the dining area that she was literally spilling over with ideas. She walked everywhere with a legal pad, feverishly scrawling down Justin's every word, her frizzy black curls bouncing as she nodded in agreement with whatever he said. Tara feared he would get annoyed with her, given his quick temper, but he seemed to respect Becky's attentiveness. Yet, Becky apparently shared Tara's fears about Justin's temper because she looked relieved one day when Tara showed up with her cameras. "Thank god you're here." Becky let out a big sigh.

The chef behind her nodded.

"Why? What happened?" Tara quickly unloaded her equipment.

"Nothing big. He just got in a little argument with one of the landscapers. Something about trimming down the apple tree." Becky and the chef exchanged a knowing look.

He was obviously Justin. Though Tara knew he treated his new staff courteously, they definitely seemed to be as intimidated by him as she sometimes was. Justin didn't realize how intense he could seem.

"So, what is my being here going to do?" Though she knew it was ridiculous, she hoped Becky and the chef might give her some insight into Justin's feelings for her.

"Put him in a better mood," Becky said. "He's always happy when you're around."

"Isn't that the truth," said the chef. "He's like a totally different person. Smiling, joking, relaxed... You bring out the best in him."

Tara walked into the adjoining room to hide her smile, but Becky followed. "So is it true that this place is haunted?" she asked eagerly. "I've been out here four times now and I haven't seen her yet, but I want to! I'm betting when the restaurant opens, all kinds of stuff will happen."

Tara frowned. "Her?"

"The lady who haunts this place. The one whose son died." Becky looked expectantly at Tara, as if she should know all about it.

Tara shook her head. "I heard it was haunted, but I didn't know there was a story."

Becky shrugged. "My grandmother said it was a big scandal when she was young. There was a little boy here who was picking violets for his mother when he fell into the pond and drowned. His mother never got over it, and she killed herself."

Tara paled. It was such a horrible story to hear repeated casually on a sunny afternoon, but something in it beyond just the tragedy itself resonated with her. *Not here. In the water.* Were those the words of a woman seeking her lost child? Was that why the ghost had dripped water on her? Perhaps her spirit still searched the pond for his body to this day. Tara felt sick at the thought.

"Aw geeze, did I scare you?" Becky asked. "It's probably just my grandmother making up stories. Her memory's not the best."

Tara shook her head, feeling silly. "No big deal." It would not be a good idea, she decided, to tell Becky that the grieving mother was still on the premises.

Justin strode into the house, slamming the door behind him. His sun-browned face was tight with tension, but when he saw Tara, he broke into a dazzling smile. Something caught in her chest as he did so. By god, he was a good-looking man. "When did you get here?"

"Just now." She pulled out a manila folder. "I wanted to show you the latest batch of shots. Henry will pick the ones for the paper, of course, but I thought you might want to use the others for promotional materials."

Justin frowned. "Promotional materials? For a restaurant?"

"Well, sure..." Gathering her confidence, she plunged on. "Some of the local hotels carry material on local restaurants. I thought you could do a brochure, include a story of the house with some photos, and menu highlights inside. I could write it for you..."

Justin pushed his long hair over his shoulder, studying the materials. "This is a great idea! We could even have them here to give the waiting diners something to read. Becky, are you getting this?"

"Absolutely!" Becky scribbled furiously.

Tara couldn't help but smile. Being here was so much fun sometimes.

It was so much fun, in fact, that September seemed to be flying by. Her last semester of night classes had begun. For her final journalism project, she wrote up a pretend investigative series on the history of the old Vandermortal

house and its transformation into La Traviata. At the paper, Henry was so pleased with her photos that he was sending her out on more assignments. She often caught Meredith glaring at her from her office, but Tara only smiled and waved. *Let Meredith get ticked off.* She suspected Meredith wasn't even as irritated about Tara's photo essays as she was about Justin's failure to respond to her charms. Each time he came into the paper office, Meredith would slink across the carpet and link her arm with his, insisting he come to her office for one trumped up reason or another. Sometimes she wanted his menu advice for a dinner party, other times she wanted his opinions on her articles. When Tara glanced into Meredith's office, Tara could see her perched up on her desk, flashing as much leg as she publicly could. That was Meredith—subtle all the way.

If Henry noticed, he crushed his thoughts in nervous mutterings of deadlines and ad space. Tara wished he would grow a backbone and dump Meredith, not just for his own sake, but for the sake of the paper. But it would never happen. After each flirtatious encounter in her office with Justin, Meredith would emerge with an explanation of how it was vital for her articles to get an outsider's opinion, or she would insist she was maintaining cordial relations with a business that was sure to become the talk of Somerset. "I'm a journalist. I need to network to get the scoop. It's good for the paper, sweetie."

It wasn't necessarily doing any good for Meredith though. Justin began dropping by the office less and less, soon coming only when summoned by Meredith to "approve" her articles on La Traviata. One rainy evening, he stopped in as they were putting the paper to bed. After speaking briefly to Meredith, he strode directly to Tara's desk, rolling his eyes at her. She tried unsuccessfully to conceal her smirk, and they both burst into laughter.

"Don't," Justin begged. "Just don't. Don't say it."

"You're mighty popular," Tara murmured through another smirk.

"But *why*? I have never given her any reason to think I felt... What does she think is going to happen?" He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. Then he shook his head and looked at Tara with fondness in his eyes. "Enough about that. Listen, Tara, I want to thank you for all the work you've done. I was hoping you would do me another favor that would also be a way of paying you back."

Tara frowned. "Sure, but... What are you talking about?"

"We're opening in a month. I was hoping you'd be one of my guinea pigs for some of the dishes I'm putting on the menu. Would you come to dinner at the house tomorrow night?"

"I'd love to!" She tried to keep the excitement out of her voice. It would be just like one of her dreams... A beautiful dinner on one of the marble-topped tables by candlelight, Justin's intense eyes gazing into hers... She forced herself to snap back to reality. "Should I bring anything?"

"Just your appetite. Oh, and your boyfriend is invited too, of course."

Was it her imagination or were Justin's eyes suddenly veiled with coolness?

"I think he has plans. It'll just be me."

"Even better." He smiled at her now with genuine warmth and left without another word.

Tara glanced out the office windows, but it was too dark and dreary to see much outside. Instead, she saw mostly the office reflection in the glass, including Meredith staring at her with a face of rage.

Oh no. A coldness crept over her as she wondered how much of that Meredith had heard and seen. Their voices had been low, but had she heard them make fun of her? Had she seen Justin roll his eyes in the window? There was only one way to find out. She stood up, preparing a friendly smile on her face. "Meredith, I was wondering if—"

But Meredith had gone back into her office and slammed the door.

Oh well. She couldn't afford to worry about Meredith's hurt feelings right now. She had enough to worry about, including Eric. He had been upset with her lately, saying she spent more time on schoolwork and her job than on him. She had avoided the subject, knowing he was right, but also knowing he got even more upset when she told him she disliked spending time with Mandy. After flaunting herself in the see-through nightgown, Mandy had apologized profusely and Eric considered the matter closed, but Tara thought better. His darling "cousin" had been an almost ubiquitous presence lately, accompanying them with Billy to every movie, every bar, every dinner. Tara was entirely sick of her, but admitting that to Eric would bring on a fight. She could never admit to him what she hated admitting even to herself—that she would rather spend her free time photographing the renovations at La Traviata than going out with him.

She sighed. In a few months, everything would be simpler. She'd be out of school, Mandy would have left town, or at least left Eric's house, and Justin... Well, her photo essays would be over and she wouldn't be spending any more time with him.

A small ache settled in her throat.

She shook it away. It was best to concentrate on the present, which included dinner with Justin tomorrow night.

Chapter Eleven

She was dressing for dinner the next evening when the phone rang. A sixth sense told her who it was before Irving yelled up the stairs. "Tara, it's Eric!"

Great. His timing couldn't be better. How was she going to explain tonight to him? "Hi, sweetie."

"Uh, hi, Tara." Eric sounded guilty.

She frowned. *What was he up to?*

"Where are you? I can hear music in the background." She glanced at her bedside clock. It was five-thirty, primetime for Happy Hour. No doubt he would ask her to come down and meet them at the bar and then what would she say? *Sorry Eric, I'm having dinner out at La Traviata tonight. No, it's just business. Really!*

"We're up at that little bar by the river." Eric spoke very slowly and carefully, and she knew he was half-drunk. "Billy's dad has a boat up here, and we're going to go out on it tonight. I just didn't want you to wonder where I was."

She was careful not to show her relief. "How long have you been up there?"

Now he sounded even guiltier. "Uh, since about two or three."

She frowned. "Did you leave work early?"

"Hank and I had a little fight." Hank was his boss, and it was not uncommon for Eric to challenge him. One day, Tara was sure he'd carry it too far. "So I took off."

Great. Now she understood the purpose of the call. Eric had gotten in a fight with his boss, stormed out of work, and spent the rest of the afternoon drinking with Billy up on the river. He was calling now so he'd be free to party the rest of the night. At least, Mandy wasn't there. "Be careful. I don't want to hear about your drunken self getting fished out of the river tomorrow."

He laughed. "We're just going out on the boat. I'll call you tomorrow, okay, babe?"

That was too easy. She walked back to the mirror and stared at herself. She wore jeans and cowboy boots and a simple shirt, but had dressed up the outfit with her white shawl and a matching set of silver Art Deco earrings and bracelet. She wanted to look good tonight, but not as if she were going on a date. Because this wasn't a date, was it? It was just...a favor. A simple favor. That was what Justin had said.

No matter how many times she told herself that, she couldn't deny the flutter of excitement in her stomach as she pulled up to his house thirty minutes later.

"Tara, you made it! Come on in." Justin grandly gestured with his hand as he opened the door.

La Traviata looked different tonight. It looked, well, like La Traviata, a gourmet restaurant, and not the old haunted Vandermortal house. The first floor dining room had been transformed by the soft gas lamps burning on the walls, a rich Oriental carpet and classic ivy-patterned Victorian wallpaper. A cheery fire crackled in the massive fireplace, which had been stocked with a black grill and irons, and polished cream-clothed tables of varying sizes were placed across the room. Tara felt a small thrill run through her. "Justin, it's so beautiful. Somerset has never had anything like this."

"That's what I'm hoping." He escorted her to a table with a hand on the small of her back. "But décor isn't what's going to sell this place—the food will. Have a seat and let me try to dazzle you."

For the next hour, she tried a baby green salad with artichoke vinaigrette, followed by crab cakes with fresh chive sauce and tomato concassée, followed by broiled portabella mushrooms on a bed of spinach and feta. She sampled the roasted garlic mashed potatoes and bacon-wrapped beef tenderloin in a gorgonzola pecan sauce. Finally, she waved off the other dishes the server brought out from the kitchen. "Come on, I can't eat all this. It's too good—I'm stuffed."

Justin and the chef watched her hopefully. "Can you give us feedback on the dishes?"

She felt embarrassed. "Well, I'm not used to gourmet dining so I don't know how valuable my opinion will be, but I thought it was excellent. All of it. I've never tasted anything like it."

A lopsided grin unfurled across Justin's face. "Really, Tara? You're not just saying that?"

She shook her head, dabbing her mouth with the cream-colored linen napkin. "It was incredible, Justin. I just may wind up being your biggest customer."

He sighed happily. "Most of the menu is replicated from my old restaurant, and a few dishes are from my parents' place, but I wanted to throw some new things into the mix as well."

Justin joined her for coffee and dessert, which was a lemon tart with raspberry glaze. Tara barely touched hers, suddenly nervous to be so close to Justin's tanned face in the firelight. His long chestnut hair hung loose, and he gestured casually as he spoke, describing the adventures and mishaps of his

old restaurant. He had held great affection for his former servers and chefs, and she wondered why he hadn't simply rebuilt on the same spot after the fire. She was afraid to ask though, as Justin was still a tightly-wound question mark of mystery and contradictions. That much was clear after she innocently asked how the upstairs renovations were coming.

His face closed down, and he looked down at the table. "There's not much to be done," he said shortly. "It's just going to be office space and since everything's been rewired, it's just a question of putting in phone lines."

Tara's jaw dropped. "What? I thought you were moving in up there! This is your new home, Justin!"

"It's no one's home!" he snapped. Then, perhaps recognizing the curtness of his tone, he softened. "Tara, it's not always a good idea to live on the premises of your own restaurant. There's no privacy, no quiet, and you're really never off the clock. And...things can happen in a restaurant. It's not always safe to live there."

Now, what the heck did *that* mean? Tara stared at him, flummoxed. Just when she was starting to think she knew him... Then that violet perfume floated by, startling her out of her thoughts. She strove to keep a neutral face, knowing Justin would roll his eyes or mock her if she told him the house ghost had just brushed by her.

Instead, he sniffed. "That's an old-fashioned perfume you're wearing."

"I'm not wearing perfume." *Let him figure it out.*

He frowned. "One of the cooks must be wearing it."

Now she wanted to roll her eyes, but she only smiled mysteriously as he pushed back his chair. "Come on, it's a beautiful night out. Let's take our coffee on the porch."

It was a cool October night, a golden harvest moon hanging low in the sky. Tara caught the ripple of its mysterious light on the fields and thought again of how much she wanted to live in the country. Maybe one day she and Eric... But no, that was silly. She might like quiet nights listening to crickets and reading on the back porch, but Eric liked nights of music and darts and pints of his favorite beer. He wasn't likely to move out to the country anytime soon.

Justin gently knocked his knee against hers. All thoughts of Eric vanished. "I really appreciate you coming out here."

She threw him a grateful look. "Are you kidding? I really appreciate you feeding me such an excellent meal, even if I have gained ten pounds in the last hour."

He smiled. In the moonlight, his amber eyes were full of quiet knowledge and Tara thought again of the evening they had met, when his blazing eyes and looming stature had reminded her of a wolf. He reached over and tucked away a loose strand of blonde hair from her cheek. "I'm sorry I snapped at you about moving in upstairs."

She shrugged. "Apology accepted. I just wish I knew what not to say to you. Sometimes, I feel the most innocent comment makes you upset, and I don't know why."

Justin looked down at the top porch step, brushing away some dirt. Finally, he let out a long sigh. "You're right. I'm irascible, and I know it. I'm trying to be better, Tara. But...when I told you there were no ghosts, I was lying. I have ghosts of my own. Not the supernatural kind, but I'm haunted nevertheless."

As if it wasn't obvious, she wanted to say. "Justin, if you want to talk about it..."

"No." He shook his head. "Just your being here helps. You have such a light in you, Tara. You're a serious girl, and I relate to you on that level—you're wise for your age. Yet you carry this radiance in you too. I love it when you're here. You're just so..." His voice faded, and he stared down at the step. Then he looked up at her. A sudden wind carried her long hair before her eyes, and he brushed it back.

And then they were kissing, Justin's lips warm and insistent on hers. A voice in her shouted, *Tara, what are you doing?* But her blood was rushing to her head with the thrill of Justin's arms around her, Justin's long hair fluttering across her face, Justin's tongue gently sliding into her mouth. His hands slid up her knees, massaging sensual circles higher and higher up her thighs. She opened her legs as she kissed him back, aching for his touch. She was drowning in the moment and never wanted it to end.

The door behind them swung open. "Hey there, boss, I was thinking I might take off if you're—oh, sorry!" The door slammed a second time as the chef hastily retreated into the house.

They broke apart. Tara suppressed the urge to laugh from sheer awkwardness.

Justin's hand was still on her leg. Stroking her thigh, he said, "Tara..." His amber eyes searched hers with tenderness and heat.

She shook her head, then stood up. "Justin, I shouldn't have done that."

Justin got to his feet. He seemed so tall in the dark. "Tara, you didn't do anything. I did. I know you have a boyfriend and I'm sorry. But..."

"But what?" Her body shook and she tried to will herself still. She couldn't let him see how much she wanted him. This was wrong, all of it was wrong all the way around. Thinking about him, dressing up for him, now

kissing him and spreading her legs for him—wrong, wrong, wrong. She didn't even know him.

His eyes were intense with questions and need. "But he just seems so wrong for you. He's a boy, not a man. He'll never be able to take care of you the way you need—"

"We're the same age!" she said, her anger suddenly flaring. What had that last comment of Justin's meant? Was he making fun of Eric's limited income, maybe even her limited income as a secretary? Maybe Eric had pegged him right after all, thinking he could dazzle her small-town head with his flashy car and fat wallet. "And so what if he's not rich? I don't care about money—"

"Tara, that's not what I'm saying. Please listen to me. Eric's still a kid, an overgrown adolescent who can't see past the small town he's lived in all his life—"

That did it. "You think we're hicks!" she said in wonder. "You think that just because you've traveled all over the world and you have some money you're better than us. Hey, you may be more sophisticated than Eric, but he is my *family*, Justin. His parents have been like my own parents since we started dating. I'm an orphan. Do you understand that? I have a history and a future with Eric, even if we are just 'small-town' people who—"

"Tara, Tara, I got it." Justin's face was cold as stone. "You and Eric belong together. It's true love. Fine. I misread the situation, and I apologize." He turned and walked back into the house.

She followed, suddenly unsure of what had just happened. What had she said? He collected her coffee cup and handed her purse to her. "Let's just forget about this." His voice was cool and distant, and she had the sudden screaming sensation she had made a horrible mistake. "Thanks for coming out

tonight. Contrary to what you said, your opinion is valuable. We all appreciate it." He gestured to the chef and sous chef and server, all beaming at her.

It was too late. She couldn't possibly rectify the situation now. "Well—You're welcome." She wanted badly to talk to him alone, to tell him she did want him, that she did have doubts about Eric. She wanted to fix this sudden coldness between them. Instead she hesitated, unable to think of a way to do so, then walked out the door into the deepening chill.

Driving home, she felt sick with turmoil. What had just happened? One moment she was kissing Justin in an embrace that was better than her best fantasy, and the next moment, they were snapping at each other. Had she overreacted? Why had she reminded him she was an orphan? Oh god, she had totally blown it. She had acted like an idiot.

All the same, Eric really was her high school sweetheart and the only love she had ever known. She might not have used the most tactful words, but what she had said to Justin was the truth—she and Eric had a history and his parents were good to her. She enjoyed being part of their family. Who was Justin anyhow? Just a gorgeous stranger with some money who had blown into Somerset. He could up and leave town at any time, and probably would if *La Traviata* wasn't a success. She was being silly to even entertain thoughts of a future with him. Sure, Justin was handsome and intelligent and kind, and even his moodiness was kind of sexy in a mysterious, smoldering way... She sighed. No. She needed to be practical. Eric was where she belonged.

As she drifted off to sleep that night, Justin's adamant words echoed in her mind. *This is no one's home!* Of course, it was the ghost's home, whether he believed it or not, but now it would never be her home...and for the first time, she realized how much a part of her had hoped it would be.

Chapter Twelve

Thursday morning dawned gray and cold. As always, Tara had meant to get up early enough to read the paper, but after tossing in bed for hours with thoughts of Justin and Eric, she overslept. Hurrying through her morning shower, she pulled on some clothes and dashed off to the office. She had one objective and one only today—to explain her feelings to Justin. More than ever, she was certain she had overreacted last night.

“Look who’s here,” Meredith drawled. “What happened, did you have a late night with Bachelor number one or Bachelor number two?”

“Neither,” Tara answered coolly, putting her purse in her desk drawer. “How is it your business, anyway?”

Meredith smiled like a cat. Her mood was too good today, too taunting. Why was she so full of herself? Suddenly, Tara wondered if Meredith had somehow pulled her weekly photo essay. But no, Henry wouldn’t let her do that. Would he?

“Well, I just wouldn’t want this week’s paper to hurt your relationship with Justin, that’s all,” Meredith said sweetly. She sipped her coffee, her green eyes glowing.

Something in Tara went cold, but she refused to let Meredith see it. Instead, she walked casually to the break room, where she found the fresh newspaper. At a glance, she saw her photo essay still on the front page. She sighed with relief.

Then she saw the headline beneath the photos.

NEW RESTAURANT OWNER HIDES TRAGIC PAST.

Heart thudding sickly, she read the article.

As most of you know, at the tender age of twenty-nine, Somerset's latest bachelor Justin Bremington is an accomplished restaurateur, with one successful restaurant behind him. But what many of you may not know is that his former restaurant burned to the ground two years ago in a suspicious fire, tragically taking the life of Bremington's wife, Rochelle.

No. No, it couldn't be true. He would have told her.

The article went on in a breathlessly glib tone, pointedly mentioning that the cause of the fire was still under investigation. It then finished with a mention of La Traviata's own past as the town haunted house. Tara felt sick reading it. Why had Meredith written such a thing? Was the *Chronicle* now just a gossip rag, exposing Justin's private pain for the town's entertainment? She cast the newspaper to the floor, marching to Henry Hansen's office.

Henry was on the phone as always, desperately begging a vendor to pay for a placed ad. "The paper has a bigger circulation than you think," he said in a thin voice. "Look, Herb, you took out the ad, I don't care if business hasn't picked up..." Suddenly his face changed, and he slowly replaced the receiver. Apparently, he had been hung up on.

"What kind of cruelty are we publishing these days?" Tara demanded. "Telling the entire town about Justin's dead wife? He's a private person, Henry. If he wanted everyone to know, he'd tell them."

Henry had the decency to look shame-faced. "Tara, we're a newspaper. We print the news. Meredith did some investigative reporting—"

Tara laughed shortly. "That's what you call it? She got mad at Justin because he wouldn't—" She broke off, aware that she couldn't hurt Henry. "She has a personal grudge against him and got her revenge in print. That's hardly unbiased journalism."

"Oh, and you would know about that?" Meredith slunk into the room. Fixing her eyes on Tara, she said to Henry, "Our little secretary here has taken quite a shine to Justin. Why, she had dinner with him just last night."

Tara felt herself color. "We're friends, Meredith. That's it."

"Oh come now, Tara. A gorgeous man like that, chasing a small-town girl like you? A secretary? Of course you're putting out for him. We're not stupid."

Tara itched to slap her. "I'm not 'putting out,' Meredith. Just because he rejected you—"

Meredith's eyebrows shot into her hair. "Rejected? What are you talking about? You know I'm in love with Henry." She shot Henry a loving smile, which he returned with one of his own.

Tara shook her head. "Whatever, Meredith. You may fool some people, but I know what you are—and what you aren't." She walked out of the office.

Well, *this* day had gotten off to a rousing start. She and Meredith had become open enemies, and she'd learned that Justin had lost a wife in the fire that destroyed his restaurant. No wonder he'd wanted to move away and make a fresh start. No wonder he'd referred so obliquely to his own ghosts. He had to be consumed with guilt and grief. His refusal to move into the second floor of La Traviata echoed in her head. *Things can happen in a restaurant. It's not always safe to live there.*

She picked up the phone, but Becky, the gawky manager, was the only one to answer at La Traviata. "Justin's not here, Tara!" she sang. Apparently she hadn't seen the article. "How'd you like dinner last night?"

"Loved it." Tara was too nervous to gush with praise. "Do you know when he'll be back?" Just then, through the window, she spotted the silver

Lexus pulling up to the curb. Slowly, she replaced the phone without saying goodbye. Her heart boomed as the glass office doors swung open and Justin strode through, his face an unreadable mask of cold rage.

Tara summoned her courage and stood up. "Justin, I just read the article. I'm so sorry."

He threw her a cold glance and strode past her to Meredith's office. The slam of her door ricocheted through the room. Tara stood very still, listening to the shouts and threats echoing through the thick wooden door. Henry emerged from his office, looking confounded. "Tara, what's going on?"

"Justin Bremington is here. I don't think he liked the article."

Henry looked baffled. "But any publicity is good publicity. Isn't that what they say?"

Tara's patience snapped. "Henry, you're divorced. Would you like all the details of that published on the front page? I think Justin moved here for a fresh start. He didn't want his past to follow him." She watched the comprehension creep over Henry's face. *By god, he's dumb about people things.*

"I didn't think of that," he admitted.

Meredith's office door flew open and Justin stormed out. Tara could see Meredith sobbing behind him, but there was no time to react as Justin flung an accusatory finger at Henry. "You. What kind of editor are you, publishing a little smear piece like that? Your paper practically accused me of causing the fire that killed my wife."

Henry had never looked more ineffectual. "I'm—I'm sorry," he began.

"Sorry? You people didn't even bother to interview me or find out what really happened. Instead, you went for the most scandalous angle. I'm suing your ass for libel, Hansen. When I'm done, I'm going to own this goddamned paper."

Tara stood pale with fear. What would he say to her? But he ignored her, sweeping past her to the door. She ran outside after him. "Justin, wait."

"I have nothing to say to you either," he spat. "I know you do the editing, Tara, so you must've seen this article, and yet you sat there with me on the front porch last night and kissed me like a—like a *traitor*!" He bellowed the last word, throwing his fist into the building. Then he was in his car, tires screaming away.

Oh god. Could this day get any worse?

Apparently, it could. As the day wore on, with Meredith and Henry conferring behind his closed office door, Tara realized she hadn't heard from Eric all day. When she called him at work, he wasn't there. No one answered at his house either. What could be going on?

At last, her cell phone rang around noon, and she grabbed it. It was her brother Irving calling from the hospital where he worked as an orderly. "Uh, Tara, have you heard from Eric today?"

Her heart went cold with fear. "No. Why?"

"Because Billy was admitted last night with a concussion and a ruptured spleen. Apparently, he and Eric had some kind of boating accident."

Oh god. "But Eric wasn't hurt?"

"I heard he was treated and released last night."

Nice. She grabbed her purse and left on an early lunch, driving directly to Eric's. As she pulled up, she could see him getting out of his father's car in a suit and tie, a solemn expression on his face. As she got closer, she could see that his hand was bandaged. Seeing that he was physically safe, her initial worry gave way to anger.

"Tara!" Eric looked astonished to see her. She accepted his kiss coolly, then pushed him away and picked up his bandaged hand.

"What the hell happened last night?" She tried to keep the anger from her voice. His father gave her a guilty look but went into the house without speaking.

Eric looked shamefaced. "We had a little accident last night, babe. Nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about? I heard Billy is in the hospital."

Eric stared at the ground. "Tara... Look, I'm in enough trouble as it is. I don't need you busting my balls about this."

She swallowed hard. "Excuse me for checking to make sure my boyfriend is okay. I didn't realize that qualified as 'busting your balls'." She turned and strode back to the car, and he came after her.

"I'm sorry. You're right, it's just that after dealing with the cops and the hospital and the lawyer all morning, I'm kind of sick of hearing about what a fuck-up I am."

Cops? Lawyer? It was worse than she thought. "What did you do? Just tell me. I'm going to find out anyhow."

He sighed and ran a hand—the unbroken one—through his wavy blond hair. "We were at that little bar near the river. I guess we had a bit much to

drink and got a bit loud, and the bartender cut us off. So we went down to Billy's dad's boat and there was a speedboat there that was totally unsecured and so Billy dared me to take it for a little ride ..."

Oh god. No, was he really that stupid? "You stole a boat?" She stared at him, incredulous. "I'm dating a thief now?"

"I didn't steal it! We were just going to take it for a little cruise and bring it right back! You know, how we snuck onto the country club golf course that time and took the golf cart for a ride."

She remembered it well.

"Anyhow, we never took it out. We decided just to climb on board and see if they had any liquor in the cabin. You know how some of those rich bastards keep a bottle of Johnnie Walker or some good Russian vodka on board. Well, they did and we had a few drinks. We didn't hurt the boat at all." Eric gave her a defiant look. "Then, the owner's friend showed up and came after us, and well, we were pretty drunk, so we didn't realize we were jumping in shallow water and we hit the submerged part of this dock—"

She held up a hand. "Got it."

They stood in silence for a moment. She was thinking of how many stories she'd heard before which were exactly like this one, stories that didn't quite add up and always seemed to be missing crucial elements like logic and motivation. What it all boiled down to, in this case, was that Eric and Billy got drunk and broke into someone's boat and raided their bar. Now Billy had a concussion and a ruptured spleen, and Eric had a broken hand.

"It's all okay," Eric told her. "We met with the lawyer today, and he thinks he can persuade the owner not to press charges. We only took one bottle of gin and as for trespassing, we're just saying that we were drunk and mistook the boat for our own."

She shook her head. "Whatever, Eric."

"‘Whatever’ what? Tara..." He reached for her chin and she turned away. He exhaled. "Come on. You can't be *that* mad."

Tara forced herself to meet his gaze. "Look, I think we need some time apart. I've been wondering about this for a while, and frankly, this just confirms it."

His blue eyes widened with betrayal. "What does this have to do with our relationship?"

"Everything! Eric, I'm going to be twenty-five in December. I'm kind of past the days of drunken adventures, don't you get that? I want a man, not a boy. And I certainly don't want someone I have to bail out of jail or pick up from the hospital."

His mouth tightened, but he only shrugged. "So how much time are we talking about?"

"Enough time for you to take this seriously," she said, suddenly angry. "Don't act like this is some irrational little whim of mine, Eric. I really need to think about our relationship. Look, I don't want to cut you out of my life. I just want to put things on hold."

He laughed angrily. "In other words, no sex. That's what you're really saying, right? You're blackmailing me by withholding sex."

"I'm not *blackmailing* you," she replied curtly. "I'm just telling you I need to think. Is that all our relationship is to you—sex?"

They stared at each other. As a cool autumn wind ran through the trees, the skittering leaves reminded her that time was passing, that she was getting older and Eric was staying exactly the same.

"Fine," he said. "I have a lot on my mind anyway, but we're still together, Tara. Don't use this as an excuse to go chasing after Mr. Pretty Boy Lexus."

She raised her eyebrows. "This has nothing to do with him."

"Yeah, right. You can't see him like I can. He's some smooth-talking rich guy who's used to small-town girls falling right into his bed. Why do you think he keeps hanging around the paper? So he can get into the cute blonde secretary's pants."

Tara stiffened. "I think his opinion of me is a little higher than that."

His reply was cut off by Mandy suddenly banging through the front door. "Eric, how did it go with the lawyer? Oh hi, Tara! Did you hear what happened to Ricky? Poor baby, he broke his hand." She clucked sympathetically, rubbing his back.

Something possessive tightened in Tara at seeing Mandy cling to him. "Poor baby? He brought it on himself, Mandy."

"Tara, come on. It was an accident. Eric needs our support."

They were both crazy. Tara shook her head and walked away. "Eric, I'll call you in a few days." She drove back to work with a numb heart and baffled head.

Chapter Thirteen

That weekend, October blazed into a glory of gold and russet leaves. Tara photographed the high school football game Friday night, enjoying the lingering smoke of the pep rally bonfire. At home, she changed into her flannel pajamas and made cocoa, reveling in the first truly cold night of fall. Watching TV, she began to feel lonely. How nice it would be to have someone there with her on the couch. Maybe being out at the bars with Eric all the time wasn't her idea of fun, but staying home alone wasn't either.

Reluctantly, her thoughts turned to Justin Bremington. What was he doing tonight in his hotel room? Before she thought twice, she had the phone in her hand, dialing Somerset's only hotel. Justin was registered there, but he wasn't in his room.

Great. He probably had a secret girlfriend he was with right now. Even her geeky little brother was out tonight on a "paranormal investigation." She was the only one at home.

She sniffed back a self-pitying tear, wondering if she'd been too hard on Eric, then she thought of Billy in the hospital. They could have been seriously hurt or arrested. Why couldn't that seem to penetrate Eric's conscience? What would it take for him to grow up? She needed time away from him, no matter how lonely she might get. She also needed time to figure out how she felt about Justin.

* * * * *

For the next week, Tara tried to focus on herself and her schoolwork, and it seemed to work. She received an A on her mass media project and was encouraged by her professor to contact him for job assistance after graduation. Between work and school, she bought pumpkins to carve and

made time to stop at a roadside stand for apples and cider. At home, she hung up tiny lights shaped like ghosts and put a green-faced witch on the front porch. She knew it was corny, but it made her feel better. She loved Halloween.

Things seemed to be getting better at work too. Whatever deal had been struck, she didn't know, but Justin dropped his threat of a lawsuit against the paper. Instead, Henry ran a clarification of Meredith's poisonous article, describing the fire from Justin's point of view, and the result was a sympathetic, eloquent article. Tara was touched by Henry's words. There was a decent journalist there under the harried editor persona. Justin was also given a free half page ad space for a year. Meredith kept to herself, but her bitter eyes burned with rancor whenever she passed by. Tara was betting things were coming to a head with Henry. Perhaps Meredith would leave him or the paper...or both.

Eric too had had a stroke of luck. His father's lawyer had gotten him out of this latest scrape, leaving him only to worry about his broken hand. He dropped by the paper to crow about it. "See babe? I told you it'd all be okay."

She sighed. "Eric, I'm glad it's worked out for you, but it still doesn't resolve the basic issue. It's what could have happened, what still might happen. You just have too many nights like this."

He looked as pouty as a child. "So we're still 'on hold'?"

"Yes," she said incredulously. Why didn't he understand? "Like I said, it wasn't just this one incident, but your entire pattern of them... I'm sorry, but I still need time to think."

Eric scoffed. "Think about what? Mandy was right, you do find a way to take the fun out of everything."

She bit back her urge to say exactly what she thought of Mandy. "That's really interesting, given that on your last fun adventure, you broke your hand and almost got yourself arrested."

Eric looked as if he wanted to say something sarcastic. Instead, he resumed pouting and said moodily, "Well, you let me know when you're done 'thinking.'" He walked out.

Justin hadn't spoken with her since the day he'd called her a traitor. With the news of his wife's death made public, he seemed to have become even more reclusive. Tara wasn't sure if she should drive out to continue the photo essay or not, but Henry demanded it. That Thursday, she telephoned Becky, the La Traviata manager, to test the waters.

"Oh sure, come on out," Becky said casually. "We've got the menus printed, so maybe you could photograph those."

She pulled up that afternoon to the usual medley of trucks belonging to the contractors, plumbers and electricians. Becky's and the other staff's vehicles were parked on the road. Directly to the right of La Traviata, another contractor was paving a parking lot. Tara snapped some shots of it, along with a roadside view of the house exterior. She couldn't help noticing the absence of Justin's Lexus. Maybe that was for the best.

"Tara!" Becky called cheerfully from the porch. "Come on in!"

Inside, the renovated parlor and dining room looked almost finished. Only the chairs were missing, which Tara knew were on order from an exclusive furniture maker in New York. She and Becky pulled up regular chairs, and Becky proudly turned over the leather-bound menu inscribed in elegant calligraphy. Tara read through the entrees and appetizers, struggling to hide her feelings. A sudden angst burned through her at the thought of Justin staying up late at night composing these dishes. He was so talented and

had worked so hard on creating this place. In less than two months, he had turned it into a stunningly classic Victorian dream, luxurious and antiquated. Through it all, he had been alone.

She glanced at the fresh new wallpaper, the antique but polished light fixtures. A child had drowned here and a mother had committed suicide. She wondered if a house could absorb the agonized emotions experienced within its walls. Justin himself had said it was instinct that made him buy the property, but now she wondered if he had unconsciously identified with its aura of loss and sadness. It was odd how she and Justin had shared not only a deep love of the house even in its decayed state, but also a background of loss and grief as well. Perhaps the ghost understood that about them and had somehow reached out to them.

She shook her head. She was starting to sound as crazy as her brother.

"I have other news too!" Becky beamed. Her black frizzy hair was tacked up with different barrettes, but enough of it escaped to soften her shining face. Tara couldn't help but smile. "La Traviata is throwing a huge costume ball for our opening—on Halloween!"

"Actually the night before Halloween," a low voice said, and both of them looked up to see Justin leaning in the doorway. He studied Tara, his car keys dangling from his hand.

"I thought—" Becky began.

"Halloween is on a Sunday this year. We'll have the costume ball on Saturday night." He walked into the room, never taking his amber eyes off Tara. "Becky, can I speak to Tara alone?"

"Oh, sure." Flustered, Becky gathered up the menus and walked out.

Justin extended his hand, still scrutinizing Tara. She accepted it, and he led her out back into the garden. Only now, the former garden of overgrown weeds was a large, groomed square laid out with heavy stone tables and silvery-green shrubbery. Black iron glass lamps adorned the borders. Tara caught her breath, imagining how beautiful it would be at night. They walked to the apple tree, and there Justin picked up a few rotten apples from the ground and shot them into the distance. He finally said, "I want to apologize for calling you a traitor."

She shook her head, relieved they were speaking. "Justin, I had no idea—"

He held up a hand. "I thought about it, and I realized it's not in your character to deceive anyone like that. You're simply not that good an actress. I apologize."

"I had no idea about any of it. Meredith must have dug it up after you rejected her."

He shrugged. "It's done. I really didn't want to be known as a widower here or have people feel sorry for me, but it's done. Life will go on."

Her blue eyes searched out his. "Justin, why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged again. "Tara, I'm not the most open person." She bit back a sarcastic rejoinder of "no kidding", as he continued, "I lost an entire life when I lost my wife. I lost my restaurant, and I lost the respect of my community. People gossiped that the fire was my fault, and that it was suspicious I wasn't home at the time." He stared into the distance as if looking at something she couldn't see. "Meredith got it wrong. They knew the cause of the fire. The duct work ignited because it had cooking grease in it, plain and simple."

When he didn't say anything else, Tara prompted, "What happened?"

He shook his head. "It was a simple fire in the hood and ventilation system. We had good extinguishers that should have put it out, but the system only put out the fire below the duct. The rest ignited in the kitchen hood and spread up through the ceiling. Rochelle was dead of smoke inhalation by the time the firemen reached the house."

She reached for his arm. "I'm so sorry, Justin."

"She was only twenty-seven. Can you believe that? Twenty-seven. She was my high school sweetheart, and suddenly I was left alone. We'd been waiting to start a family because we wanted to get the restaurant off the ground first. And there I was, with nothing."

Tara didn't know what to say. Instead, she repeated dumbly, "I'm sorry, Justin. I lost my parents in college, but I can't imagine..." Her voice faded.

Neither of them spoke. A cold wind rustled the apple tree, and a few of the contractors shouted to each other in the new parking lot. Finally, she said, "I can understand now why you wanted to make a fresh start instead of rebuilding."

Justin laughed bitterly. "Fresh start? There's been nothing fresh about coming here. I got run out of town, Tara. Oh, not literally, but I come from a family who's pretty big in the business. My parents have a few restaurants, and my uncle owns a chain of bistros in London. The restaurant business can be cutthroat, make no mistake."

He stared at his feet before continuing. "After the fire, my biggest competitor in town, who'd been tired of losing his business to a young upstart like me, started rumors. Said the fire was suspicious, said I was having affairs with my waitresses and was abusive to my wife. He never came right out and said I set the fire, but he may as well have. Another competitor said it was drugs, said I was a big cokehead and one of my unpaid dealers started the

fire. People started looking at me funny, started speculating. So I said forget it and came here. I knew exactly the kind of restaurant I wanted to have and traveled all over the state looking for the right house. Then I found this.”

They looked at La Traviata together. Painted a fresh cream, its shutters the same dark forest green as the elm and maple trees bending toward it, the big Victorian house looked as beautiful as it must have so many decades ago.

Tara’s mind was reeling. “Justin, I’m so sorry.” She struggled to find the right words, the right gesture, to let him know how much she empathized. “I can’t imagine the pain you’ve been in.”

“Actually, I think you can, Tara. Maybe not exactly, but you know what loss is like and how it changes you forever. That’s why I like you. I never thought I would even look at a woman again until I met you.”

She looked at him, stunned. “Justin, I—”

“No, I know. You’re taken. I do understand that, Tara, and you don’t have to worry. I won’t make a pass at you ever again.” His lopsided smile twisted bitterly, then he was striding toward the house, leaving her alone in the sharp autumn wind.

* * * * *

La Traviata’s costume ball was big news in Somerset. Henry allowed Tara to write up the article on it, and the response was immediate. The phone rang off the hook with people hungry for details. Other people called up or stopped by wanting to know the truth about Justin. “I heard his wife died in suspicious circumstances,” one woman confided. “Is that true? Is he under investigation? If so, it’d be a good item for ‘Sidewalk Talk,’ don’t you think?”

"It's not true," Tara said curtly. "We've printed a retraction. The fire was a tragedy. Why would you want to rub salt in his wounds?" But every morning brought new calls.

To her surprise, Eric and Billy and the gang wanted to attend the ball. When she met them at Gilligan's for Happy Hour, it was the talk of the bar. Mandy was especially keen on the idea. "I love dressing up!" she purred. "Last Halloween I was a naughty nurse. Hmm, maybe I still have the photos somewhere..."

Spare me. "Eric, are you really going to go in costume? You never would dress up before."

"Hell, yeah. Maybe I'll go as a warrior or Frankenstein or something. It might be kind of cool."

Mandy said snidely, "Or maybe you could go as a priest, since Tara's put the kibosh on your sex life."

Maybe you could go as a hooker, Tara wanted to snap, but she merely said, "Why are you so interested in our private life, Mandy?"

Mandy rolled her dark eyes. "God, Tara, I was just making a joke! You're so uptight about sex." Before Tara could respond, she slipped out of their booth to dance with Billy.

Tara's eyes met Eric's. When he didn't speak, she said, "How much longer is she going to be staying with you and your parents? She's twenty-eight, Eric. Shouldn't she be getting a place of her own?"

He shrugged helplessly. "She's had a hard time finding a job, babe. Give her a break. Don't get me wrong, we're all getting sick of her, even Billy, but she's family."

"She's a third cousin. Not exactly immediate family."

Eric spread his hands. "What do you want me to do, Tara? It's not my house. If my parents let her stay, she stays."

"Well, I wanted to talk to you about that. I've been thinking about our relationship, Eric, and I think if we go forward, you need to get your own place. It seems like we're never alone, just the two of us."

His face settled into a predictable sullenness. He hated it when she bugged him about living with his parents. "I'm trying to save money for a house, Tara. I've told you that a hundred times."

"You spend all your money on beer and concerts." She knew she was nagging him, but she couldn't stop. How much longer were they going to be in this pattern? "You like having your mom cook all your meals and do your laundry and not having to pay bills. But my god, Eric, we're going to be twenty-five. Isn't it time to take responsibility?"

He stared out at the dance floor. She watched him fight for control of his emotions. Then, his better side triumphed and he turned back to her. "Tara, I love you. If this is what it takes to save our relationship, I'll do it."

She was so surprised she didn't say anything for a moment. "Thank you. Eric, I'm sorry to nag you. I just want us to work out, you know?" *I want you to grow up*, she almost said.

A warm smile crept across his face. "Me too." He reached to squeeze her hand.

They kissed across the table. His eyes were tender as she sat back, and for a moment, she was tempted to tell him to forget the whole idea of rethinking their relationship. She almost said, *Come home with me, now*. Instead, she told him she had homework and slid out of the booth. "I'll call

you tomorrow." They kissed goodbye, and she hoisted her purse over her shoulder.

As she walked out the door, a hand fell upon her arm. "Tara!" It was Mandy, breathing hard from the dance floor. Her auburn hair was in disarray and her skin was prettily flushed from dancing. At that moment, Tara had to admit that Mandy was an attractive woman, regardless of how she felt about her. "I wanted to ask your advice on something."

Tara raised her brows. "My advice?"

"On Justin Bremington, the owner of the new restaurant. I heard he's a pretty fine-looking piece of eye candy. Is that true?"

Oh god no. Mandy couldn't possibly be setting her sights in that direction. "He's very nice, but he just lost his wife in a fire not too long ago, and I don't think he's dating yet."

Mandy smiled naughtily. "Great, that'll make it even easier to get in his pants. Poor guy must be dying to get laid." As Tara's jaw dropped, Meredith released a tinkling laugh. "I'm just kidding! God, Tara, you have no sense of humor. Well, anyhow, do you see us together? Think we'd be a good match?" She struck a pose and fluttered her eyelashes.

"Honestly? No. He's very serious. You're a party girl, and he's a workaholic."

"Hmm... Well, maybe I could loosen him up." Mandy looked thoughtful and Tara realized she was serious about pursuing him.

"What about Billy? I thought you two were...dating."

Mandy shrugged. "We're just having fun. Well, listen, how about setting up a date between me and this Justin? Eric says you know him pretty well, right?"

"He's very busy getting ready for the opening," Tara hedged. "It's right around the corner, you know."

"Okay, then I'll see him at the opening. It's probably better that way anyhow..." Her eyes turned dreamy. "I'll wear a sexy costume, something real seductive..."

"Excuse me, it's late," Tara said coldly and walked out of the bar. Unlocking her car, a molten rage spread through her blood. The idea of Mandy flaunting herself in front of Justin—or even worse, the idea of Mandy naked on top of Justin—made Tara almost swoon with nausea. She realized with a pang of surprise that the idea upset her even more than the idea of Mandy with Eric, and that was indeed something to ponder.

Chapter Fourteen

The next night, Tara stayed home with her brother Irving to carve their Halloween pumpkins. She felt she had been neglecting him lately, always running between work and school...and between Eric and La Traviata. Tonight would be a good family night, just the two of them, but it was a decision she quickly came to regret as Irving chattered on happily about his most recent "investigations" and the ghosts he was sure they had discovered.

"We were over at Steve's mom's house, and she has this closet that has bad vibes? So we took some pictures and there was this weird ball of light—"

"It was probably a speck of dust, Irv." As soon as she saw his face fall, she wished she hadn't spoken. She added gently, "Or maybe not, but a lot of things will show up on film that can look like a ghost. A speck of dust or moisture or even one single hair in front of the lens. You should keep that in mind."

He shrugged. "I'm just saying...it looked pretty cool."

Someone knocked on the door. Tara got to her feet, wondering why Eric would come over now. Had he been drinking down at Gilligan's again? Surely he'd know better than that. To her astonishment, Justin Bremlington stood on her front porch in a leather jacket. Quickly, she opened the door, wishing she was wearing something other than sweatpants and an old t-shirt covered with pumpkin pulp. "Justin, what are you doing here?"

He looked strangely humbled. "Tara, I hate to bother you. I stopped in at the paper and Henry was still there. He told me where you lived so I just drove over. Can I come in?"

"Of course!" She moved aside and he breezed in, smelling of the smoky autumn night. "We're just carving pumpkins in the kitchen..." As she said it,

she realized the unfortunate intersection that was coming. Her little brother the ghost-hunter meeting the owner of the town's haunted house.

She led Justin into the kitchen, aware of the homey shabbiness of her house. She'd never been able to afford to redecorate since her parents' death, and she often felt the house had an outdated, though comfortable feel. She tried not to show her embarrassment as she put on the coffee. "Justin, this is my younger brother, Irving. Irving, this is Justin Breminington." She deliberately left out his role with La Traviata, but Irving, blinking from the mess of pumpkin pulp on the kitchen floor, recognized him.

He jumped to his feet. "Awesome! So how's it been going out there? I know ghosts hate to have renovations or remodeling done. Have they been real active?"

"They?" Justin blinked, confused.

"Irv, please. Justin didn't come here to talk about that." She glanced at him. "What did you come here about, if I may be so rude? Is there an issue with the photo essay?"

"No." Justin shook his head. "No, it's the weirdest thing. The opening is next weekend, as you know, but these last few days, everything has gone haywire. The radio the contractors listen to keeps changing stations. Some of the outlets work sometimes, then they stop for no reason. Three new light bulbs have blown. Oh, and our antique ottoman is missing—just disappeared into thin air. I really don't think one of the contractors would steal something like *that*. And our cameras—well, pretty much everything battery-powered—won't work. The batteries keep dying."

Irving's face was shining. "It's the ghosts. Ghosts drain batteries!"

Tara wanted to shush him, but she couldn't. He was right. There was a supernatural presence at La Traviata. She had seen it, smelled it and touched

it. She knew it could be the lady ghost who was doing it. But why now? Justin's crews had been renovating the place for two months. She glanced at Justin.

His face was neutral. "I just don't—I swore to myself this stuff wasn't real."

"Justin, why are you so adamant about not believing in ghosts?" Tara moved closer to him. "The first time we met, you were quite angry about it."

He stiffened. At last, he said, "Tara, after my wife died, I tried everything to get in touch with her. I went to psychics and mediums. I read books and even tried meditation. Nothing worked. She was gone. Gone." His voice sounded angry again.

"A lot of those mediums are just con artists, I think," Tara said gently, "but it doesn't mean ghosts aren't real."

"And it doesn't mean your wife isn't in a different plane of existence," Irving urged. "It just means she passed on. Went to the light, went to heaven, whatever you want to call it. You should be glad she's not earthbound."

Justin raised his head. "It all sounds so crazy. I thought if anyone would come back from the grave, it'd be her. She'd tell me if she still loved me, if she forgave me for not being there that night. I thought she'd send *some* kind of sign. But—nothing."

Tara and Irving stared at each other, flummoxed. Neither knew what to say.

"So it doesn't make sense that some random ghost I don't even know would start playing tricks on me," Justin said. "But what else could it be? Tara, I know you believed there really was a ghost at the house. I respect you. Could you tell me why you thought that?"

She took a deep breath. Nodding at Irving who then scurried away, she sat down at the table and began to describe her high school experience there. She left nothing out, from hearing the waltz to seeing the lady in the mirror to hearing the footsteps on the stairs. Then, she told him of the pond water sprinkled on her arm, the violet perfume that seemed to follow her. As she finished, Irving returned with the tapes and photos from the investigation. Justin listened to the tapes with raised eyebrows, but expressed no skepticism.

"Unbelievable," he said when they were both finished. His face was pale. "So you both really think this lady could be hanging around the restaurant? Why is she mad at me now?"

"Good question," said Irving. "But she might not be mad, necessarily, just trying to get your attention. Why, I don't know."

Justin looked uneasy. "I wonder if she's warning me about something to do with the opening. Oh god, what if it's a complete failure?"

"It won't be," Tara assured him, even though she was privately wondering why the ghost had become so active now.

"Spirit activity is supposed to get stronger around Halloween," Irving suggested. "The Veil between the worlds is thinner then."

Justin looked at him. "Irving, could you and your group do another investigation before the opening?"

Irving couldn't speak right away. His eyes looked dazed for a moment, then he swallowed and said quietly, "We would be honored."

For a moment, Tara wanted to burst into laughter, but she refrained. "Can I come too? I'm the only one here who's actually seen the ghost in person."

Justin nodded, his amber eyes speculative as they rested on her. "I'd love that, Tara."

Oh, why not admit it. She'd grab any excuse to spend time with Justin. Maybe she could find a way to make up for her childish outburst that time on his front porch.

That night, she dreamt of her and Justin carving pumpkins together, smearing cool pumpkin goo all over each other's naked skin. Somehow, the carved pumpkins all turned into Mandy, hissing at Tara with demonic rage. She awoke, heart pounding, and wondered if the ghost was trying to warn her, not Justin.

* * * * *

Two days later, she and Eric and the gang went to get their costumes at a local shop. Mandy wanted to dress up as Mae West or Marilyn Monroe. Billy was going to dress as a pirate, and one of the other guys was dressing up as a vampire. Eric and Tara had decided to dress up in an Arabian Nights theme. He would be a handsome sultan, and she would be a harem princess. Giggling madly in the dusty shop, they sorted through silky pantaloons and chiffon halter tops for Tara, and plumed turbans and waist sashes for Eric. Being with him this way reminded her of the best of their memories: having fun, playing like children without a care in the world. As Eric emerged from a dressing room in the headress and pants, his tanned chest bare, a salacious heat flooded her body. In all of the recent fighting, she had lost her appreciation of just how gorgeous and well-built he really was.

"What do you think?" He looked at her expectantly. "Is it me?"

"It sure is," she answered, eyeing his taut stomach.

Catching her gaze, he looked surprised for a moment. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into the dressing room, closing the door. "Come with me to the Kasbah," he growled in a cheesy Arabian accent, then he began to tickle her ruthlessly in her most vulnerable places. Not wanting to get caught by the shop owners, she stifled her giggles in her own costume. Before she knew it, Eric slipped his arms around her waist from behind. As he kissed the back of her neck with long hot kisses, his hands slid down and began to stroke her pussy through the gauzy harem girl pants. Despite herself, Tara moaned and arched her back. She had missed Eric's body on hers, missed the warm skill of his hands and tongue on her bare skin. He'd always known exactly what to do to bring her fulfillment.

Suddenly, the door swung open. "Tara, did you try on—" Mandy stopped talking and blinked in surprise at them. "Oh. Uh, excuse me." She shut the door, and they began to laugh.

When Tara slipped out, costume in hands, Mandy was looking through blond wigs with a tight face. "Did you have a question for me?" Tara asked innocently.

"I thought you two weren't having sex anymore," Mandy said without hiding her displeasure.

Tara shrugged mysteriously. "Like I said, that's private. You can't really be too sure of anything between us." She sauntered to the cash register. She could feel Mandy's hostile brown eyes on her back. More than ever, she was sure Mandy wanted to seduce Eric—her own third cousin. It was repulsive, but Tara's instincts had never been stronger.

Chapter Fifteen

The final paranormal investigation of La Traviata was scheduled for Thursday night. Once again, Irving and his cohorts packed up their EMF detectors, tape recorders and cameras, along with flashlights and extra batteries. As “payment” for the investigation, Justin had generously bought them a thermal scanner and a set of walkie-talkies, new tools they never could have afforded on their own. Tara was touched by the gesture.

“Irving, please tell your group to do their best tonight. It took a lot for Justin to even admit he might have a ghost, so please be as professional as possible.”

Irving was disseminating a typed-up plan detailing the “hot spots” in the house and grounds. “Oh, we will,” he said seriously. “This could be our big break. La Traviata is already famous around town, and it hasn’t even opened yet. If we find something tonight, our phone will be ringing off the hook with people wanting us to do investigations.”

Somehow Tara doubted that, but she kept her smile to herself.

They arrived in La Traviata shortly before dusk. Outside, a few bats swooped past the barren branches of the elm tree and a curving yellow moon beckoned from the darkening sky, but inside, the restaurant was warm and inviting. The first floor dining rooms were prepared for the opening: tables and chairs perfectly aligned, the kitchen stocked with sparkling glasses, plates and linens, fresh wood piled in the fireplace. Thinking back on her “test meal” with Justin, Tara couldn’t wait to eat there again. Apparently Justin read her mind because, after shaking hands with the investigation group, he announced, “I really appreciate you all for doing this. As thanks, I want to invite you back tomorrow night to be the first true diners at La Traviata—on the house.”

The guys murmured their thanks, seeming a little intimidated. Tara smiled again, knowing their usual culinary tastes ran to bags of fast food gobbled down during video games. They'd probably never been in a gourmet restaurant in their entire lives.

"Have you still had the same electrical problems?" she asked Justin. "Batteries dying, radios changing stations, etcetera?"

He shrugged. "It's calmed down a bit, but the ottoman is still missing. That really bothers me, for some reason."

"Is it possible one of the contractors stole it?" Irving asked.

"Possible, but unlikely. This place is stocked with dozens of bottles of expensive wine and liquor and beer. Why steal a footstool?"

"Good point," Irving admitted. "Okay, let's get to work." He was in a new mode tonight, something Tara would never have guessed possible for her little brother—stern, efficient and commanding. Probably he wanted to impress Justin, but it did show that he had genuine leadership qualities. Maybe Irving was learning how to function in the real world after all. Then she laughed to herself. Did a ghost hunt count as the real world?

The boys began their initial walk-through, noting the house's air vents, heating system, electrical appliances and computer. With the thermal scanner, Irving recorded the temperatures in all of the rooms and the initial EMF readings. Only then did they ask Justin to point out sites of recent activity. As they began the real investigation, Tara thought of how silent the house was tonight. For weeks, she had grown used to the sounds of electric drills, the bulldozer outside, and clatter in the kitchen. The new silence was, well, a little spooky. Suddenly, she was glad Justin wouldn't be living on the premises.

Irving looked at Justin. "Can we go upstairs? Something tells me that's where the real problem is."

"Sure. The whole house is yours."

They headed up the stairs, Justin behind Tara. As they neared the top, he took hold of her elbow, inadvertently pulling her against him. "This is really involved," he whispered. "I didn't know they'd have so much equipment."

The warm solidity of his chest evoked a flood of longing through her body, but she pulled away and forced out a neutral voice as she whispered back, "Apparently, ghost hunting is very high-tech."

Once again, the EMF detector went off in the child's bedroom that had bothered Tara the first night here. "The thermal scanner just registered a drop of ten degrees," one of the investigators reported excitedly. "Something's in here."

"It's probably the little boy who drowned in the pond."

All of them turned in astonishment at the new voice. It was Becky, the restaurant manager, shyly poking her frizzy head into the little room. "I didn't mean to interrupt, Justin. I just came back to check on inventory."

Justin stared at her, but his face creased with astonishment, not anger. "What little boy?"

Suddenly, Tara remembered Becky's grandmother's stories about the drowned little boy and the mother who killed herself. They exchanged glances and Tara realized none of the staff had told Justin about them—probably in fear of his vacillating moods.

Now, Becky bravely came forward. "Justin, something horrible happened here. Didn't the realtor tell you when you bought the house? It was at the turn of the century. As the story has it, the family's little boy was picking violets for his mother when he fell into the pond and drowned. Shortly

afterward, his mother hung herself. I checked it out at the library. It's all there."

Everyone in the room swallowed.

"Where?" Tara asked softly. "Where did the lady hang herself?"

Becky shook her head. "Right in this room, I believe. *His* room."

Irving and the other investigators looked at each other. "So it could be either of them," Irving said.

The guy holding the thermal scanner glanced down. "Temperature's back to normal."

Tara felt almost sick. "You guys, remember the voices on the tape? *Not here. In the water.* That wasn't the little boy. That was her, the mother. She's looking for him. She's looking for her son."

An uncomfortable silence prickled the room. Justin, who had been quiet, spoke up. "Tara, I think you've solved the mystery. We just need to tell her to move on—go to the light, isn't that what they say?"

"But why has she been so active lately?" Irving asked. "There must be a reason."

No one knew, but after taking photos of the second floor, the little group moved outside to the pond. Becky's dark eyes were alive with fascination. She was having a good time, Tara realized. As their flashlights moved over the tables of the garden and through the weeds of the field by the pond, she felt an unknown fear creep over her. The pond had always looked pretty to her before, but standing there knowing someone had drowned in it—even a century ago—was just a little too creepy.

A warm, dry hand took hers in the dark. She looked over to see Justin's lopsided smile. "Don't trip."

"I won't."

The black pond water sparkled in the moonlight. Irving and the guys busied themselves with more photos, but the EMF detector did not register any energy fluctuations. Disappointed, they set up the tape recorder.

"What's that?" Becky asked.

"A tape recorder." Tara noted her brother's chest seemed to expand with pride as he spoke. "It records what we call EVP's—Electronic Voice Phenomena. Of course, most people will scoff at the idea of the dead being able to record their voices on tape, but it might interest you to know that in fact Thomas Edison, the inventor of the light bulb, believed in such a possibility and was working on such a device when he died."

God, Irving, do you have to be such a geek around girls? Tara thought in despair. She caught Justin's eye, and he winked at her.

"So like, they just talk?" Becky asked, dumbfounded.

"Well, we don't actually hear them as they're doing it. You play back the tapes later and listen for whispers."

"Cool." Becky frowned. "So you could actually set up a dialogue, asking questions and listening later to the answers?"

Irving seemed to truly notice her for the first time. "Exactly," he said with a gratified smile. "Okay, everyone, we're going to start."

Everyone fell silent as Irving addressed the air. "Please tell us who you are."

There was a long pause, presumably so the ghost could answer. Then Irving asked, "Why are you still here?" Another pause. "What do you want from us?"

The wind picked up in the trees. Tucking a long strand of hair behind her ear, Tara glanced at Justin's impassive face, wondering if he was privately regretting the investigation. This was beginning to sound crazy, even to her, and she was the only one here who had actually seen the ghost!

One of the other investigators said in a low voice, "The EMF detector is going off..."

Irving asked a few more questions, but with each ensuing silence, Tara felt sillier. This was kid stuff, really—just like the séances they used to have at slumber parties. Then, Becky said in a trembling voice, "Something is in the pond."

They all turned their attention to the water. Something was disturbing the surface of the pond. Swallowing hard, Tara took a step back—straight into Justin's warm arms. He hugged her to him and whispered, "Spooked out yet?"

She shook her head, but didn't break away from him. She could feel the heat of his body through his shirt and hers, and his arms felt strong and safe around her. Everything in her body relaxed and melted into him. He leaned his chin on the top of her head as everyone stared at the pond.

"It's the wind," Irving muttered. As soon as he spoke, the disturbance died.

Apparently, one of the investigators had had enough. "That's it," he announced, packing up the tape recorder. "We're freezing our asses off out here for nothing. I'm going in." He walked back to the house so quickly that Tara stifled a laugh.

Everyone else followed suit. Tara felt a moment's regret, leaving the warm sanctuary of Justin's arms, but she avoided his eyes as they walked back with everyone else. What was he thinking? She knew what she was thinking—that she normally wasn't the type of woman to be aroused by Eric in a costume shop one day, then come here and feel even more strongly attracted to Justin. What was wrong with her? Every nerve in her body was on fire, and she wanted nothing more than to throw Justin into the nearest bed and fall on top of him. She could almost feel his hands on her body, that long silky hair washing over her bare skin....

"So what'd you think, Tara?" Becky's awkward laugh cut into her salacious thoughts. "Do you think it was the wind on the water or the ghost?"

Tara shook her head. "No idea. I guess the tape will tell us."

Back in the house, Justin poured them all a glass of wine as they rewound the tape. Expectantly, they gathered around the table.

Irving's voice came over the tape. "Please tell us who you are."

There was a pause. Then, a whisper. "*Alone.*"

A chill shivered down Tara's spine.

Irving's voice again. "Why are you still here?"

And again: "*Alone.*"

"What do you want from us?" was answered the same way. "*Alone.*" Gradually the answers stopped, and there was just silence after his questions.

Then Becky's voice was on the tape, saying, "Something is in the pond." There was a swell of murmurings from all of them, and in the ensuing silence, a very harsh whisper came across the tape: "*In the water, in the water. Alone.*"

Everyone screamed.

"Holy crap!" Irving's face flushed and a muscle near his jaw twitched, as it always did when he was nervous. "Oh *man!*"

"That's it," said one of the other investigators, pulling on his jacket. He looked ready to run back to his car. "This house needs a priest! Or an exorcist!"

Justin spoke. "Please, calm down. The ghost has never hurt anyone so far. Let's please be patient and try to assist it, rather than running in fear."

Tara was impressed with his sensible manner. So now, Justin did believe in ghosts, and he was dealing with them as he had dealt with renovating La Traviata, as a problem that could be tackled with the right tools. His composure stood in sharp contrast to Irving's fellow investigators, who looked pale and nervous around the table.

"How?" Irving ran his hands through his curly hair. For all his avid ghost hunting, Tara saw that he'd never actually expected to have one dropped so obviously and tragically in his lap. She felt almost sorry for him as he fretted, "I just don't know how to handle this. I mean, it's one thing to find the ghost. But when they need help—geez, I don't know how to do that!"

"She obviously feels guilty over her son drowning," Becky mused. "But is she saying he drowned alone or shouldn't have been playing alone? Or that she's alone here now?"

Justin glanced at the clock. "You know, it's getting late. I think we've all had enough ghost talk for the night. You've done your investigation. Why don't you review your findings and we can discuss it further tomorrow night when you come to dinner."

Everyone agreed with relief. It was obvious to Tara that tonight had been just a little too ghostly for the investigation team, and that amused her mightily. As she walked out with them into the clear starry night, Justin followed. She turned expectantly to him on the porch. "Afraid to be here alone now?" she teased.

She was expecting him to tease her about staying. Instead, his reply took her aback. "Oh, I won't be. I've got someone coming over in..." He checked his watch. "Fifteen minutes."

Tara blinked. Justin had a date? No, it had to be work-related. But at this time of night? Why else had he so suddenly asked them all to leave? She glanced out at Irving's car and saw headlights turning into the driveway. The car was familiar and as the driver's door swung open, she suddenly knew where she'd seen it.

Meredith stepped out.

"Hi Tara," she called through the dark. She walked toward them in a long black leather coat and high heels, carrying a bottle of wine. Her gait was confident and her smile very naughty. "Looks like I'm right on time."

"You're a little early actually," Justin said, but he didn't look displeased. "Come on in, it's getting cold out." Meredith kissed his cheek and with a slick smile for Tara, she walked past him into the restaurant.

Tara was frozen. Was this some kind of a joke? Justin loathed Meredith. He'd been dodging her none-too-subtle passes for weeks. And now, here she was showing up late at night with a bottle of wine? She stared at Justin, but his face was unreadable.

"We have things to discuss." He inclined his head toward the dining room where Meredith was making herself comfortable. "See you tomorrow night for dinner, okay, Tara?"

"Sure," she answered stiffly and walked down to Irving's car on wooden legs.

Justin had a date with Meredith. That slime ball had kissed her and gazed into her eyes with what she thought was real love, had held her in his arms tonight until she never, ever, wanted to be released, all the while knowing he had a late-night rendezvous with her enemy, Meredith. What a bastard!

"You bet I'll come to dinner tomorrow night," she muttered, climbing in the car. "And I won't be alone either, you two-faced bastard."

Driving home through the night, she knew she had no reason to be angry. She was the one with two men on her mind and in her heart, and she had as much as told Justin to forget about her that night on his porch. So why was she so outraged? Because it was Meredith? Maybe Eric was right and Justin was nothing more than a fast-lane operator. Maybe he really was just out for what he could get, and when she'd turned him down, he'd simply moved on to a sure thing. Maybe he'd been sleeping with Meredith all along.

She shivered with revulsion as they drove home, but that night in bed, she couldn't stop dreaming of his body against hers.

Chapter Sixteen

"A dinner party at that foo-foo place? You've gotta be kidding me, Tara."

Eric's face was creased with puzzled suspicion, and she didn't blame him. For the last two months, she had been doing her best to keep him and Justin wide apart. "Foo-foo" was Eric's term for anything he considered feminine, fancy or snobbish, and she couldn't help wincing at the thought of him embarrassing her at dinner. But he was going to attend the costume ball, wasn't he? She couldn't hide him from Justin forever, even if she dreaded confirming Justin's opinion of Eric as a beer-drinking lout.

"My brother will be there too," she said desperately. "Come on, Eric, it's a free dinner. Since when do you pass that up?"

Her biggest fear was that Meredith would be there as Justin's date. If that happened, she absolutely couldn't show up alone. It would be too humiliating. Especially after last night. She had arranged for a day off today anyhow, to get started on her Halloween baking, so she hadn't had to face Meredith yet.

"I hate that guy," he said sulkily. "I still think he's trying to get in your pants, Tara."

"Come on, Eric. Would he have invited you if that was the case?" Of course, Justin hadn't invited him at all, but Eric didn't need to know that. Justin was too well-mannered to say anything when he showed up, of that she was sure.

Finally Eric agreed. As soon as he did, Tara felt a flicker of regret, but she knew it was too late to change her mind. Besides, she wanted to show Justin he meant nothing to her.

Later as they pulled up to La Traviata, she pushed away her doubt. Eric looked good tonight in a dark navy shirt, which brought out his blue eyes, even if his face was a bit petulant. She herself was in a black velvet skirt and blue angora sweater, her hair long and loose. They made a good-looking couple. She took his hand as they went up the front porch steps, and he smiled at her. She began to relax.

The door opened to reveal Justin, his long chestnut hair loose over a casual white sweater. The smile died on his face when he saw Eric standing next to Tara. "Oh, you brought Eric. That's great." His voice was falsely cheerful as he took their jackets and led them into the dining room.

Irving and his ghost-busting cohorts were already seated. Meredith was nowhere in sight. Becky, the high-strung manager, nervously hovered around the kitchen doorway. Tara wondered for a moment how she could possibly handle tomorrow night's chaos without turning into an anxious wreck, then decided it wasn't her concern as the first course was brought out.

"Goddamn!" Irving was enthusiastically chowing down a grilled calamari salad. "This food rocks!"

"It *is* good." Tara decided not to let on that she'd eaten here once before. It would only upset Eric. "Sweetie, do you need help with your hand?" She gestured to the beef tenderloin. Eric's broken hand, still bandaged, made it difficult for him to cut meat sometimes.

"Nah, that's okay." Eric downed his beer in a gulp, making her wince. "I think I'll just eat it as is." He laughed as he picked up the piece of meat and began to eat it like a chicken wing. Without knife or fork, he held it in his hand and chomped away.

Oh god. Did he have to act like such a country bumpkin, tonight of all nights? "Eric... I'll cut it for you," Tara said in a low voice.

"It's okay, babe. Come on, it's not like anyone's here." He smacked his lips as he dropped the meat and looked in his empty glass. "I need another beer," he called toward the kitchen.

She wanted to kill him. Was he putting on an act for Justin's sake? The server came out without a word and refilled his glass with the dark German beer he'd ordered, then filled everyone else's water glasses. "Damn, this is good," Eric said cheerily. "Babe, you gotta try the beef."

"She's had it before," said a voice from the doorway. Justin, who had stayed in the kitchen for most of the meal, watched Eric coldly. "I recall you liked it quite a bit, right, Tara?"

She nodded, hoping the words wouldn't register with Eric, but they did and he frowned. "Wait a minute, when did you have it before? This place isn't even open yet."

"Tara ate some test meals for us," Justin said calmly. "She was very helpful. More wine, Tara?"

He seemed to have recovered from his initial coolness and was now back to his normal courteous charm. But there was something else in his manner, a certain competitiveness, almost as if he wanted to anger Eric.

And it was working. "When the hell was this?" Eric's eyes were full of betrayal and his mouth was full of meat. Tara wanted to scream, *Don't talk with your mouth full!* Instead, she shrugged helplessly, but he went on, "So you've been coming over here at night and having dinner with him?"

"Just once! God, Eric, relax."

"Typical." Eric downed his new beer and glanced at Justin. "Hey, no offense, man. Anybody else having dinner with my girl, I'd be a little pissed, but with you, I don't mind at all."

Oh no. Something bad was coming down the pike, and she wasn't sure exactly what it was.

"Oh?" Justin's brows lifted. "Why is that?"

"Well..." Eric gestured around. "You know. I mean, the decorating, the cooking, and all. I didn't realize you were gay at first, but now—"

"Eric!" Tara cried out, cringing. "Justin is not gay and you know it."

Justin's amber eyes were like ice. "You don't have to defend me, Tara. My cousin is gay, and I don't have a problem with it. However..." He took a menacing step toward the table. "I'm not gay, and I think your boyfriend knows it."

Eric shoved his chair back. "Even with one hand broken, I can bust your pretty face in. Stay the hell away from my girl, understand?"

Oh god. She wanted to die, but Justin kept his cool. He was smiling thinly. "I think that's Tara's decision to make, not yours."

Silence. The ghost hunters stared back and forth between the three of them as if they were watching a movie.

"I, uh..." Tara's voice was weak. She looked from Eric's defiant blue eyes to Justin's cool gaze. For a moment she wanted to shout, *Screw you, Eric! Don't you tell me who I can and cannot see!* Her immediate impulse was to dump his Neanderthal self right there and tell Eric that Justin was everything he wasn't—refined, successful, attentive. But then, she remembered Meredith—walking up the steps last night with a bottle of wine and a seductive smile. Her stomach turned.

"Justin, I'm sorry, but I guess Eric's right," she muttered. "I probably have been spending too much time over here." Meredith's cocky face flashed

before her eyes, and she cleared her throat. "I mean," she went on in a stronger voice, "Eric is my boyfriend, and I love him very much. I could never see myself with anyone else. He's the hottest man I know." She conjured up a falsely lustful smile as she looked at Eric, but from the corner of her eye, she could see the devastation on Justin's face.

He recovered and shrugged. "I see. Well, I didn't mean to step on anyone's toes. Eric, you have my apologies."

It was a gracious thing to say, but Eric only sneered. "That's right, you pretty boy asshole. She prefers me over a creampuff like you any day. I've got—"

"Eric!" Tara cried again. "Shut up! Come on, we're leaving." She grabbed their coats and her purse. As she did, she noticed that Eric's leather jacket was wet. She recognized the pungent odor of the pond water that had sprinkled on her arms before. The ghost had ruined Eric's jacket, but why? She shook her head, trying to concentrate on the present. "Justin, I'm sorry. If you don't want us at the costume ball tomorrow night—"

"Don't be silly. Of course I want you there. You're always welcome here." His voice was as dead and cool as a dry leaf.

She dragged Eric out to the car, tossing his wet and ruined leather jacket in the back seat before he could notice it. Neither of them spoke during the drive back into town. As Eric pulled up in front of their favorite bar Gilligan's, Tara looked at him. "That was really uncalled for, you know that?"

He barely looked at her. "Whatever. I showed that Lexus-driving asshole who's boss."

He strode into the bar, leaving her on the sidewalk. A cold dismay crept over her. That little pissing contest back at La Traviata had nothing to do with

her, she realized. For Eric, it had just been a macho competition with a guy who drove a better car.

At least that was how it had been for Eric. For Justin... She just didn't know.

* * * * *

The morning of the costume ball found her hunched over too many cups of coffee, replaying the last few weeks in her mind. How did Justin really feel about her? Had he ever cared, or had he just been trying to get her in bed all along? Eric's comment returned to her: *just trying to get in the cute blonde secretary's pants*. She had scorned it then, but now she wondered if he was right. She never would have seen through him, after all, if Meredith hadn't shown up early for their date.

Her brother came into the kitchen. "You missed it last night." He yawned. "After dinner, we lit some candles and told the ghost to go to the light. Do you think it worked?"

Tara shrugged. "How would I know?"

Irving poured himself some orange juice. "Eric sure made an ass out of himself last night."

She sighed. "Yes, indeed he did."

"Why don't you break up with him and go out with Justin, Tara? He's cool, and he likes you."

"He's dating Meredith from work," she told him. "My arch-enemy. So he doesn't like me that much."

Irving shrugged. "If you say so. What costume should I wear tonight?"

Her geeky little brother was going to the party? That was news indeed. Usually, Irving felt insecure in large gatherings. "Most are going to be rented out at this late date. You could make a simple one, I guess."

He brightened. "I could wear my *Star Wars* costume from high school."

Tara sighed again. "You could, Irving, or you could just wear a giant sign telling all the girls to keep away from you."

"What do you mean?"

It was hopeless. Her little brother was never going to get a date at this rate.

She'd just had her fourth cup of coffee when Eric called. He seemed so excited about the costume ball she decided to forgive him for last night. "Is my harem princess ready for her sultan?" he asked in a sexy voice. She laughed. "Aww, don't laugh, Tara! You'll ruin the whole effect."

She couldn't help being amused. "You're really getting into this, aren't you?"

"Damned straight I am. You're going to look *hot* in that flimsy little Arabian get-up. I might just pull you off into the trees and have my way with you right there."

"You wish!" Then she remembered Mandy. "What's your cousin dressing up as?"

"Mae West, she said. She has to go pick up her costume later, and Billy's going as a pirate."

"Sounds good. When are you picking me up?"

"Oh. Uh..." Suddenly his voice turned uncertain. "Well, the thing is, Mandy's costume won't be ready until eight tonight. It's a rental. So I might be a bit late..."

"It's okay, Eric." Obviously, Mandy had concocted some scheme to ruin the ball for them, but it wasn't worth getting into an argument over. It might actually be fun to make Eric find her at the ball. "I'll ride with my brother."

"See you there, babe."

After a long bath, she slipped into the gauzy pantaloons, halter top and sandals of her costume. After applying exotic eye makeup, she put on a wig of long black hair, then fastened on her veil. When she was done, she looked as exotic and mysterious as any harem girl. When she headed downstairs, Irving was shocked. "Wow, I barely recognize you!" Fortunately he had decided against his original costume and had dressed up instead as a priest. It wasn't exactly an attractive costume, Tara thought, but it wasn't as geeky as *Star Wars* either.

Just after eight, they set out for the ball. There was a brisk October chill in the air, but she knew the body heat of the party would keep her warm. As they pulled up to La Traviata, she was thrilled to see the majestic old home alive with lights and music. They slipped in the front door only to find Becky presiding over a dining room full of guests—a smoothly competent Becky who directed the servers, chefs and hostess like a conductor with an orchestra. Tara blinked. Was this really the same frazzled girl who had been rushing around here for weeks? "The real party's out back in the garden." Becky must've read Tara's mind, for she said with a wry smile, "Yes, I know. I'm actually calmer under pressure. Strange, isn't it?"

No kidding. They moved out back, a small knot growing in Tara's stomach at the thought of seeing Justin. What could she possibly say to him after last night? *Justin, I don't really prefer Eric to you. I just hate you for*

secretly dating Meredith. Speaking of which, how many women are you dating? They turned the corner to the garden—a garden lit up with torches, table lamps and the stage lights of the band playing in front of the pine trees. And there, surrounded by half a dozen women, was La Traviata’s owner himself, Justin Bremington.

He was dressed as a vampire. It suited him. His long hair flowed over his cape and the black of his costume brought out the glow of his eyes. When he laughed, Tara could see the plastic fangs he wore. Dammit, why did he have to look so good even dressed as a walking corpse? And who were all those women surrounding him? Her jealous eyes immediately noticed that all of them were dressed sexily—one as a French maid, one as a cat girl, one as a serving wench from the Renaissance, and so on. All of them laughed at his remarks and shoved their cleavage in his face. She wondered idly if Justin liked big-busted women. If so, he wouldn’t be interested in her, but he just might like Mandy, who was intending to hit on him tonight. Oh yuck, she’d forgotten all about that. Would he really do that to her—sleep with not just one but both of her mortal enemies?

Justin caught her gaze. From his curious expression, she could tell he hadn’t recognized her. She walked up to him. “Everything looks beautiful,” she said simply, ignoring the hostile stares of the other women. Up close, she could tell who they were—the most aggressive single women in Somerset. Of course, they had come here hoping to snag the town’s newest bachelor. All of her write-ups on him in the *Chronicle* had pretty much advertised what a catch he was, hadn’t they?

Justin’s eyes widened. “Tara?”

She smiled beneath her veil. “Can I speak to you alone for a moment?” She glanced over her shoulder and was relieved to see that Irving had disappeared.

"Sure." Justin walked away with her. "What's up?" His initial warmth vanished, replaced by a cautious neutrality.

"I wanted to apologize for last night. Eric was completely out of line."

"He's just jealous. Completely understandable, given how in love you both are."

She caught the sarcasm, but only shook her head. "Actually, we've been having problems lately, which is why he's a little insecure but—"

"Tara, no explanations necessary. Really." He gestured to his bevy of admirers. "As you can see, I've got my hands full."

A cold lump settled in her stomach. "What will Meredith think about that?"

He frowned. "Meredith?"

Her patience snapped. "Don't treat me like a fool, Justin. I saw her waltz in the other night with a bottle of wine, remember?"

He smiled faintly. "Oh right. Yes, she was quite convinced she was finally getting the date she wanted with me."

Tara's lips tightened. "Are you saying it wasn't? It was late at night, Justin—"

He laughed. "I let her think it was a date because I wanted to see her alone, without that Henry Hansen protecting her. But no, Tara, it wasn't. It was pure business. After seeing how much of a help you were with publicizing this place, I decided to do what I could to help you out."

She was puzzled.

"She was all over me, as you can imagine," Justin said. "But I told her to back off and that I'd changed my mind and decided to sue after all about that article on the fire. I told her she could either promote you to staff writer or hire a lawyer. Her choice."

No. No, it couldn't be.

He yawned. "She pitched a fit, don't doubt it. Swore you were just a ditzzy little secretary, and she'd be damned if she promoted you to anything, but here's the thing." He smiled indulgently. "Your brother and his friends accidentally left their tape recorder. Somehow—I swear I didn't do it—it got turned on. It recorded everything, including her hitting on me and telling me how terrible Henry is in bed, how she's only with him for her job."

Tara shook her head, too confounded to speak. She had misjudged Justin, misjudged him terribly.

"I'd never have the heart to play it for the poor old guy, but when Meredith and I realized it was recording, she went nuts. Called me every name in the book and grabbed the tape and ran out." He smiled ruefully. "Meredith's not too bright, Tara. She left the tape in her car. Yesterday, Henry got a flat and had to borrow her car, and he stuck it in the cassette player, thinking it was music. He called me as soon as he got home to see if it was true. What could I say? He's heartbroken and you're going to be a staff writer. Congratulations."

He turned and walked back to the waiting women. Tara stared after him, almost too stunned to breathe. She felt as if she no longer understood anything.

Chapter Seventeen

The torch-lit garden was a throng of costumed guests. Most wore masks, and she had a difficult time recognizing anyone. Then again, hardly any of them recognized her behind her veil and long dark wig. For that, she was grateful as she made her way to the bar for a drink. "A Mai Tai, please." She sipped it gratefully and leaned against the elm tree. She needed to be alone with her thoughts, at least for a few minutes.

Justin wasn't dating Meredith.

Justin had tried to help get her promoted at the paper.

Justin was on her side.

Or he had been.

Recalling last night's confrontation with Eric, she flushed. Why was she always screwing things up with Justin? She felt she was always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, or making the wrong choice at the right time. What could she say to fix things?

Suddenly she realized the obvious: La Traviata was open for business. The house was renovated. There would be no more articles, no more photo essays. No more trips out here to photograph the changes. With the animosity between Justin and Eric, they certainly wouldn't ever be coming here for dinner.

As of that moment, Justin was out of her life for good.

Two women in schoolgirl outfits passed by, their voices lowered, but she could hear them perfectly. "Is he a hottie or what? He asked for my number, can you believe that?"

"He's gorgeous, Sue. Boy, play your cards right and this will be your restaurant too."

They laughed dirtily as they moved off. Tara felt sick. So Justin was collecting numbers, was he? Well, why shouldn't he? So much for his talk of her being the only girl he had had any feelings for since his wife's death. With this opening, he officially had his pick of any single woman in town. Hell, it looked like even some of the married women were giving him the eye.

Screw it. She was with Eric. It was time to stop mooning over the enigma that was Justin Bremington and go back where she belonged.

* * * * *

After another Mai Tai, she felt better. She moved into the party, enjoying the masked eyes and anonymous gazes sliding over her body. It was almost nine o'clock, according to someone's watch. Eric and the others should have already arrived. Where were they? She looked around for a Mae West, but Mandy was nowhere in sight. Nor was Billy, supposedly dressed as a pirate. The torches staked in the garden cast a sinister glow on the masks grinning or glaring before her, and she tried to focus on finding Eric. A sultan, a sultan, why couldn't she find a sultan? Then she spotted him in his turban, mask and sash off by the apple tree, paying a waiter for a beer. She smiled beneath her veil and slipped behind the tree.

When the waiter stepped away, she moved forward and clasped her hands over Eric's eyes. "Care to ravish a young harem girl?" she whispered sweetly.

Eric laughed dirtily. "Do with me as you will," he said, his voice muffled by the mask.

Tara led him back to the fields, to the old stone bench by the pond. Under the open sky she felt bold and adventurous—and determined to forget about Justin. “You’re so sexy tonight,” she purred. “I’ve never made love to a sultan before.”

Eric laughed and removed her veil. Shaking out her long hair, Tara boldly undid her gauzy halter top and exposed her breasts to the silver light of the moon. Her nipples hardened in the crisp autumn breeze that danced across her skin. “Do you like what you see?”

In answer, Eric eagerly leaned forward and began to fondle her breasts.

There was an urgency in his touch tonight that thrilled her. He was as aroused by the costumes and masks as she was. As his hands began to squeeze and explore her ass, she daringly bent over the bench. She swallowed a sigh as he eased her silk pantaloons down. “That’s right. Pretend we’re really in a harem,” she whispered. “Tonight I have to obey you and do whatever you want.” Caressing her inner thighs, Eric carefully parted her legs a bit, then traced light fingers over her vulva. She had shaved her pussy earlier, imagining it as an additional exotic surprise for Eric tonight. Judging by his moan, it was one he appreciated. As two of his fingers dipped into her soft, moist cleft, she caught her breath. “Faster,” she begged. “You’re a sultan tonight, Eric. Act like one.”

With another dirty laugh, Eric pushed her onto the bench to face him. Boldly, she lay back and spread her legs and he began to fondle her swollen pink lips with one hand. Tara squirmed and moaned as he reached for her clitoris and squeezed it gently between his thumb and forefinger, but he seemed a little clumsy tonight, trying out different strokes instead of touching her the way he knew she liked. She wiggled her hips impatiently. “Eric, quit teasing! Some sultan you are...” Suddenly, it occurred to her he wasn’t saying much. Just then he pushed aside his tunic to take out a short, wide cock that

was as hard as the bench she lay on. Quickly he tried to mount her, but she shoved him off.

"Get off me!" Pulling her pantaloons up, she jumped to her feet. Flustered and blushing, she refastened her halter top. "Who the hell are you? Take off the mask!"

The man in Eric's sultan costume seemed frozen. Angrily, Tara reached for the mask, and Billy's voice spoke with embarrassment. "Tara, it's me."

"Billy?" she breathed. Shock, rage and humiliation coursed through her like a furious supernova. "Billy, you—you were actually going to have sex with me? Billy, you planned this whole thing!"

"No!" Billy whipped off the mask, and she could at last see his red, perspiring face. "No, it was Mandy. She said you wanted—uh, well, she said that you'd been dropping hints about me—"

Mandy. That ice-cold bitch. Tara should have known she was behind this. "Forget Mandy. I called you Eric. You knew I thought you were him. How could you let me expose myself to you like that?"

Billy blushed furiously. "Geeze, I thought it was just part of the game. It's Halloween, everyone's letting go tonight. It's not like you have something I haven't seen before."

For a moment, she thought she would vomit. Picking up her veil, she ran back to the garden, leaving Billy far behind her. Eric, she had to find Eric. She'd deal with Mandy's deception later. And then it hit her.

Mandy was the only one who knew Eric would be dressed like a sultan. Mandy had wanted Tara to have sex with Eric's best friend for a reason. Either she was planning on them getting caught, or she wanted Tara out of the way so she could get at Eric herself.

Panic and horror leapt in Tara's heart as she remembered there hadn't been a Mae West costume at the party tonight. That meant Mandy hadn't come.... Or that she'd worn a different costume.

No, it couldn't be.

The ghostly violet perfume floated by to her right. As her worst suspicions began to scream in her mind, she followed the scent across the grounds. As she passed the equipment shed, she heard a moan. She crept to the entrance, and once her eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw exactly what she had feared—Eric on top of another veiled Arabian princess, pumping wildly into her as he groaned. He'd removed his mask and his face was flushed from drinking. Tara froze with horror.

"Oh yeah," he moaned drunkenly. "Tara, keep moving like that..."

Beneath him, Mandy bucked and writhed. Tara felt sick with disgust as she watched her boyfriend's cock drive into another woman's pussy.

"Yeah, babe," he breathed. "I'm getting tired. You get on top."

Mandy quickly rolled him around and began bouncing energetically on top of him. It was like watching a film, or a nightmare, as Eric opened Mandy's halter top to play with her breasts. Or rather, to play with Tara's small breasts. Instead, his hands grasped Mandy's large silicone tits, and abruptly, he ceased.

"Tara?" he asked in a voice of baffled panic.

"Right here." Tara stared at him in bitter betrayal as he shoved Mandy off him and got to his feet.

"I— Tara— How—" He squinted through the dark at her, then at Mandy.

With a tinkling laugh, Mandy removed her veil and stepped into the light spilling into the shed from the torch-lit garden. "Oops! I guess it was a case of mistaken identity tonight." Her breasts still exposed, she smirked at Tara.

"Cover yourself up!" Tara snapped. "You're nothing but a whore, Mandy, a whore who would deceive people just to sleep with her own cousin!"

"Oh, for god's sake." Her halter top still parted, Mandy sneered at Tara. "You're such a little fool. For the last time, we're *third cousins*. It's not that big a deal, and Eric knew damned well who he was with." She caressed her own nipples and smiled at Eric. "Didn't you, hon?"

"No... No..." Eric said in a choked voice. "You pulled me in here when I passed by. I just saw the costume, and I thought you were Tara..." He sat on the edge and lowered his face into his hands.

"Oh, don't give me that. Deep inside, you knew. Just like Tara knew it was really Billy she was having sex with tonight."

Eric raised his head. "What?" he yelped.

"Tara and Billy had a little tryst tonight," Mandy said acidly. "Didn't you, babe?"

"Wrong." Tara longed to hit her. "I figured it out in time. Did you think I wouldn't know the difference between my own boyfriend and another man?"

Mandy shrugged, lighting a cigarette. She looked completely unperturbed. "Then you really are a fool. I gave you the perfect set-up to cheat on Eric without being responsible for it. Oh well."

Eric looked stricken. "You— Did you let him touch you, Tara?"

"Does it matter?" she snapped. "You were actually inside another woman! You had sex with your own cousin! How could you think she was me?"

Mandy laughed. "God, Tara, you really are stupid. Eric knew it wasn't you. He was just pretending so he could cheat with a clear conscience. Don't you know anything about men?"

"No, no. I didn't know it was you. I'd never— never, never, never—" Eric muttered drunkenly. He seemed so pathetic and ineffectual to Tara that she ignored him.

"I happen to know quite a bit about *men*," Tara spit. "Drunken boys, however, are another story. How in god's name could you justify this, Mandy? I feel like I've been assaulted. I almost had sex with Billy—"

"You should have. He's a great lay." Mandy's voice was smug.

"Actually, he was clumsy and rough. Apparently, you just haven't had better." Tara made her voice cool and was pleased to see Mandy's nostrils flare with indignation. "Regardless, I still exposed myself to him, thinking it was Eric."

Now, Mandy smiled her cat-like smile. "Wasn't anything he hadn't seen before, sweetie."

Tara noticed a change in Eric's posture. Still covering his face with his hands, his shoulders now were palpably stiff, almost as if he was fearful. What was going on? "It sure as hell was, Mandy. Unlike you, I don't stroll around in see-through nightgowns."

Now, Eric looked like he was cringing, and Mandy's smile deepened until she practically shook with repressed laughter. "No, but you do get drunk and pass out sometimes."

"I beg your pardon? I do not. I've done that but once in my life and that was at Eric's—" She broke off, remembering it was the night she'd met Mandy, a night when Billy and the whole gang had been over.

The dark cold of suspicion crept through her.

Mandy began petting Eric's damp blond hair. He didn't stop her but began to cry as Mandy purred, "After Eric helped you to bed that night, he came back down and kept drinking. We all got a little drunk and wound up playing Truth or Dare. Billy dared Eric to show you off to us. We all went upstairs, and you were so passed out, I don't think a Mack truck would've woken you up. Eric pulled back the covers, and there you were on your back, completely naked—"

"Stop it!" Tara screamed. "You're lying. Eric wouldn't do that!"

Silence hung in the room. Eric denied nothing.

Old memories stole into Tara's mind. Eric encouraging her to take her top off at the concert this summer. Eric bragging to his friends about a night they had had sex over and over until the sun had come up. Eric jumping off the town bridge, Eric stealing a golf cart, Eric climbing the roof of St. Mary's church, all on a dare.

He had done it.

She walked over to him, forgetting Mandy for the moment. Sliding her fingers under his chin, she tilted up his face to meet her gaze. His blue eyes shone with tears and looked as frightened as a child's. *He is a child*, she thought. *An overgrown, thoughtless child*. She ached for Justin in that moment, but she couldn't think about that now. Instead, she stared into the eyes of the person she had once hoped would be her husband. "You did it, didn't you. I mean so little to you that you would take advantage of me just to titillate your idiot friends."

Eric cleared his throat. "It was a dare. I was drunk and it seemed funny at the time. It was dark, and they didn't even get a good look at you. Tara, please, it was just one of those stupid things you do when you're drunk—"

"But you're always drunk, Eric," she said softly. "Life with you will always be like this. There will always be a beer, a dare, a woman you can't turn down. So remember this: I'm not leaving you because of Mandy. I'm leaving you because of you."

Eric burst into tears.

Picking up her discarded veil, Tara turned to Mandy. In that same cool, soft voice Tara said, "Seducing a drunk man isn't exactly a feat to be proud of, Mandy. I'm guessing the sober ones are kind of turned off by you, huh?"

Mandy's dark eyes grew enormous with anger. As Tara swept out the door, Mandy charged after her. "Screw you, little Miss Innocent! Don't you get on your high horse with me! You're no better—"

Her words were cut off by a crash and a scream. Tara whirled around to see Mandy sprawled on the ground, having tripped over the antique needlepoint ottoman. The *missing* antique needlepoint ottoman. What the hell was it doing out here in front of the shed? Tara felt a chill in the air and watched in astonishment as Mandy lifted a bloody, gaping face. Her nose was gushing blood and looked broken, and at least two of her teeth had been knocked out. She had hit her face on one of the rocks.

The old-fashioned violet perfume floated past Tara and was gone.

Two La Traviata employees came running at the sound of the scream. "Get an ambulance," Tara told them. Carefully, she picked up the ottoman and carried it to La Traviata's back door, where she handed it to a baffled waiter. Then, she walked toward her car under the glittering October sky. She was done here. Her dream costume ball had turned into a nightmare, and she only wanted to be home.

No doubt Justin was inside with the prettiest of his admirers right now, celebrating his success. After tonight, he would be the toast of the town, not

just as a handsome young bachelor, always a rarity in Somerset, but as the owner of the most luxurious, novel gourmet restaurant in the region. It was best not to think about what might have been. She had had her chance and blown it.

Chapter Eighteen

Halloween dawned damp and gray. Tara stood at the kitchen window in her flannel pajamas, coffee in hand, watching the neighbor's sheet ghost toss about in the wind. This was normally her favorite day of the year. Unlike Christmas, Thanksgiving or Easter, Halloween wasn't packaged in cloying messages of family togetherness. It was the one holiday she wasn't acutely aware of her parents' absence or the small, sad family she and Irving made on special occasions. Halloween was fun and frivolous—a time to dress up and enjoy the small ghosts and witches and cowboys wandering the neighborhood.

But today, she wouldn't be feeling much Halloween joy.

She still felt numb from the debacle of last night. After driving home alone, her phone had rang repeatedly with frantic calls from Eric. Alternately crying and pleading with apologies, he had tried to explain away the damage, but Tara could hear in his voice that he knew the blow to their relationship had been fatal. He had continued drinking throughout the night, each phone call growing progressively more slurred, until she unplugged the telephone. Before she did, one of La Traviata's staff members had called her from the hospital. Not only had Mandy's nose been broken, as Tara suspected, but her jaw and cheekbone were fractured as well and she had knocked out both front teeth. She would need extensive surgery to regain even a semblance of her old face, but Tara hadn't felt vindicated in any way. She simply wanted her life cleansed of these people and that included her thoughts and feelings. She had no energy to spare for any of them anymore.

She sighed and pulled out her baking pans, then took out the flour, sugar, vanilla and other ingredients. The neighborhood kids didn't know of her heartbreak. They would still ring the doorbell tonight with cheery screams of, "Trick or treat!" She couldn't disappoint them.

Distracted, she began to make the batch of butterscotch brownies. How could she have been so wrong about Eric? Yes, she'd known he was still a boisterous adolescent at heart. Yes, she'd known he did idiotic things when he'd been drinking. But to show off her naked sleeping body to his friends on a dare? Where was the love and respect in that? Plus having sex with Mandy. That was just beyond the limit of credulity. Yes, he was very drunk and yes, Mandy had dressed up in the same costume, but how could he not have known? A part of her agreed with Mandy—that in his secret heart of hearts, Eric knew exactly who he was having sex with.

She remembered exposing herself to Billy and felt sick. What was wrong with these people, treating sex like some drunken, meaningless game? She didn't belong with them. She never had. Her own loneliness and lack of options in Somerset had blinded her. To think she had chosen them over Justin, had judged them her surrogate family, trusted and familiar.

Well, no use thinking about that. Justin would never speak to her again.

"Mmmm." Irving came into the kitchen, his straw-blond hair sticking up in every direction and a sleepy smile of satisfaction on his face. "Something sure smells good in here."

"I'm baking for the kids, Irving, not you! You can have one of everything, and that's it." She took a closer look at him. "You're looking rather smug today. What's going on?"

Irving popped a ball of dough into his mouth, still smiling. "Let's just say, I'll be needing two of everything."

Tara stared at her little brother, perplexed. Light footsteps padded down the hall. Tentatively popping her frizzy head into the kitchen was Becky, the manager at La Traviata. "Um, hi."

"Hi," Tara replied, dumbfounded. Was it possible her dorky little brother had actually found romance last night, amidst the chaos of the costume ball?

"She, uh, she kind of spent the night," Irving clarified needlessly. The two of them grinned shyly at each other, and Becky curled into his arm, her clothes from last night rumpled and disheveled.

"I should go home and change," Becky said. "I mean, if you still want me to go tonight, that is."

"I do, I do!" Irving said fervently. "It's going to kick ass, doing an investigation on Halloween night at the abandoned hospital!"

Tara couldn't believe her ears. "Becky, you actually want to go along on this ghost hunt?"

"Do I ever!" Becky's brown eyes lit up. "I think ghosts are fascinating! Tonight's going to be awesome." She and Irving gazed lovingly at each other.

Unbelievable. On the night I lose the most important men in my life, my geeky little brother hooks up with his soul mate.

Putting the butterscotch brownies in to bake, Tara headed upstairs for the shower. There was just no making sense of this Halloween.

* * * * *

Irving and Becky had left the house by the time she got out of the shower. She was still in her bathrobe, patting moisturizer into her skin, when there was a knock on the door.

With a sudden jolt to her heart, she hoped it would be Justin. Perhaps he had forgiven her, had heard about last night and come here to give her a

second chance. She knew it was crazy, but she quickly put on lip gloss and shook out her wet hair before running downstairs.

Eric stood on the front porch, holding a bouquet of tiger lilies, daffodils and carnations in his arms.

She cursed silently, but in her heart of hearts, she'd known it would be him. They stared at each other, and she opened the door. "Come on in."

He handed her the flowers without a word and walked into the kitchen. The delicious smells of baking vanilla and cinnamon filled the house, and he inhaled deeply, his eyes growing moist. He collapsed at the table and didn't speak. Putting the bouquet in water, she fixed them both a cup of coffee and brought him two of the fresh butterscotch brownies. They drank their coffee in silence.

Finally, Eric said, "I am begging you for another chance."

She stared at him. Had Eric's blue eyes always been so guileless, so empty? Had he always looked so—young and unformed? After dreaming of Justin, Eric seemed like a boy to her. Not a jerk, not a bastard, not a man who set out to betray her and break her heart. Just a silly, immature, fun-loving boy who loved drinking too much and made bad decisions.

"No," she said quietly. "It's over. For good."

Eric bit his lip. "I love you. I can't live without you, Tara."

"You'll have to learn." Part of her was astonished at her own coolness, but she knew being soft with Eric wasn't going to help him. "Nothing you could do will win me back. Accept it and move on."

Eric's face tightened with determination. "I'm laying off the sauce. From now on, it's sober fun for me. No more crazy dares, no more stunts."

"Good. I think you need to learn how to have fun without being drunk. Maybe you won't put your next girlfriend through the hell you put me through."

"I don't want a next girlfriend. I want you."

She shook her head. "Don't make this difficult, Eric. It's over. You can accept it gracefully or you can make it ugly. It's your decision, but I think after what I've been through, I deserve the first."

He didn't speak for a long time. Then slowly, he nodded. "I'll always love you, Tara. I know I messed up. Maybe one day..."

She cut him off. "No. There will never be 'one day' for us. You need to understand that."

She walked him to the door. The day was still gray and chilly. The grinning pumpkins on the porch looked as if they were laughing at Eric. "I wish only the best for you."

He nodded, struggling not to cry. "I'll always be waiting if you change your mind."

They hugged briefly. Tara was surprised at how little grief or regret she felt on releasing the man she'd thought she loved. As Eric walked stiffly to his car, she deliberately turned her back on him, stepping inside and locking the front door.

So that was done. A huge part of her world had just died—her feelings for Eric, the life she'd thought they would have, her lost relationship with his parents. And what did she have left? Not much. Her same lousy job and an unrequited love for a man she would never have. She would start over. She'd had to start her life over once before, when her parents died, and she'd had to

drop out of college to come back here and take care of Irving. At twenty-four, she could certainly do it again.

As her cinnamon-sugar cookies baked, Tara took out a legal pad and began a list of all the changes she was going to make in her life. Tomorrow, she would know if Henry really intended to offer her the staff writer position. If so, that would be wonderful, but if not, she would have her degree in a matter of weeks. She could always find another journalist position, maybe up in the city or maybe at another small paper in one of the surrounding towns, but she would definitely not stay at the *Chronicle* for a secretary's pay when she was really acting as a part-time editor and photographer. Maybe at the new job, she would make new friends. She would definitely need some. Those new friends would introduce her to new men. Maybe she'd even meet her dream man through them—tall, brooding, with long chestnut hair...

She sighed and released the pen. No matter what new dreams she tried to create, they all turned into Justin. It was just too impossible to want someone else after meeting a man like him.

She glanced outside and noted that the gray skies had deepened with late afternoon. Time to set up for trick-or-treaters. Pushing Justin out of her mind, she went upstairs and changed into the witchy long black dress she wore every Halloween. Carefully, after fastening on silver ghost earrings, she did her makeup, finishing by drawing exotic cat-eyes with her eyeliner. Yes, she looked appropriately spooky and seductive for Halloween night, her long blond hair falling down over the dress. Despite her lingering sadness, she felt her mood begin to pick up.

Downstairs, a Halloween cartoon about a lonely ghost played on cable. She left it on as she lit apple-scented candles around the house, then lit the pumpkins on the front porch. Dimming the first floor lights, she turned on the orange lights strung up around the foyer and plugged in the green-faced witch

facing the door. Yes, now it looked like Halloween night. Shutting off the TV, she put on a tape of haunted house noises—creaking floorboards, yowling cats, and rattling chains. She ran out to the front yard to view the effect. Her modest home looked spooky as all get out. She smiled, knowing the kids would love it.

She had just arranged the treats when the doorbell rang for the first time. It was the Sanders kids from up the street. Their mother barely got out a greeting before little Tyler yelled out, "We made her take us here first! This is the best house in the neighborhood!"

Tara and his mother laughed. "I'm glad you love Halloween as much as I do," Tara told him, offering the tray. "Do you guys want to come in for cider?"

"Not now," their mother apologized. "We have a lot of houses to hit before bedtime. Come on, guys."

They were barely out of the driveway when a large pack of pre-schoolers turned in, steered by women Tara recognized from the bank. She was still passing out the brownies when two more families came in. One of the fathers was an avid contributor to "Sidewalk Talk," being a nosy and careful observer of the Somerset Zoning Board meetings. "Tara, have I got an item for you," he began in a confidential tone. "I just heard that dump of a laundry mat on King Street is going to be—"

"Honey, please, not on Halloween," his wife scolded. "Tonight is for the kids."

Tara suppressed a laugh. How could she have thought of leaving? No, she loved small town life. She belonged here.

More neighborhood families arrived. Soon, her front porch was a mass of kids hitting each other with cardboard lasers and pulling each other's tails,

their parents too grateful for a reprieve of cider and cookies to notice. Dusk deepened into night and more trick-or-treaters arrived, some unknown to her. For those, she had regular candy, not sure if their parents would let them accept baked goods from a stranger, but to her surprise, the parents knew who she was. "You're the photographer from the paper, aren't you?" asked one of the women. "We heard you had a hand in setting up last night's costume ball out at La Traviata. It was fabulous!"

"Thanks," she kept saying. "Thank you very much." The praise felt good after Mandy's and Eric's betrayal last night. Here were people who respected what she did and thought she was good at it.

The night grew chilly. Tara drew a black cloak over her dress, but the treats were almost gone and the neighborhood sidewalks empty. Halloween was almost over. Of course, it wasn't over for everyone. Down at the pub, Eric and everyone else would probably be drinking away their own Halloween ghosts. Justin was probably out on a date with his pick of the beautiful women who had surrounded him last night. Somewhere in that spooky old hospital, Irving and his new girlfriend would be hunting for ghosts. Only she was alone tonight, but maybe it was for the best.

When almost half an hour had passed since the last trick-or-treater, Tara realized it was time to close up shop. She shut off the tape of scary noises and unplugged the green-faced witch, then brought in the pumpkins so as not to tempt any rowdy high school kids wandering around later, but she couldn't bring herself to blow out the candles just yet. Instead, she left them glowing on the kitchen table, enjoying the warm golden light dancing on the walls and put on some soft music.

A knock sounded on the front door.

A trick-or-treater at this time of night? She looked at the clock and saw it was almost nine. She frowned, wondering if her home was about to be

vandalized—or just had been. Maybe when she looked out into the front yard, she would discover the pine trees had been toilet-papered, or her car had been egged.

She walked into the front hall. A small vampire waited on the front porch, apparently without any parents, his face covered with a lurid white mask. She opened the door to his short caped figure and said, “You’re out kind of late, aren’t you?”

He shrugged.

Feeling bad, she turned back to the tray of goodies in the foyer. “Here, you can have everything that’s left. I don’t have any cider left but—”

She turned back around to find Justin smiling at her.

“Justin.” For a moment she couldn’t breathe. A dozen thoughts raced through her mind as a sudden wind blew up a scattering of dead leaves around his boots.

He leaned in the doorway, his caped six-foot-three body filling the frame. He waggled the mask at her. “I can’t believe you fell for the old on-the-knees trick. I thought I was going to have to pretend to be a ghost to get in here.”

She swatted at his mask, smiling. “Very funny. Come on in.” She stepped back as he walked in. Oh my god. Justin Brenington, in her house. Now. Tonight. Just the two of them. There was nothing to do but take a deep breath and follow him into the kitchen.

Chapter Nineteen

Justin's long black cape lagged behind him as he walked. With his long hair loose, he really did look like some kind of supernatural being—a vampire prince, or a werewolf in human form. Smiling crookedly, he undid the cape and draped it over a chair. He gestured to his jeans and dark green shirt. "Just plain ole me, ma'am. Do I still get a treat? Or would you rather have a trick?" His amber eyes were luminous in the candlelight, the amusement in them tempered with love.

"I've had enough tricks," Tara said after a moment. "Justin, I'm sorry for everything. I'm sorry for defending Eric's childish behavior the other night, and I'm sorry for doubting you with Meredith. It's just—it's hard when you're from a small town and you know everyone, then some gorgeous stranger comes sweeping into your life. I didn't know who to trust."

He shook his head. "No apologies necessary. Of course you trusted Eric because you've known him for years. I knew you had a boyfriend. I never should have kissed you that night on the porch. I was just so sure you felt the way I did—"

"I did!" Tara insisted. "I do!"

Justin looked unconvinced. "The waiters told me about what happened last night with Eric and that woman. If you hadn't caught them together, Tara, would you still be happy to see me tonight?"

She nodded furiously. "Justin, it's always been you. The costume ball just made me realize it. When you told me you weren't dating Meredith, I realized I really could trust you. And when I saw Eric and Mandy together..." She swallowed, momentarily sickened by the memory, then pushed it out of her mind. Steadying her nerves, she went on. "I had an epiphany about him

and about how unhappy I'd always been with him and always would be. Justin, you've got to believe me—it's you."

He made no move toward her. "I want to believe that," he said quietly.

The grandfather clock in the hall began to strike. It was nine o'clock. She had hours before her brother got home, hours in which to convince Justin of the truth.

She took a deep breath and walked toward him. Inches from his body, she stopped. His face in the dancing candlelight was as handsome and intent as she'd ever seen it. "I think about you all the time," she told him shakily. "I think about...holding you and touching you and being naked with you."

"Tell me more." A slow smile spread across Justin's face. "Show me."

Her legs went weak with embarrassment. She had never taken the lead before. "I...I dream of running my hands through your hair." She stroked his hair as she spoke, and feeling its thick silkiness spill over her arm was so erotic she caught her breath. "And ever since that night you kissed me on the porch, I've dreamt of your mouth on mine..."

She leaned forward and kissed Justin's mouth, and at the touch of his strong lips on hers, her stomach filled with butterflies. After a torturous pause, he kissed her back. Slowly, their mouths moved against each other, and tentatively, his tongue moved over hers. She opened her mouth wider and they kissed hungrily for a few moments, then Justin pulled back with a smile.

"And then what?" he asked innocently.

She could barely think. "And then...then I think of you putting your hands on my breasts." She blushed as she spoke. "I think of you fondling them, playing with them..."

Justin only raised his eyebrows. "I'm waiting."

Her face turning a deep pink, Tara unzipped the back of her black dress and let it fall to her waist. Never had she done this—undressed before a man she barely knew. Eric had been her only lover, but tonight she was going to show all of herself, give all of herself, to someone else. She stepped out of the dress and stood before him in a black silk thong and lace bra. From the burning appreciation in his eyes, she could see he didn't think her breasts were too small at all. He was as hungry to touch her as she was to touch him, but he restrained himself with effort. "Show me."

Taking a deep breath, Tara unsnapped her bra and pulled it off. As the straps slid down her arms, her nipples came into view. Under his gaze, they stiffened into dark pink points. Justin made an odd noise in his throat and began breathing rapidly.

She pushed back her long blond hair, exposing her toplessness completely. Boldly, she reached for his hands, his large rough hands that until now she'd only seen repainting or rewiring *La Traviata*, or cooking a meal. As she placed them on her bare breasts, he tweaked her hard nipples until she gasped. They kissed again, harder and faster and hotter than before. Then his knee came between hers, wedging her legs apart. They broke apart and he stepped back, his face transformed with lust.

"I want you." His voice shook. "I want every part of you, Tara, and I want everything with you. Are you ready for that?"

She nodded breathlessly. Justin reached out and began to stroke her pussy through the black silk of her panties. A soft moan escaped her lips as he circled her clitoris. "Please. I do want it...I can't stand it...oh my god..."

Justin laughed softly as he tickled her mound. Tara spread her legs wider, wordlessly begging him to remove the panties. Instead, he edged them

down just an inch, stroking the bare skin with one finger. "I won't go any farther until you tell me. Are you sure, Tara? Are you really sure? Once these come off..."

His finger slipped down to her shaved pussy, stroking the wet softness. Almost out of her mind with desire, Tara wiggled against his hand.

"Please," she begged him. "I'm sure." She pushed her panties down herself and hopped up on the table. She leaned back and spread her legs wide open for his view.

A deep blush of shame and excitement burned through her face. Only one man in her life had seen this most private, cherished part of her. She began to tremble with anticipation.

Justin stared at her bare pussy with an animal lust in his eyes. "You're beautiful." He ran his hands lightly up her thighs but stopped himself as his thumbs grazed her damp pink skin. She lifted her hips, begging him wordlessly for more, but he only traced the outline of her slit with his index finger. She dropped her head back, feeling a liquid heat spread through her groin.

"Justin, please..."

Still he denied her. Instead he brought her foot to his mouth, one then the other, kissing the arch before sucking her toes into his mouth. Feeling his hot soft tongue dance between her toes, she succumbed to the deliciously squirming feeling inside her. Unconsciously, her hand crept down across her stomach. Justin laughed softly and removed it.

"No cheating, you naughty girl. Don't worry, satisfaction is at hand. You and I have waited this long for each other..."

His strong hands massaged her thighs. For a moment, Justin tickled her clitoris with a light finger, then he fell to his knees and his mouth covered her, skilled and hot. A long groan escaped her. "God yes," she whispered. "Oh Justin..." As his warm, slow tongue ran up her exposed slit, she involuntarily moaned and thrust her hips into his face.

"Oh God," he muttered. "Tara, you are so hot..."

Eagerly, his tongue danced over the smooth skin of her vulva before he sucked her labia into his mouth. She moaned again as he gently tugged each of them with his lips, awakening sensations she'd never felt in her life. Teasingly, he circled his tongue just inside her wetness.

"Please," she managed to beg, "please, Justin, don't tease me..."

His practiced tongue slid up and tripped lightly across her clitoris, causing her to groan and shove herself further into his face. "Please," she choked. "Please." It was all she could say and all she had to say as he suddenly sucked her hardened rosebud into his lips. In one deep, warm kiss, all of her blood rushed to her thighs, making her feel as if she was swooning. Unable to stop herself, she twined her fingers in Justin's long chestnut hair, the gorgeous hair that now spilled across her naked thighs. As his tongue fluttered across her clit, she arched her back and cried out. "Oh god," she gasped. "Oh god..."

He began to lick her quickly with hard fast strokes. That old familiar tingling began in her loins. Dizzily, she arched her back, and as his hands cupped her swelling breasts, she shuddered with a powerful, relentless orgasm. Under the wet warmth of his tongue, she throbbed again and again, moaning helplessly.

Justin pulled her off the table. There was an intent, wild look on his face, and for a moment he held her against him roughly. She could feel his

cock straining against his pants, large, hard and determined. He bit his lip and stepped back. Tara watched in something of a daze as Justin began to undress in the candlelight.

First, his shirt hit the floor, his chest still lightly tanned from the summer, defined and hard. She could barely breathe when he unzipped his pants. He flashed a crooked wolfish smile and let them fall to the ground. Slowly, he slid his underwear down. Justin Bremington stood naked in her house.

He was a sight to behold, every inch of him taut and sculpted masculine beauty. His cock rose straight against his abs like golden marble. Dizzy and trembling, her every nerve alive with heat, Tara knew she was helpless to resist as he gently pulled her forward. They stood naked together for the first time, marveling at the gorgeousness of their bodies in the pumpkins' flickering light. Justin took her breasts in his hands.

"I know it's our first date," he began, tracing her nipples with his fingers, "and I don't know how far you want to take this, Tara, but I've been dreaming of you for so many nights I don't think I can wait another..."

She shook her head. "No, Justin, don't say a word. This isn't our first date. We're beyond that. I want you, all of you. Tonight."

In answer, he teasingly brushed his erection against her. At the first touch of his hard cock against her thigh, she caught her breath.

With that wolfish smile, he cupped her buttocks in his hands, kneading them with a satisfied grin. Quickly and easily, he lifted her up. "Wrap your legs around me."

She obeyed. The head of his cock knocked against her pussy. He watched her eyes carefully as he said, "Are you sure?"

She nodded breathlessly. "Please, Justin. I'm sure."

Slowly, with expert control of his powerful arms, he lowered her onto his erection. For a moment, Tara felt something like velvet steel open her up very gently. Slowly, he slid in up to the hilt, and she dropped her head on Justin's shoulder and began to moan. "Oh my god," she cried. "Oh my god, Justin, fuck me, please, fuck me..."

She no longer knew what she was saying or doing. All she knew was she was in Justin's arms, held against his wet hard body, as he bounced her up and down on his thick, hard cock. He drove in and out of her like a rocket, pushing her faster and faster into the bliss of oblivion. Hot liquid streaks of lust spread through her body like firecrackers. Crying senselessly, she begged him to fuck her, to pound her, to never stop holding her, then they were tumbling backward onto the sofa, where she spread her thighs wide for him as he rode her. Her breasts jiggling wildly, she began to scream with the ecstasy of her second orgasm building inside of her as Justin clenched his muscles.

"Oh god, oh god," he muttered, and feeling the tension swelling in his body, Tara held him tight as together they broke into throbbing waves of heat. Justin's cock surged over and over inside her as her pussy squeezed him tightly. For a few moments, everything was hot liquid and skin.

Gradually their breathing slowed, the sweat cooling their bodies when Justin finally spoke. "Tara... I have to say it."

All of the golden bliss permeating her body suddenly stopped. Say what?

He stared at the ceiling for a moment. Then, he rolled over and fixed her with his amber gaze. An intense light poured from them, a light she realized she'd been waiting all her life to see.

"I love you," he said. "I don't care if it's too soon to say it. I love you and I know you're the woman I was meant for. I've known it since I caught you creeping around my house."

She smiled with relief, but to her horror, her smile erupted into giggles. Unable to stop herself, she buried her face in her hands and laughed. Justin raised himself up on one elbow, eyebrows arched.

"I bare my soul to you and you giggle?"

"I'm sorry, but that just sounded funny. What a way to meet—trespassing on a ghost hunt. Thank god my brother's a weirdo!" She stared up into his tender amber eyes and stroked the damp hair from his cheekbone. "I love you too," she said after a pause. "I love you so much it's been scaring me."

Justin kissed her forehead. "I know how you feel. I want to build my life around you, Tara. I've been terrified it would never happen." He helped her off the sofa. "I'll make you a deal. You make the hot chocolate, and I'll run you a nice bath."

"I'd rather take a shower. With you." Her body was sticky with sweat and fluids, her long hair in disheveled knots. She knew without looking that her black cat-eye makeup had smeared as well, but she only felt exaltation.

"Deal."

They were toweling off when Tara caught sight of the full October moon through her bedroom window. Impulsively, she opened her window and took a deep breath of the crisp autumn night. It was almost midnight, but she wasn't tired at all.

Justin joined her naked at the window, his warm bare skin a tantalizing contrast to the brisk night outside. "What are you thinking about?"

"Your ghost," she said, leaning back against him. "You do realize how much we owe her. If La Traviata hadn't been haunted, we never would have met."

He wrapped his arms around her with a thoughtful smile. "Do you think she brought us together on purpose?"

"I don't know, Justin. When you think about it, a lot of strange things have happened."

They looked out into the black, star-studded sky. Suddenly, Tara felt the urge to enjoy these last moments of Halloween in the most classic way she knew—in a haunted house. She looked up at Justin and knew he was thinking the same thing.

"Come on," he said with his lopsided smile. He stepped back and threw her a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. "We at least have to say goodbye."

They didn't speak much in the car driving out to the country. The stars glittered coldly above them, the smoke of a distant bonfire spreading the scent of burning leaves through the crisp air. At last they pulled up before La Traviata, the old Victorian house looking proud and majestic in the moonlight.

Together, they walked quietly through its darkened dining rooms and kitchen, then headed out back to the garden and pond. Gazing into its black waters, so still in the night, Tara thought of the grief of that mother a century ago who had pulled her dead son from the pond. Suddenly, she understood why the ghost had tried so hard to get her attention. She'd been unable to rescue her son and unable to undo the mistake of her suicide, but she had saved Tara from an unhappy lifetime with the wrong man and taught Justin that life bloomed anew after grief. In doing so, she had filled her home with love and light again.

Suddenly, Tara noticed something at her feet. It was a single violet, impossibly fresh and new on this chilly autumn night. She picked it up, her eyes filling with tears, as that floral perfume wafted under her nose. "Thank you," she told the ghost softly. "We understand now."

The scent faded away. Somehow, Tara knew that the ghost wouldn't return. Nothing held her here anymore. She stepped close to Justin, snuggling into him, not from fear but gratitude, and he kissed her hair. "She's gone. I feel it too."

They turned to make their way back to the car, Justin's arm still around her shoulders. "Just a suggestion," he said. "No offense to our ghostly friends, but let's make sure the new house isn't haunted."

She raised her head from his shoulder and looked up at him. "What new house?"

"Our new house." He nuzzled her hair. "I can't live at the hotel forever. I thought we could go house-hunting together this week, find a little place in the country where we can put up a hammock to watch the stars and you can plant a garden..." He smiled his lopsided smile at her.

She blinked back more tears and kissed his beautiful mouth. "I love you so much, Justin."

"I love you even more, Tara," he said. There, in the last moments of Halloween, he kissed her again under the October moon.

About Veronica Wilde

Veronica Wilde is a thirty-something author who lives on the West Coast with her boyfriend and three cats. She has a never-ending passion for both erotic literature and the paranormal and is always on the hunt for good books that combine the two. When not writing or reading, she enjoys astronomy, horror movies and night-hiking.

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What is a man to do when he does not believe in magic, but is seduced by a banshee, who could either claim his death or his love?

The Christmas Fairy

© December 2006 by Phillip Sweeny

Jason Bakker can no longer endure his horrible nightmares. Secretly blaming himself for the death of his wife, he wanders aimlessly until some mysterious force lures him deep into the Irish countryside. There he buys an abandoned cottage and encounters the banshee, Aislinn, when he doesn't even believe in ghosts or the supernatural.

Has Aislinn come to call him to the fate of death he secretly desires or does the sexy, sensually seductive fairy have her own agenda for Jason Bakker?

Aislinn, whose name means 'a dream or vision', has haunted the cottage since her death, driving all new occupants away or to horrifying deaths, as a result of her tragic past. However, Jason seems to be different somehow.

What connection draws her to Jason? Can she overcome Jason's disbelief in magic and awaken the passion which is hidden in his soul? In the process, will her own much needed healing start?

Will this Christmas be a season of magic and miracles for them?

Enjoy the following excerpt:

"She said she would be here tonight," I stuttered, sounding out of place.
What a stupid thing to say.

"Do you know—" I began as the door opened all the way. I stood face to face with the girl Tom had followed from the pub. She was dressed in a flimsy nightgown. I could see her erect nipples through the silky fabric. As my eyes focused on her breasts, the first thing I thought about was a vision of Tom banging away at her up against a tree with her dress pulled up and draped over his head.

"Last night," she began. "I came home from the pub and heard Darla screaming. Darla never screams. She is the calmest and gentlest person I have ever met. But, last night she was screaming, or—" she stopped suddenly in mid-sentence, as if something registered in her thinking.

"Or, what?" I asked, a cold chill creeping up my spine. I started to sweat.

Is Ginny's mysterious stranger her Christmas Stalker or Christmas Savior?

Christmas Stalking
© December 2006 by Selena Kitt

Pursued by her abusive stepfather, Ginny holds damning evidence that will expose the city's "Cop of the Year" as the corrupt and dangerous man that he really is. Keeping this information close is the only thing that has kept Ginny safe from his pursuit, but now he is growing desperate and Ginny is tiring of life on the run.

Nick Santos is a good cop who goes by the book and knows the difference between right and wrong - but when he sees Ginny in her desperate circumstances, he finds himself torn between doing what is right and what is right for her. Watching from a distance, Nick tries to protect her from the dangers of the street. Drawn by her strength and determination, Nick vows he will do what it takes to help her, whatever the consequences.

In a bout of violence, their two lives collide on Christmas Eve, bringing together two people desperate to find someone they can trust in a world full of conflict. Unable to deny the magnetic pull, Nick and Ginny break down each other's barriers and lose themselves in the power and passion of the moment.

But just as they begin to find faith in each other and the world again, they are faced with the looming specter of the past and must make decisions that will affect their lives, and their future together, forever.

Enjoy the following excerpt:

She loved the little coffee house. Bright and cheery, it was always packed with people coming and going, ordering coffee and all sorts of sandwiches and pastries. Often enough, patrons would leave in a hurry to make their movie or go dancing at the club, the remainders of their meals and snacks left behind in their rush.

She slid into an empty booth covered with half-eaten plates of food, when she felt him watching her. It wasn't so much seeing him as just knowing, a kind of extrasensory jolt. Her eyes lifted to see him staring at her through the frosted glass window, his wiry frame beginning to thread through the crowd, his uniform parting the tide.

She bolted from the booth and ducked out of the café, trying not to run and attract attention to her flight. He caught her in the alleyway, and she realized her mistake the moment his hand found her throat and pressed her head hard against the brick. There was no one back here, no bright lights, no warm bodies, and no watching eyes. It was cold, dark, and they were completely alone.

"Did you think you could run from me?" Patrick's breath reeked of alcohol and Ginny turned her head, struggling. "Did you really think you could hide?"

She couldn't answer. His hand at her throat made it impossible. He wasn't a big man, but he was tall and wiry, and surprisingly strong. His voice turned smooth as he took his hand from her throat, twisting her arm up behind her, his weight pressing her into the wall.

"I told you, girl." His voice was like slick oil against her ear. "You can't ever hide from me. I own the system. You're a number that shows up wherever you go. I've got eyes everywhere. You rent a motel room, you're mine. You use a credit card, you're mine. Put your name on a lease, you're mine. You get a paycheck, you're mine. Do you understand me? You. Are. Mine."