Body and Soul: A PsyCop Novel A Torquere Press High Ball by Jordan Castillo Price



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Chapter One

"Uncle Jacob? Did you get to shoot anybody since last summer?"

Jacob's nephew, Clayton, asked this with the eagerness and joy of a kid who'd just learned that school was cancelled. Clayton was in fifth grade. I have no idea how old that would make him.

"You shot someone last summer?" I muttered, smoothing my napkin on my lap to the point where I probably looked like I was playing with myself. Not exactly the impression I'd wanted to make on Jacob's family on our first Thanksgiving together.

The muttering? Not usually my style, but I was feeling uncharacteristically mouthy. It seemed like the moment I had a thought, it made its way through my vocal cords and out my mouth before I had a chance to pat it down and make sure it wasn't going to jab anyone. I'd been this way since I'd stopped taking Auracel and Seconal over a month ago. Here I thought I'd been mellowing all these years, when really, it had just been the drugs.

"No," Jacob answered patiently. "I try to avoid shooting people." And then he looked at me. "Carolyn and I walked in on an armed robbery in progress at the convenience store on California and Irving. It was a clean shot to the leg."

Departmental policy allows us cops to decide whether to go for a lethal or a non-lethal shot when a criminal's got an unarmed civilian at gunpoint. If Jacob had shot someone's leg, I had no doubt it was exactly where he'd been aiming.

Jacob is a Stiff, the non-psychic half of a PsyCop team, and not only are Stiffs impossible to influence by sixth-sensory means and impervious to possession, but they're usually crack shots. The Stiffs who I know, anyway.

I'm the other half of a PsyCop team, the Psych half. Not Jacob's team; Carolyn Brinkman was Jacob's better half, on the job at least. I didn't currently have a Stiff of my very own. Maurice, my first partner, retired, although I still lean on him way too much. Lisa, my second partner, was kicked off the force when they discovered that she was as psychic as Jean Dixon. She's off being trained for the psy end of the whole PsyCop business now, out in California. Technically she's just a phone call away, and yet sometimes it feels like she's on an entirely different planet. Even when she gets back, I won't get to partner with her, since they only pair up Psychs with Stiffs.

And then there was my third partner, Roger. The bastard kidnapped me for some under-the-table drug testing, and I'd been so gullible I'd practically given him a key to my apartment. Roger was rotting in a jail cell, last I'd heard. The whole affair was pretty hush-hush. Maybe I could've gleaned a few more details, if I was the type to obsess about the little things, like where one's arch-enemy is incarcerated, and whether or not he's shown up for roll call recently. But, frankly, I've never found details very comforting. I think about them, and I just get overwhelmed. Roger went byebye, and I came out of our encounter intact. That's all I really need to know.

Six weeks later and I was still on medical leave. I felt fine, probably due to the amount of actual blood cells coursing through my system in lieu of the drug cocktail I was accustomed to.

"Did you ever shoot anyone?" Clayton asked me, eyes sparkling.

"Sure."

"Wow. Did you kill 'em?"

Clayton had Jacob's phenomenal dark eyes. Or Jacob's younger sister Barbara's eyes. Which were Jacob's father's eyes, as well as the eyes of the wizened old lady at the head of the table who was about a hundred and five. She'd been giving me a look that could probably kill an elephant ever since we'd gotten there and Jacob had introduced me as his boyfriend.

I think he'd primed his family over the phone. But still. He had to go and say it out loud and rub it in. Because that's the way Jacob is. Not that he'd be bringing a man home for Thanksgiving for any other reason. But that's beside the point.

"Clayton Joseph," snapped Barbara. She might have had Jacob's eyes, but she certainly couldn't hold a candle to his cool composure. "That is not an appropriate question for the dinner table."

Grandma Marks glowered at me from the head of the table, her dark eyes, half-hidden in folds of wrinkled skin, threatening to pierce me right through. I'd figured she hated me because I was doing the nasty with her grandson. Maybe

she had a thing against psychics. Hell, maybe both. I'm usually just lucky that way.

"Bob Martinez retired down at the mill," Jacob's father, Jerry, announced in a blatant attempt to change the subject. If we'd been in Chicago, where I grew up, Jerry would have been talking about a steel mill. But we were in Wisconsin, an alien land of rolling hills and cows with signs advertising something called "fresh cheese curds" every few miles. I gathered that the mills made paper in this alien, wholesome land where Jacob had been born and bred.

"And when are you going to think about retiring, dad?"
Barbara asked. She had a trace of an accent that sounded
Minnesotan to my untrained ear. I wondered if Jacob had ever
had that same funny lilt. Probably once, but it'd been erased
by him living over half his life in Chicago.

"Your father's got another ten years in him, at least," said Jacob's mom, Shirley. Shirley wore her hair in a white, poofy halo. I suspected she'd been a blonde in her younger days. "What's he going to do around here but get in my way?"

"Your mother plays Euchre on Tuesdays and Thursdays," said Jerry, as if his retirement hinged around a card game.

"You have hobbies," said Barbara. "You could fix up your woodshop and actually finish a few things."

"Ah, I'd rather earn an honest wage than stay home and make birdhouses."

"And you could teach Clayton all about woodworking."

"He's too young," said Jerry. "He'd cut his finger off."

"Wood is stupid," Clayton added.

I wondered if calling wood stupid was heresy in this land of trees and paper. But Grandma didn't fall out of her chair clutching her heart, so I figured that kids were allowed to say the first thing that popped into their minds these days. Or maybe they always had been. I must have been on my third foster home by the time I was Clayton's age. I was probably in fourth grade, held back for being thick, stubborn, and socially retarded. But that would've put me at just about the age where I'd learned that my opinion was neither desired nor appreciated.

Jingle bells announced the opening of the front door—that and a massive blast of arctic air, complete with a whorl of snowflakes.

"Uncle Leon!" Clayton leapt up from the table and thundered toward the door.

I looked at the empty place setting across from me and heaved an inward sigh of relief. I'd been hoping that an actual person would fill it, that it wasn't left open as a tribute to Grandpa Marks, or some other long lost family member.

Leon rounded the corner of the dining room and Shirley stood up to greet him. I glanced around at the rest of the table to see if I was supposed to stand up, too. But Jacob and Jerry were still sitting. Jerry was even packing away mashed potatoes like he was trying to beat everyone else to the punch.

Uncle Leon was in his mid to late sixties and had the same white hair and rounded snub nose as Jacob's mom. Shirley kissed him on the cheek and unbuttoned his thick corduroy

jacket. "Jacob brought his friend with him," she said, gesturing toward me. "This is Victor."

She peeled Leon's coat off him and whisked away with it just as Leon turned to shake my hand. He led with his left hand, which confused me. His bare right arm flapped at his side, with his right sleeve rolled up to his shoulder.

I shook his left hand in a daze.

Leon nodded his head toward his right shoulder. "Lost it at the mill in seventy-eight. Damn thing still hurts."

I blinked. Leon's right sleeve wasn't rolled up. It was pinned to the shoulder of his shirt. He didn't have a right arm—not one made out of real flesh and blood, anyway. And I could still see his missing arm. The party'd finally gotten started. Hooray.

"Oh," I said. "That sucks."

"Shirley tells me you're a PsyCop."

I nodded. "Yeah."

"That's some kind of program they got going on down there," he said. His ghost arm joined his corporeal arm in pulling out the chair across from mine. "What kind of talent you got?"

I sank back into my seat and swallowed a mouthful of dryish turkey meat I'd been talking around for the last several minutes. "Medium."

"No shit?"

Grandma frowned harder, but Leon didn't seem to notice. "Can I get you anything to drink?" Shirley asked me, but I mumbled that I was okay.

"That girl Jacob works with, she's a telepath, isn't she? Wow, a medium. How 'bout that?" Leon's ghost hand caressed the silverware as he spoke. I wondered if I looked like a freak for staring at his salad fork while he talked to me. "So how strong are they, your impressions?"

I drained my glass of soda to wash down the turkey and wished I'd taken Shirley up on her offer of a refill. "Pretty strong."

"What, do you hear 'em talking to you? In their own words?"

"Uh huh."

"Holy cow, now that's what you call a psychic. We got ourselves a Marie Saint Savon right here at the table."

Good old Marie had died right around the time I'd been shoehorned into the police academy. She'd been the world's most powerful medium, and no one could touch her talent. Not that I could figure why anyone would want to. I was surprised that Leon actually knew her name. Maybe it was a generational thing. She'd been big news maybe fifteen years ago, and then was quickly forgotten by almost everyone but the psychic community.

"That's got to make your police work a little easier," said Leon. "Huh?"

I nodded and swallowed some mashed potatoes. They were salty enough to stimulate my flagging salivary glands. A little.

"Only if you work homicide," Jerry piped in. The whole family had been skirting around my psychic ability, but since

Leon had started the ball rolling and I didn't seem too tender about the topic, it'd become fair game.

"I do."

"Holy shit. I didn't know they used mediums in homicide." Grandma glared at Leon.

"You mean medium, like a psychic medium?" Clayton asked.

"Uh huh."

"Wow, you see dead people?"

"That's just in the movies," Barbara said. "Like the telekinetics who can shoot bullets with their minds." Metal was incredibly resistant to telekinesis, but I'd trained with one guy who could fling a mean stone. He got these splitting headaches afterward, though, so he was never one to show off with party tricks.

"I can see them," I said.

The table went quiet. "Whoa," said Clayton. "Like, right now?"

I avoided looking at the spot where Leon's arm was flopping around on the table. "There aren't any spirits here for Victor to see," Jacob explained. We knew that to be the case because we'd called Lisa Gutierrez in Santa Barbara and asked her if there were any ghosts in Jerry and Shirley's house, and she'd said no. Lisa's precognitive, and if she says no, the answer is unequivocally no.

I guess she couldn't have known about Leon's arm. Not without us asking specifically.

"And when you see 'em," Clayton went on, "are they all scary and gross?"

"Sometimes."

Everyone at the table seemed to lean forward just a little. Even Jacob.

"Can you see right through them?"

"Sometimes. Or sometimes they look like regular people."

Leon's facial expression was open and eager, but his phantom limb was clenching and unclenching its fist, and bright red droplets had appeared all over it as if it was sweating blood. I buried my face in my glass, tilting a final droplet of soda onto my tongue.

"Can you touch 'em?" Clayton asked, his voice dropping down into a reverential whisper.

I swallowed around a hunk of turkey that'd lodged in my esophagus. Jacob slid his glass over to me, and I took it and drank it down. He'd been drinking milk. I just barely kept myself from gagging.

"You don't want to touch ghosts," I said.

The house around us, the very air, went quiet. Everyone strained forward to catch whatever crumbs of information I might care to scatter. Because we're a nation that grew up on Lovecraft and *Sleepy Hollow* and *Friday the Thirteenth*, and people are dying to know if all that shit's really real.

"They're creepy," I added. And I swallowed some more milk.

"Why don't you tell Uncle Jacob and Uncle Leon about the report you did on salamanders?" Barbara suggested to Clayton.

"Creepy how?" Clayton asked.

"Clayton got an A minus," said Barbara.

"Creepy how?"

"I don't know," I said. I'd started spreading my food around my plate, mixing my corn and my potatoes, ruining both. "The way they look in scary movies? Pretty much like that."

"How can you say that?" Barbara demanded, suddenly so vehement that I wondered how I'd ever pegged her as a sheepish single mom in her pale yellow cardigan and perfectly creased khaki pants. "When people die, they go to heaven."

Oh. Christian. Or had Jacob said Catholic—or was that the same difference? I didn't remember, must not have been paying close enough attention when Jacob had tried to prepare me.

"Barbara," said Jerry. Her father didn't have a follow up ready. Just her name, sounding like a warning.

"If he says he sees spirits, then he does," Leon said, hopping to my defense despite the fact that he made me squirm in my seat. Or, more accurately, his right arm did. "They have tests." He looked to me for affirmation. "Don't they have tests?"

"All kinds of tests," I said, burying the last of my corn.

"And being able to see them, you're what, a level three? Four?"

"Five," I said. Level five was a couple of steps down from good old Marie. But Marie was only a step lower than God. Or maybe Satan.

The table went quiet again.

"Are you a millionaire?" asked Clayton.

"It is not polite to ask people how much money they make," said Barbara. She was the same age as me, thirty-eight. She had Jacob's flashing dark eyes and high cheekbones, but she looked just as worn out as I always felt. Even more so, now that we were attempting civil dinner conversation.

"It's okay," I said. "No, I'm not a millionaire. I make more money than a regular detective, but not as much as my supervisor."

"And you spend as much money as someone who's lived through the Great Depression," Jacob added, sotto voice.

Clayton scrunched his face up. I saw mashed potatoes lurking behind his teeth. "You should find Al Capone and make him tell you where his vault is."

Jerry and Leon laughed, but the way they kept their eyes trained on me, I could tell they were hoping that maybe I'd think that dredging up Al Capone was a grand idea. And I just so happened to need a couple of assistants over the age of sixty-five.

"He's probably not around," I said. "He'd be a little old by now."

Everyone chuckled, except for Barbara, who evidently thought I was a devil-worshipper. And Grandma, who was possibly giving me the evil eye. And Clayton, who couldn't make sense out of my lack of financial savvy.

Leon smacked the table with his left hand as he laughed. His spectral right hand followed suit, only it pummeled the table with much greater force than its counterpart. Spectral

blood flew, spattering the white tablecloth covered in crossstitched cornucopia, doe-eyed pilgrims, and smiling Indians.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine a protective white bubble around Leon's arm.

"Are you warm, honey?" asked Shirley. "You want me to open a window?"

I was about to tell her not to bother, when I realized that I felt the prickle of sweat along the back of my neck. "Yeah, okay," I said, as I shrugged out of my flannel shirt and let it bunch on the seat of my chair. I was glad I'd taken the time to find a T-shirt without any holes or stains on it.

I took a deep breath and looked at Leon's ghost hand. It quivered like it was hooked up to an electrical wire. Like that frog in the biology class whose legs kick when you give it a shock. No, I hadn't been absent that day. And yeah, I'd puked. Me and Janet Neiderman.

"I'll be right back," I said, knocking my chair into Jacob's as I scrambled to make my way toward the upstairs bathroom. There was a half-bath on the first floor, but I figured that everyone at the dinner table really didn't need to hear me retching if I couldn't bring my gag reflex under control.

Why did I have to go and think of that goddamn frog?
I dodged past Jacob's old bedroom—now Shirley's very
own sewing room—and nearly skateboarded down the
upstairs hallway on a pink and blue rag rug. Darting into the
bathroom, I slammed the door shut behind me. It had a hook
and eye lock on it, which might keep Grandma out, or maybe
Clayton, if he didn't lean on the door too hard.

I breathed, and I looked around. It was a normal enough bathroom, more colorful than mine, with blue and yellow sunflowers on the shower curtain that kind of matched a border going around the top of the painted walls, but not quite. I pulled open the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet in hopes of finding a nice bottle of cold medicine, or maybe some valium. Neither one would make Leon's nasty ghost arm go away completely, but they'd sure make me care about it a whole lot less.

The right side of the cabinet was filled entirely with old lady perfume, facial cream, nail polish, and hair mousse. The left held cheap plastic razors like I use, aspirin, foot spray, a stick of green deodorant, cotton swabs, and antihistamines.

Of every drug that had ever been invented, Jacob's parents owned the only two types that affected my talent less than antibiotics.

I pawed through their drawers in hopes of finding a stray muscle relaxant or even an expired tube of motion-sickness pills. I found a bunch of washcloths and some sunblock. Sunblock. In a small rural Wisconsin town on the border of Minnesota that saw the sun maybe two hours each winter if it peered closely enough between the snowflakes.

I looked underneath the sink and found a pair of rubber gloves and a bunch of cleaning supplies. Damn it.

I tore the medicine cabinet doors open again, hoping to find something that I'd missed before. And then my eyes fell on the nail polish remover.

I turned the bottle around and read the back. Acetone was the first ingredient. And the seminar I'd attended fourteen

years ago called Inhalants, the Silent Killer was as fresh in my mind as if I'd just taken it yesterday.

And here I thought I hadn't gotten much out of the Police Academy.

I wasn't a habitual huffer, not like the anorexic girl at the Cook County Mental Health Center—the institution that'd housed me from seventeen to twenty-three—who'd shown me how to get the most bang for my buck with a can of cooking spray or a plastic baggie and a jar of rubber cement. No, I didn't enjoy killing my brain cells randomly, but I was a pragmatist. The arm wasn't going to go away all by itself. And I really needed it to stop waving at me if I wanted to make it through dinner.

I could saturate a wad of toilet paper and hold it over my mouth and nose, but acetone's a stinky chemical, and I'd end up reeking of it. Instead, I set the bottle on the rim of the sink and plugged one of my nostrils, sniffing it carefully in hopes of zapping the specific neurons that enabled me to see Leon's damn spastic missing arm without leaving me stinking like a Chinese nail salon.

I felt a little floaty and had developed a sharp headache over the top of my skull by the time anyone came to check on me.

Luckily, it was Jacob.

Since he didn't need to know I was huffing his mother's nail polish remover, I put it away and washed my face before I answered the door.

He leaned in the doorjamb, looking incredibly sexy in a long-sleeved, chocolate brown silk knit that clung to every

muscle like it'd been painted on him. He crossed his arms and gave me his most earnest you-can-trust-me face, pouty and a little doe-eyed.

"Everything all right?"

"It's ... um. I dunno."

"You went a little pale at the table."

It wasn't so surprising that Jacob noticed it when I saw something. Maurice Taylor, my first partner, used to tell me sometimes that I'd disappear if I got any whiter, and he hadn't been joking about my ethnicity.

My eyes stung from the acetone I'd just sniffed, and I pressed my fingertips into my tear ducts to try to relieve the itch. If I knuckled my eyes like I really wanted to, they'd get all red and I'd look totally high. "Your uncle Leon seems like a cool guy."

"He is."

"But ... I can see his arm."

Jacob stepped into the bathroom and locked the door behind him. He sat down on the rim of the tub and took one of my hands between both of his, and he waited.

I avoided his eyes and stared at a tile on the floor that was set a little crooked. "I'm trying really hard to be a decent boyfriend," I said. "But I think I might not be cut out for it."

"Stop it."

"No, it's true. I don't know how to have a family. And evidently, I can't function without having a buzz on."

"What are we talking about?" Jacob asked. "Are you breaking up with me or telling me you want to start going to Narcotics Anonymous?"

My heartbeat, already racing a little from the acetone, did an unpleasant stutter when Jacob said the words "breaking up" aloud.

"I mean, you know. Come on."

"No, I don't. What's going on?"

God damn. I'd started hugging myself without realizing I was doing it. Ugly habit. Ugly, ugly habit. I forced myself to try to stand normally, but I felt like my arms and legs weren't screwed on right. "I just wanted to ... you know ... be with you and your family for the holiday."

Jacob nodded slowly. "Okay. And that's what we're doing. If you need to leave, I'm trusting you to tell me so."

"I don't want to leave in the middle of dinner." I stared up into a painted-on sunflower. "I thought the house was clean," I said.

"And I had no idea that Leon's arm would qualify as a ghost. If you don't want to go, we can move you, say that you need to sit by the window."

"I'd rather sit across from Leon than Barbara, arm or no arm."

Jacob smirked. "Can't say I blame you."

I thought about that damn bloody limb performing acrobatics that were totally out of synch with what Leon's face and body language were telling me. "This is gonna sound stupid," I said. Which I can pretty much use to preface anything that comes out of my mouth. "But I wonder if it knew I could see it and it was showing off."

Stupid or not, Jacob considered the idea. "Maybe it's got a spiritual equivalent to a cellular intelligence. Who knows? But

if amputated limbs can be present in the spirit world, it explains why they still cause pain for some people and not others just as much as the idea of a bunch of neurons misfiring."

Could people have their phantom limbs exorcised? It was possible—or at least they could have them scrambled with electrical interference, once the technology of Psych science caught up with the psychology and biology of it.

"If I just had some Auracel, everything would be okay." I take prescription Auracel to block out the visions. Or I used to take it ... until I stopped. Which was fine, inside my apartment. I guess I'd conveniently forgotten about the real world outside it. Only certain pharmacies in big metropolitan areas carried the drug, so even if I could call The Clinic and have them fax a prescription, chances were we'd have to go to Minneapolis to have it filled.

Jacob stood and pulled a little paper cup from a cutesy holder mounted on the wall beside the medicine cabinet, and filled it with tap water. "How many?"

"How many what?"

"How many Auracel?"

I realized he was digging in his pocket, and it was as if the clouds broke open and a beam of sunshine landed right on him.

"You have some?"

He smiled at me. He's got a special grin that's all mine. It somehow manages to be reassuring and to promise that he'll fuck me halfway through the mattress later, all at once. "I've

got to tell you: I'm relieved this is only about Auracel." He handed me the paper cup.

"How many do you have?"

"Ten."

"Wow. You're prepared."

"I was a boy scout."

"That's creepy. And hot. At the same time."

Jacob pressed a tablet of Auracel into my mouth, running his thumb back and forth over my lips after he did. I turned away to swallow some water. In fifteen minutes or so, the pill would start kicking in. My relief was greater than my disappointment, but just barely. "I really wanted to do this without the meds."

"Which was your idea, not mine."

That was so not fair. My life was perfectly fine until suddenly I had this live-in boyfriend who wanted to interact with me, and I realized that I was almost always high. Maybe it had been my idea to go cold turkey, but I'd done it because of Jacob.

"Talk to me," Jacob said.

"You're gonna decide I'm too much trouble, someday."

"Uh huh," he said with absolutely zero conviction, flipping my hand over to press a kiss into my clammy palm. His goatee tickled at the base of my thumb.

I felt the first effects of the Auracel kicking in, a little dryness to my tongue, and a tingle in my fingertips that was only intensified by the feeling of Jacob's hot mouth grazing my skin.

"Stop it," I said. "I'm not going back downstairs with a hard-on."

I felt Jacob grinning into my hand, and then his tongue traced my life line.

"I mean it."

"So you want me to suck you off in my parents' bathroom?"

Dirty. Dirty, dirty, dirty. Jacob talks dirty so well, and I always love it. My cock stirred a little. The promise of the Auracel high made me sluggish, though, and I had enough self-control, even with a sexy hunk of manmeat going down on my thumb, to save it for later. "After dinner."

Jacob let go of my hand and pulled my T-shirt up over my stomach. He pressed a kiss into my solar plexus. "Dessert," he said, breathing the word against my bare skin and pulling a long shiver up my spine. "I'm looking forward to it."

And here I'd been expecting pumpkin pie.

Jacob went downstairs first, promising to tell his family that I reacted to my medications sometimes. Which was technically true. He wasn't saying that I'd had such a reaction at the table, after all. Jacob knows all about being technically truthful. His partner, Carolyn, is a telepathic lie detector.

All eyes landed on me as I tried to low-key it back to the table. Jacob refilled my glass with orange soda and his mother pulled my plate out of the microwave and set it back down in front of me. "Everything all right?" asked Jerry.

"It's fine," I said. "I'm good."

"Nothing wrong with taking a pill when you need one. Y'know, I need to take pain pills for this arm," said Leon. "Crazy, isn't it? Arm's not even there, and it hurts."

"You never told me that," said Shirley.

"It's true." Leon dug a capsule out of his pocket with his corporeal hand, while his ghostly hand twitched on the tablecloth. "Arm's acting up today," he said. "I think I'll take one right now."

"You don't need to do that to make me feel better," I said. The ghost arm waved a "pshaw" at me.

"Bob down the street lost a foot in Korea," said Jerry. "He still feels it, too."

"What about skeletons?" Clayton asked me. Do you see skeletons?"

"Skeletons are nothing supernatural," Barbara told him. "They're inside everyone's body. Everybody has one."

"But I seen this movie."

"Saw," Barbara corrected him.

"Or zombies," said Clayton, ignoring her. "Are zombies real?"

"No," I said. "When bodies die, they're dead."

"But what about in the hospital, when they take that electrical shock thing with the paddles, and they yell, 'Clear!' and they shock you.... "he jumped in his seat as if he'd been hit with a thousand volts. "And you were a flatline, and then your heart starts beating again?"

I thought about it. Not that I was worried about giving a fifth-grader a scientifically accurate answer; I was thinking about electricity, and how the most knowledgeable

paranormal expert I knew said that ghosts were made of electrons. "I don't know," I said. "Maybe those people aren't all the way dead, and the machines aren't accurate enough to tell."

"You should see how it works the next time you're at a hospital," said Clayton. "Then you'd know."

"I don't go to hospitals," I said.

"Never? What if someone shot you while you were being a cop? Then where would you go?"

"I have a special ... um, doctor."

Everyone had craned to the edges of their seats again. You could hear a pin drop.

I sighed to myself and decided I might as well talk about it, since everyone seemed so eager to know. Even Grandma. "Actually, now I see this panel of two doctors and a psychiatrist, and they all have to be in the room at the same time to make sure that nobody's doing anything they shouldn't be doing...."

Chapter Two

"You didn't finish your pie," said Shirley. "Can I get you something else? I have some cookies."

She'd given me a slice bigger than my head. "The pie is great," I said. "I'm just stuffed."

"Look at him, Ma," said Jacob. "You can't expect him to eat like I do."

Which was true. I was about as big around as one of Jacob's well-muscled thighs.

Shirley paused halfway to the kitchen, where Grandma and Barbara were making lots of noise clanking pots and pans into the sink. "How about a beer? Do you want some beer?"

"I'll take a beer," said Leon. He and Jerry were sprawled in matching recliners, looking more like mismatched twins than brothers-in-law, while Clayton sat on the couch, engrossed in a Game Boy.

"Not after that pain pill you took with supper," said Shirley, clearing some more half-empty serving dishes from the table.

"You like sports?" Jerry called to me from the living room.
"Not ... really."

"Good. 'Cos we don't watch the Bears in this house unless they're getting their asses handed to them by the Packers."

"Don't go for the obvious gay joke," Jacob whispered, smirking. "Football is sacred here."

"Cripes. I wasn't going to." I was about to offer to help with the dishes when my cell phone rang and vibrated at the same time. I only have it set up to do that for two callers: Jacob, and my boss.

I checked the caller I.D.—Sergeant Ted Warwick.

Obviously, since Jacob was right next to me, still grinning over the word "ass."

"Bayne," I said into the phone.

"We've got a situation here."

How I hate that word. Let me count the ways. "Uh huh."

"You watching the news?"

"Fumble!" someone yelled from the living room. I couldn't tell if it was Jerry or Leon.

"I'm, uh, not home."

"You're what?"

So I never went anywhere, ever. It was no reason to snap at me. I was on medical leave, too, so it was completely within my rights to drive up into Wisconsin and eat cheese curds. Whatever those were.

"I'm in Wisconsin."

Warwick's stunned silence seemed to demand an explanation as to what the hell I was doing in Wisconsin, since I had no friends there, and no family anywhere. But technically, it wasn't Warwick's business, and since he did everything by the book, he didn't ask. "Could you make it back tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure." It was a five hour drive, maybe six, depending on traffic. We'd planned on spending the whole Thanksgiving weekend. But police work takes precedence over leisure time. It takes precedence over pretty much everything. "Afternoon all right?"

"The earlier the better."

"So, I'm back on duty now?"

"It's a special circumstance. Three people gone missing in the space of a week and we need to figure out if they've been murdered. And the alderman's nephew is one of them."

Nothing like political leverage to set the wheels of justice in motion.

It didn't bother me. If I could help sort out the "situation," I'd do it. Sure, I was on medical leave, but I'd felt like my old self again, maybe better, about a week after the whole kidnapping fiasco. The part that gave me pause was the fact I didn't have a partner to work with. I suspected the extended medical leave was a way for the department to try to dredge up a new Stiff for me, and maybe get it right this time.

* * * *

We headed back toward Chicago at five in the morning. It was pitch black out, and evidently streetlights are nonexistent in Wisconsin once you get outside town limits. And not a single road is straight.

Jacob woke up around six thirty. I'd offered to take the first leg of the drive since I'm more of a morning person than he is. My knuckles were white and it would've taken a crowbar to pry my fingers off the steering wheel.

"Where are we?"

"You grew up here," I snapped. "You tell me."

Jacob glanced at the GPS unit. "You can go a little faster, you know. Speed limit's 55 if nothing's posted."

"Easy for you to say."

"Deer season's over."

"Okay." I risked a little glance at him to try to interpret what that was supposed to mean, but he was just rolling a kink out of his neck as if the hairpin turns of death were no big deal at all. Then he pulled out his phone and started texting. He was able to create actual words with his phone. Unlike me. Some weird feature had activated itself on my phone so that when you tried to key in a letter, whole words would pop up. I couldn't turn the fucking thing off, and I couldn't find the manual, so I decided it was easier to just leave voice mails anyway.

Unless you wanted to call people at six thirty in the morning on the day after Thanksgiving, as Jacob was so nimbly demonstrating.

"What are you doing?"

"I figured I'd look at some more houses, since I've got the day off."

"Oh." The house thing. I think that finding a house must be difficult enough for normal people. For Jacob, finding a place that didn't come with prior inhabitants was verging on impossible. I was starting to think that maybe he needed to buy out the landlord of my apartment building and renovate the inside, since it seemed to be the only place within a reasonable distance from our precincts that wasn't haunted.

Not counting the basement.

"There's a condo near Ravenswood that's still available," Jacob said, talking to me while he squinted at his phone.

"I thought you said the kitchens were too small there." Jacob shrugged. "I'll make do."

"You shouldn't grab a place with a small kitchen just for the sake of moving." I'd thought his old condo was fine, but he'd sold it anyway. It hadn't been haunted by actual ghosts, but the memories of the incubus I'd killed there still lingered too much for Jacob's comfort.

He did turn to face me then, arching one dark eyebrow and looking devastatingly hot. I did my best not to swerve onto the gravelly shoulder. "You're gonna miss me?" he asked in a low, taunting, sexy voice.

Damn. He wasn't supposed to be psychic. "I just ... you know."

"What?"

I shrugged.

I could feel him staring at the side of my face, waiting for me to have a coherent thought and speak it out loud. He'd gotten eerily adept at not filling in any awkward silences with me over the last couple of months. Damn him.

"I'm used to living with you," I said. Christ. Could I sound any worse?

"So you've given more thought to moving in together?" I hadn't. "Uh. Yeah."

"And?"

We passed a ball of whitish fur on the side of the road that had once been an animal, though I didn't see its remnant wandering around nearby. Wild animals were usually cleaner that way. Pets, not so much. And people, forget it. Yack, yack, yack. It'd be easier if we were all animals. If we were all just so much meat.

"Vic?"

"Um." Shit. I couldn't breathe. What was my problem? I loved Jacob. I missed him when he wasn't there. And I hated the idea of crawling back to that crappy little apartment someday and knowing that we weren't going to end up in the same bed that night. I had to stop being such a wuss. "Yeah. Let's do it."

I couldn't make myself look directly at Jacob, but I could tell in my peripheral vision that he was smiling. He turned back to his phone, and the giant invisible hand that had been crushing the breath out of me loosened up just a little. Jacob started keying a message into his number pad. "We'll definitely need a bigger kitchen," he said.

* * * *

I'd managed to throw on a sport coat and present myself in front of Betty's desk just a few minutes shy of noon. Betty was Sergeant Warwick's secretary who predated him at the Fifth Precinct, and today she was immaculate in a double knit polyester pantsuit the exact powder blue of a ChapStick Medicated tube, with a coordinating navy eyeglasses chain dangling from her thin shoulders. "Detective Bayne," she sang out as I rounded the corner. I think she'd always secretly wanted to be my mom. At least, I'd always hoped that was why she was so nice to me.

"Go right in," Betty said. "The Sergeant is waiting for you."

It felt weird to go back to Warwick's office after being off the job for over a month. Things looked the same and felt the same, but it was like I had changed and I fit differently now. As if to prove that my impression was right, Warwick actually

stood up to greet me when I entered his office, him and another guy to his left, a middle-aged bulldog in a suit, just like him.

"How're you feeling, Bayne?" Warwick asked, extending his hand to shake mine.

I did my best not to look suspicious. "Okay," I said, giving his arm a couple of pumps up and down. "Good."

"This is Bob Zigler," he said, gesturing with his hand as I released it. "He'll be your new partner."

Something sank a little inside me even before I took a good look at Zigler. It hadn't happened with Maurice, or Lisa, or even that homophobic bastard, Roger. But a tiny voice in my head went, "Cripes, not him."

Zigler was giving me a fairly neutral handshake, his hand dry and warm and completely unobjectionable. He seemed okay. So I tried to put my dread aside and wait until we'd actually spent some time together before I hated him.

It's just that he was so obviously an old-school cop. I don't just mean age—after all, Maurice was older than Zigler, but Maurice was just so relaxed.

Zigler was a fireplug of a guy. Maybe an inch over six feet, about two hundred fifty pounds, and no neck whatsoever. His brown hair was clipped short and starting to gray around the temples, and he had the obligatory Chicago P.D., Mike Ditka mustache. He looked older than Jacob, but it could've also just been a serious lack of style that made him seem that way. After all, administration wasn't going to pair me with a guy on the verge of retirement, not if they had a thousand applicants to choose from.

"Call me Zig," he said.

"Vic," I offered, hoping beyond hope that he wouldn't turn out to be an ass.

"Zig's a local," said Warwick. "He's been an Evanston detective for the past eight years."

Evanston. It butted up against Lake Michigan to the east and Chicago to the south. Nice buildings. Jacob had been talking about moving there if he couldn't find a decent place in the city, and now I was officially going with him. Jacob and I might call Evanston home in the near future. I could probably announce our future live-in plans and get the whole "I'm queer" part of the meet and greet over with. But I just wasn't up for it, especially not in front of Warwick.

Zigler and I listened as Warwick gave us the last known locations of the three missing persons, descriptions, and possible commonalities that had already been found. There weren't many; a couple of them used the same dry cleaner. But that could've been explained just as easily by a sweet coupon in a neighborhood circular as a connection to a killer.

The alderman's nephew had been running errands that day one week earlier, and a video surveillance camera had captured him getting off the El station, heading toward his dentist's office where he never showed up for his three-thirty cleaning and semiannual checkup.

There was a park between the station and the dentist's office, so we decided to start there. Not that I was a big fan of parks. I'd stumbled onto the site of an Indian massacre the last time I combed a park. But this was a different park, and I was no longer on secret experimental drugs that amped up

my ability to the level of Marie Saint Savon. So I let "Zig" establish a search grid and march along beside me, pen and paper at the ready, as we walked it.

Zig was professional, I'd give him that. He really knew his shit. Moreso than me. Not that that's saying much. Willing to do all the work, too, without seeming to expect much input from me. All in all, maybe a good match—if it wasn't for the whole "I'm gay" thing. I couldn't imagine that such a confession would be greeted with any amount of enthusiasm. Or even civility.

"All clear?" Zig asked as we moved to the next row. I realized I'd been trying to figure out if there was any way at all I could get the damn confession out there, on the table, before I built up any kind of relationship with him. Best to let him be disappointed right off the bat, before he had any preconceived ideas about me.

I glanced back over my shoulder and gave the area we'd just walked a quick scan. "All clear."

We pivoted and started doubling back. I didn't want to challenge Zig's work methods by telling him that I didn't actually need a grid to spot ghosts. After all, maybe he'd find something that the first investigators had overlooked. But once I realized he was focused on me rather than the grid, like any good Stiff would be, I knew that I was just wasting time.

In so many ways.

"You married, Zig?" I asked him.

"Yeah, twenty-one years." He actually glanced at his wedding ring as he said it. "You?"

I looked down at my bare left hand. I'd never had the compulsion to do that before. How lame. "I'm, uh.... "Great. I couldn't say it.

But I had to. The longer I waited, the worse my anxiety would be. And I couldn't imagine it feeling any worse than it did already. "I'm moving in with someone. Just as soon as we find a place that's not haunted." Say it, Vic. Damn it. Tell him.

"That a common problem, spirit activity in a...?"

"Jacob Marks. From the Twelfth. You know him? I'm moving in with him."

Zig almost did a spit take. The color drained from his ruddy cheeks, leaving him a strange shade of gray. His already-bulging eyes bulged even more. And then a barrier slammed down somewhere behind them and he pressed his lips together hard.

Shit. I'd thought I was up for the conversation, but evidently I was a much bigger pussy than I realized. My stomach clenched up and I fought back the urge to tell Zig that I was just kidding, and laugh, and give him a hearty, heterosexual clap on the back.

God, I hate confrontation.

I steeled myself for the tirade that was sure to come. The one where I was a drug addict, a shitty cop, and a miserable excuse for a human being.

Zig blinked. He cleared his throat. "Marks," he said. "Sure. We've met." And then he looked back at his notepad with every ounce of attention he had.

Chapter Three

Even though he was on vacation, Jacob hadn't been relaxing. My hole-in-the-wall apartment smelled like lemons, or more likely Pledge aerosol furniture polish, and Jacob was dressed in black and charcoal designer casual.

"Got a date?" I asked him. My sport coat slid off the hook on the back of the door. It seemed like too much effort to pick it up. It settled into the space where my door met the worn linoleum tile of my kitchen floor. There was a cigarette burn there from the previous tenant. A gouge where the new refrigerator had cornered badly. I was accustomed to my apartment. It wasn't very demanding.

"Condos on Irving Park, Western, and Ravenswood. I made the first appointment for eight. Figured you could get a power nap in if you needed to."

We'd been awake since five and it was six-thirty at night. If my head hit the pillow, I'd power nap all the way through to the next day.

Of course, I didn't need as much sleep as I had in my big pill-popping days. I tried to get into the Internet to fill those sleepless hours with some good healthy porn, but it seemed to me that all my old fifty pound laptop was capable of doing was downloading antivirus definitions and firmware updates. I'd turned to Sudoku to fill the spare hours. Seven or eight out of the nine boxes usually added up for me. I thought that was pretty good

I loosened my tie and found Jacob had been watching me from his post in the doorway. He crossed the minuscule

kitchen in about a step and a half and backed me into the formica countertop beside the sink. A spot that used to house an old coffeemaker and a can opener had been packed tight with all kinds of contraptions that Jacob needed to make dinner from scratch: a crock pot; a tabletop grill; four different bottles of oil and half a dozen vinegars. And an even bigger coffeemaker, which I wholeheartedly endorsed.

Jacob's mouth pressed against mine while the handle of the tabletop grill jabbed me in the low back. I was tired. I'd woken up early and been clenched up tight all day with the stress of coming out to Zig, but the day's fatigue melted away the second Jacob's tongue pushed between my lips.

There was probably a time for lazy, tender lovemaking on a white down comforter with a bottle of champagne chilling beside the bed and a bowl of ripe strawberries at the ready—but Jacob and I never seemed to synch up with it. One of us was either at work, or had just returned from it, carrying around an image in our heads of a crime so sickening that it made fluffy boas and hearts and flowers feel pretty useless.

Jacob deepened the kiss as he straddled my leg, his quads clamping onto my thigh. He drove me into the countertop even harder, and the grill handle drilled me from behind like it was impatient to get going with our ménage a trois.

I pulled my lips from Jacob's and gasped out, "Grill." He trailed kisses down my jaw, my neck, ending with a bite that was hard enough to hurt—in that wow-what-a-turn-on way, not the ow-get-a-bandaid way. He always let up before he left a mark. It was hard enough for me to function as a cop, what with the drugs (or the longing for them) and the gay and the

half-seen corpses floating around all the time. I didn't need hickeys that I was struggling to hide on top of everything else.

Jacob got that. And yet, when his teeth pressed into my vulnerable neck and a rumble of pleasure started building up low in his throat, I sensed a quivering restraint that told me he'd love to just let loose, sink his teeth in until he tasted just the faintest hint of copper ... and of course that idea made me insanely hard.

Jacob tossed the grill into the sink with one hand—that really loud cracking noise didn't bode well—and wedged his other hand between my legs. He cupped his palm over my balls and rolled them together, wringing a desperate noise out of my throat that I hadn't realized I'd been holding back. His thigh drove his hand into me harder, and I felt a serious rush to my balls as he sent me soaring up the precipice even through my lousy work pants.

"I want to fuck you," he purred behind my ear as he nuzzled my hair. "You want it?"

"Y-yeah." Okay, so I hadn't mastered the dirty talk yet. It didn't mean I didn't totally get off on Jacob saying all that hot, nasty stuff. He flipped me around and dropped my pants around my ankles while I nudged a glass bottle back into the mass of stuff on the countertop before it could tip into the sink and shatter.

Jacob grabbed the bottle away from me. Olive oil. Okay. At least it wasn't the one with a bunch of garlic cloves at the bottom, or the big sprig of something in the middle that looked like part of last year's Christmas tree.

Clothes-rustling noises, bottle-opening noises, and then his fingers were inside me while I tried to figure out where to put my elbows without punctuating our evening with broken glass. My cock got even stiffer at the feel of his fingers, the sound of his voice mumbling its disjointed stream of dirty talk: "Sweet, sweet ass, God, you're so tight. Oh, fuck, yeah...."

I stared at the crowded electrical outlet above the counter while his cockhead nudged my hole. Slippery. I shivered and relaxed into the countertop, doing my best to enjoy the anticipation. We'd never done it in the kitchen before. Every other room but. It was too cluttered, with nowhere comfortable to sit. Not even a table, just a couple of barstools and a little ledge. Maybe I could do something on the ledge if I was feeling acrobatic.

"Oh, fuck. Yeah," Jacob said. My brain shut off as he shoved in. It burned. It was amazing. I wanted to grab my cock and bring myself off fast, but I didn't. I stared at that electrical outlet and focused outside myself, so Jacob had time to give me the reach-around. Clock. Microwave. Coffee maker. Coffee grinder.

What if one of 'em fell into the sink while he was piledriving me and I ended up electrocuted? Not that there was any water present. But the lethalness of the combination of electricity and sinks is hard-wired into our primordial lizard brains, so that just seeing the two of them at the same time is enough to leave me thinking about biology class and twitching frogs....

"Uhn, God, Vic. So good. Fuck."

Jacob took a fistful of my hair and shoved my face into the coffee maker while he jammed his cock in deep, setting a rhythm of slow, steady thrusts. Good. Yes. I should be focusing on him, and not the macabre dance of electricity through dead limbs. So why couldn't I stop thinking about it?

"That feel good? Huh? You feel that?"

I walked my feet out as far as the pants around my ankles would let me and shuddered as a hot bead of oil rolled down the back of my thigh. "Fucking hot," I mumbled into my forearm. "Fuck me harder."

Jacob went ballistic because I'd managed to string together more than two words while he was fucking me. He grabbed my cock with an oil slick palm and pumped it hard—cripes, harder than usual, and the pain was sparkly white around the edges of my vision and everything, my cock, my balls, my ass, clenched up rock-hard while I started peaking.

Jacob's cock hammered at my ass while he chanted something like, "Nn, yeah, nn, yeah..." and his whole body folded over my back, touching me everywhere he could possibly touch. I wouldn't have thought I'd like it, since I'm so twitchy about being restrained. But when Jacob wraps his body around mine, I feel more like he's shielding me than engulfing me.

I made another crazy noise—I'm not sure if I was going for a word or not—and my cock throbbed in his greasy, tight fist. I shot into the cabinet door and, fuck, so good, like I'd come and come and come, and he was bearing all my weight, him and the countertop, and there I was bucking like an electrocuted frog corpse.

"God," he gasped against the back of my neck. "I love you."

Oh.

I breathed carefully.

He'd said it. First.

"Yeah," I managed. "You, too." And it sounded so fucking stupid as it came out of my mouth, off guard and reactionary, and I wondered how he could possibly be satisfied with something like that. Sure, it's all about my ass when he's talking dirty, but obviously it can't be all that special. Everyone's got one, after all. It's the whole package he was after. The weird shit I said, and did, and saw.

I didn't know why he wanted that. Just thinking about it made my brain hurt.

I craned my head around and he met me with a kiss that barely reached, his hand still moving gently over my cock, which was settling down after its big fireworks. His come was hot and tacky on the backs of my thighs. I brushed his lips with mine and tried again. "I love you, too," I whispered.

Better.

Chapter Four

I'd seen Jacob stand up to various frightening people, from Sergeant Warwick to Roger Burke—police officer turned criminal—to his unflinching and perpetually sour Grandma Marks. But I hadn't been prepared for watching him tear a new one into his realtor. In a very quiet and controlled voice, of course, that got scarier and scarier the lower it went.

"Did you even look at this place before you wasted both my time and my partner's by bringing us out here?"

The realtor was a fiftyish guy named Stan, with washedout blue eyes and a hairline that was both receding in the front and balding on the crown. He dressed well and kept himself in reasonable shape; if I was that hair-challenged, I might have been tempted to let myself go entirely. "I did," Stan said, doing his best to stand up to Jacob, "and it must have been clean at the time...."

"Roaches leave carcasses. They leave droppings." Jacob snapped the door to the kitchen cabinet and it shut with such a bang that both Stan and I jumped. "We will not buy an infested unit. Understood?"

I stared at the crevice between the baseboard and the tile where the small family of roaches had wiggled away when Stan turned on the overhead light. Roaches happen; that's what exterminators are for. But with a condo in a multi-family unit, you couldn't keep on top of it like you could in your own house. You had to rely on the homeowners association to organize that, and given the fact that we saw roaches now, it was unlikely that they had their shit together.

I suspected that Jacob wouldn't be nearly as angry if the first place we looked at hadn't been a total bust. It was a good building with fancy woodwork, and a street-level train line about a block away that went elevated the closer you got to downtown. I hadn't ridden the El in years, but it might be a fun way to go shopping on State Street or maybe visit a museum and see if there were any ghouls hanging around that the curators didn't know about.

Yeah, the train would be pretty fun. Except for the bells.

They started ringing at eight forty-five and kept on clanging for about four minutes straight. "It does this *every* time a train pulls in?" Jacob demanded. Well, of course it would. It had to keep the traffic off the tracks. How many trains came by every day—that would be the question. At least four or five an hour, I'd imagine. "Who the hell can live around here?"

"They say you get used to it," Stan said, shrugging.

First the train, and now the roaches. I hoped the third place Stan had lined up for us didn't have any glaring flaws, or Jacob might scare him into an early coronary. And then Stan would haunt me for the rest of my life. I'd need to ask Jacob to tone down his macho.

The last condo on our agenda was an old motel from the twenties that had been chunked into eight sizeable units, four upstairs and four down. "Hotel," "twenties," and "Chicago" didn't inspire much faith in me that it would turn out to be a ghost-free zone, what with prohibition and gangsters and whatever else was running wild back then. Since I was giddy from endorphins, work-related stress, lack of sleep, and

digesting Thanksgiving dinner, I figured my opinions were less reasonable than usual, so I tried to keep an open mind.

"Are these the original floors?" Jacob asked. We were looking through a doorway into a living room-dining room combo that was probably bigger than my whole apartment combined with my neighbor's across the hall.

Stan sounded pleased with himself as he answered something about the developers tearing up carpets and finding the oak floors pristine, but I tuned him out since I can't say that a floor would sway me one way or the other in terms of living somewhere.

I walked over to a bay window and looked out over the street. Big old trees that were bare for the winter, expensive, late-model cars, lawns that had been meticulously raked of twigs, leaves, and garbage, now dusted with a light frosting of snow. It was a good neighborhood. I tried to imagine myself living in it with Jacob, and I couldn't make the image gel.

That didn't make any sense. We lived together already. Sure, we called it something else, and he only kept the bare minimum of his stuff at my place because even though I wasn't much of a packrat, there wasn't enough room to merge two households in one three-room apartment. But we landed in the same bed every night. Christ, I'd met his parents. He'd dropped the L-bomb.

I hung my head and pinched the bridge of my nose. I needed some rest.

"Hey."

I turned and found Jacob holding up the doorway, same as he did in my apartment ... our current apartment ... minus all the clutter and cheap pressboard furniture around him.

"I sent Stan outside to wait for us," he said.

"I'll bet you didn't have to tell him twice."

Jacob crossed the original oak flooring and slipped his arms around my waist. The room was dark, though lights from the kitchen probably carried far enough that anyone who happened to be looking through our window would see our big gay Hallmark moment. "What do you think of this place?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. It's big."

Jacob's reflection in the bay window smiled. "What I mean is, are we the only two here, now that Stan's outside?"

Oh. Right. I was supposed to be checking for ghosts. I restrained myself from looking around the room, so that it wasn't too painfully obvious that I'd been slacking on my assignment. "So far," I said.

I snagged Jacob by the cuff of his jacket and started a clockwise sweep of the apartment, just as if I was walking a crime scene. "You like this place?" I asked.

"It's not bad. I'd need to see it at different times of the day, make sure the noise level's okay. But if all that checks out, yeah. It could work."

I looked into a closet, let my eyes adjust to the darkness inside and stared for a long while before I flipped on the light. Spacious. And empty.

I tried to imagine my pathetic wardrobe hanging in the closet—heck, even half the closet, if Jacob needed the other half for his stuff. The closet was too good for it. I'd need new

clothes. This must be how people got into debt. First they got a bigger place, then they needed to fill it up....

"Do you see something?"

"Uh ... no."

"Good."

I kept walking, passing room after room. I'd counted two bedrooms so far, plus a niche off the big combo room and a bath and a half. Damn. "It's bigger than your old condo."

"Because we're going to share it."

I peeked into another room. Bedroom, or maybe an office. I couldn't really tell what I should call it without furniture in it to guide me.

Jacob pushed open a final door and waited for me to go in. I crossed the threshold and stared out the huge picture windows into the yard that sprawled behind us, thick with the twisted, black branches of old-growth oaks, a couple of evergreens poking up on either side. It couldn't quite compare to the lakefront view of Jacob's old condo, but for the location, it was pretty sweet.

Jacob mumbled something, but I was busy trying to imagine the trees full of leaves, shielding Jacob and me from the chaos of the city. Was I a nature nut and I just never knew it? Scary thought.

Maybe I could see myself in that condo after all, pulling my stylish and wrinkle-free clothing out of a closet with elbow room to spare, and getting dressed in front of my tree-shaded window while the coffee brewed in our eight thousand square foot kitchen. I felt surprisingly little anxiety as this fantasy played.

Jacob said something else I didn't quite catch, and I figured I might as well pay attention. "What?"

"What?" he said back to me.

"What were you saying?"

Jacob opened yet another closet door and peered in. "Nothing."

"Just now."

"I didn't say anything," he assured me. His voice faded as his whole body disappeared into the closet, but I could still understand him, muffled or not. "This is really nice."

"You sure you didn't say anything?"

Jacob appeared in the doorway with his brow creased and his eyes trained on me. No wonder people didn't lie to him. His eyes were scarier than the knowledge that his partner, Carolyn, was a telepath.

I was about to insist that he repeat whatever he'd said right after we walked into the bedroom when I heard it again, that low murmur. Like a neighbor's TV playing too loud, only without a wall to soften the high end. Words. A sentence that repeated itself.

"Tell Georgie that I know about him and my wife."

I pressed my eyelids shut and did my best not to sigh. Damn it.

When I opened them, Jacob was looking at me even more closely, and if I thought about it hard enough, I could sense a cold spot in the middle of the room. I stared at Jacob. He stared back at me.

"Tell Georgie that I know."

"Tell him yourself," I muttered, leaving the bedroom without looking back at the tree-lined view.

I'm not sure if Jacob took the haunting out on Stan. After all, how was Stan supposed to know if the place was haunted or not? Mediums are few and far between, and it's harder to detect the voice-only apparitions than it is to spot the full-blown, bleeding and blubbering deceased. You needed a pretty strong medium to pick up on those voices. Like me.

I wished I hadn't combed through the whole damn apartment before Georgie's nemesis found me. Hadn't seen all those wide, elegant closets, or the bay window, or the yard with all its damn trees.

Too bad there wasn't some sort of ectoplasmic sensor I could just wave around when I walked in the door before I got my hopes up, like a paranormal pregnancy test. Sorry, the dot turned red. It's not a ghost-free zone. Can't live here. Next.

It would be so comforting to be sure, to know that I wouldn't throw away all my pressboard furniture and buy the new wardrobe to fill up the spacious closet, and then find some dead asshole who'd tried to get a piece of burnt toast out of the toaster with a metal fork standing in my kitchen at four in the morning. That'd be even worse than falling in love with a "view" and then figuring out that the bedroom's haunted.

Jacob and Stan emerged from the front door, then stood on the stoop, talking. Jacob made notes on a pad of paper. Stan looked like he was only pretending to be calm. I watched the two of them set up their appointments, and I wondered

how much longer I'd be able to look for missing people all day and real estate all night. Jacob had seen at least twenty or thirty places. At the rate of three properties per night, I'd probably be a basket case by Monday. Unless I narrowed down the playing field.

I really hated to bother Lisa over something so mundane, but I was sure she'd understand that things were getting desperate. Roaches could be sprayed, but as far as I knew, disgruntled ghosts are forever. Or at least a hell of a long time. I flipped open my cell phone and hit memory dial three as Jacob approached the car. Lisa could use her "si-no" ability to tell me if any of the places on his list were haunted or not, and save me from looking at a bunch more ghost motels. Then we'd only need to worry about noisy neighbors, roaches, and freaky occurrences like Uncle Leon's arm.

Lisa and I hadn't gotten to spend much time together before she shipped off to Santa Barbara, but she and I were still two of a kind. I'd been a medium before anyone even acknowledged that there was such a thing, and she'd played the "si-no" game with her sister even though it was frowned upon by her strict Catholic-Hispanic-cop household.

Now that Lisa was learning some kind of new age whatnot at a place in Santa Barbara called PsyTrain, she didn't get much free time to walk on the beach or chat on the phone. But I could at least leave her a message and run my idea by her.

Her phone rang a couple of times, and then instead of her usual "I can't come to the phone" message, I got, "Hello?"

"Hey! It's me!" Well, duh. Her cell phone would've showed her my phone number before she picked up. But some habits die hard. Heck, I'd grown up with a rotary phone. And Jacob even admitted to having a party line as a small child in rural Wisconsin.

"Hey! How did the parents go?"

Jacob opened the car door and got in. "Hi," I told him, "I'm talking to Lisa."

"Tell her we miss her."

That was too mushy for me to convey, so I hoped she'd heard it straight from Jacob's mouth. "Jacob says hi," I summed up lamely. "Um ... his family was good. I think they want to become ghost hunters."

"Good," she said. "I knew they'd like you." Lisa knows lots of things. Anything that she thinks to ask herself that can be answered with a simple yes or no.

"There was something a little weird," I said, and a wave of fatigue washed over me as I thought about Leon's bloody spectral arm flopping around next to the mashed potatoes, "but I'll tell you about it later. You might be able to stump your professors with it. Listen, why I really called...."

"Wait a second, Vic."

"Yeah?"

"Before you say anything else, I just wanted to..." she sighed, and I suddenly caught the awkwardness in her voice, the stilted timing. I tried to imagine what was up. It couldn't be good.

"If you're gonna ask me something," she said, attempting to start fresh with a new sentence, "I mean, a 'si-no,' then ... don't."

"Why? Is something wrong? You're not taking antipsyactives, are you?" I felt Jacob glancing at me as he drove, but I didn't want to make eye contact with him, not until I figured out what Lisa was trying to tell me.

"No. I don't need the pills. It's not like seeing ghosts, where you can't ignore them if they're there. I just ... I don't have to play the 'si-no' if I don't want to."

On one hand, I was relieved. I never wanted Lisa to go to stinking PsyTrain to begin with. I don't trust any of those psychic mills as far as I can throw 'em. But on the other hand, I didn't liked what I thought she was trying to say.

"Vic, it's too hard to have all the answers. You know?"

"What, are you tired? I thought playing 'si-no' was as easy as saying your name. It never seemed to wear you out before."

"It's not like that," she said, and she was still choosing her words too carefully for my taste. "But ... I just don't want to be the one with all the answers. I want to be myself."

West coast psychic airy-fairy granola bullshit. "How does the 'si-no' make you any less yourself?"

"I doesn't—if I don't let it. I've got to stop doing 'si-no' with you for a little while."

I hadn't realized how important the "si-no" was to me until it was slipping out of my grasp. Heck, I probably wouldn't have let Jacob get me into bed if the "si-no" hadn't told me he

was on the up-and-up. "Lisa, this is crazy. The 'si-no' is part of you...."

"And you have a question."

My mouth worked. I couldn't exactly deny it.

"I know you do," she said, "because I asked the 'si-no' when my phone rang."

"Well, yeah, but...."

"You only call me when you have a question."

"Don't normal people call other normal people when they have questions?" I asked her. "Not that I'd know what the hell normal people do, but maybe we can pretend for the sake of argument."

"I knew you were gonna be mad."

"I'm not mad," I lied. "I'm just wondering when you started resenting me for asking you questions."

"I don't resent you," she said.

Even I could tell it would be a bad idea to have her prove she didn't resent me by telling me which apartments on Jacob's new list were free of spirit activity. "Is everything really okay there?" I asked. "Nobody's forcing your eyes open and making you listen to Beethoven while a slide show is playing?"

"It's good here," she said. "And I'm okay. I'm gonna go right now. I just need some time. Goodbye, Vic."

I listened to the dead air after she disconnected and gritted my teeth.

"Is she okay?" Jacob asked me when I flipped my phone shut.

I sighed and sagged into the car seat. "I think Lisa just broke up with me."

Chapter Five

The sinking feeling I'd been expecting to feel in the pit of my gut at the sight of my new partner, Zig, wasn't as much like riding a roller coaster with a stomach full of stale beer as I'd thought it might be. It was more like the nausea you get from reading too long while the car is moving. I'd made progress.

It helped that I had a stack of missing persons files on my desk to stare at. The people in those pictures paperclipped to the manila file folders might still be alive. So I had to get my ass in gear and find them.

Zigler stared at me from the desk opposite mine. I'd thought of it as Maurice's desk, back when it'd been cluttered with CDs in mismatched cases, half-empty coffee cups, and weird trinkets his kids made him in art class. But now the desk was so clean and sterile that it was just a desk. I tried to think of it as Zig's desk, but I didn't want to go there. I figured there was no sense in straining myself over it, especially with missing persons on the line.

"What's your plan?" Zig asked. He said it in a monotone. Either he was mad at me for ruining his dreams of glory as a glamorous and celebrated PsyCop by being queer, or he couldn't accept me as a senior partner because I was younger, quieter, skinnier, and ... let's face it: queer.

I thumbed through the files. Miranda Lopez, first to disappear. Lived with her elderly mother and her two teenaged kids. The mother might have seen something that would tip us off. Or a neighbor could've noticed something

unusual. Or one of the kids might have an idea where she'd gone.

"Let's walk through the homes. If any of them are dead, they might turn up there."

Zig nodded.

"If you could just act like you've got some more questions for them, I can see if there are any spirits around."

Zig stood up and buttoned his suit coat. "Let's go."

I headed for my car, since I wanted something familiar around me while I dealt with the neckless plug of a new partner who was glaring at me like I'd eaten his goldfish in a game show stunt. Zigler filled the passenger seat completely. I had the arm rest down between us, and we were both careful not to brush elbows on it.

Miranda lived in the Second Precinct, not usually my turf, but the alderman had called the commissioner in a panic, and the commissioner grouped all the recent missing persons together and called in the PsyCops in hopes of getting the alderman's nephew back. Money. Power. I should've been offended that you had to be "somebody" to get shuffled to the top of the deck, but I couldn't help but wonder ... what if those people were still alive somewhere? I could overlook a little political favoritism if it saved lives, right? Or maybe I just didn't have a backbone.

Or maybe I'd been going stir-crazy and just wanted to get back to work. Even if my new partner was a bulldog with a Ditka mustache.

I took Lincoln to Ashland, then headed south toward the Second. The ghostly newspaper vendor who always stands in

the bus shelter on the corner of Ashland selling invisible papers was more or less solid, but the rape-homicide who usually jumped around waving her fists was nowhere to be seen. Maybe her killer had finally gotten caught doing someone else, and she decided she'd had enough of her afterlife aerobics.

As I made my way deeper into the Second, the buildings crowded closer together, the traffic slowed, and multiple thudding bass lines warred for dominance from cars and garden apartments. We weren't far from Crash's shop, which reminded me that I wanted to ask him if he'd made any progress on finding me a GhosTV. Supposedly he had a lot of savvy internet friends who'd sit up and beg for the chance to hook up with a real medium. And I'd be tickled to give them a reading in exchange for a device that could clean out spirits like a stiff wind blowing away cobwebs.

But I wasn't planning on stopping at Sticks and Stones with Zig in tow. I'd never hear the end of it. From either of them.

The Lopez family lived on the third floor of a leaning walk-up with stairs that creaked something fierce as we went up—louder with Zig's weight on them than mine. I knocked—not the cop knock that says, "Let me in right now, you piece of shit," but the polite human being knock that most cops reserve for victims' families. That's my typical knock anyway, since I've always hated calling attention to myself. I wondered briefly if my knock wasn't manly enough for Zig, but then I thought, fuck it. I was already pretending to be

macho by doing the driving. I didn't need to batter down the door.

The door opened just a few inches, exposing a security chain so lousy that even I could break it. A brown eye set in brown folds of skin peered out at me. "Si?"

I flashed my badge. "I'm Detective Bayne, this is Detective Zigler. Habla usted ingles?"

"Un momento," she said, shutting the door. I heard her scuttle deeper into the apartment, calling, "Carlos? Carlos!"

I hadn't thought about the possibility that Miranda's family spoke Spanish, despite the fact that she lived in a neighborhood more Hispanic than not. I wasn't used to talking with living witnesses anymore; Maurice had always done that. I wondered if I did find Miranda's spirit floating around, would I need a translator?

"You speak Spanish?" Zig asked, sounding pleasantly surprised.

"Not much."

Zigler shifted gears immediately into neutral, staring over my shoulder at the door. It opened again, all the way this time, and a wiry kid of about eighteen glared out from the apartment. Shaved head, tattoos, and flashing dark eyes you could get lost in. If you were a girl, anyway, since my gaydar told me this kid was the last one I'd find trolling Boys' Town. "You cops?" he asked.

"Detective Bayne," I repeated, showing him the badge I hadn't bothered to pocket. "Detective Zigler."

"You here about my mother? You find her?"

"Not yet," I said. I probably wasn't supposed to be so blunt, but hell. We didn't have all day. "I was hoping we could come in...."

"I already told them everything I know." Carlos crossed his arms like Jacob did when he wasn't planning on going anywhere. He wasn't bulky like Jacob, but he could still fill a doorway.

I really didn't want him to challenge me. Not in front of fucking Zigler. "If we could just go over things one more time..." and really, I knew the facts already. Who'd last seen Miranda, what she'd been wearing. The fact was, I just wanted to get into that apartment without announcing that I was ghost hunting.

"Don't you people ever read? You make all these notes, and then what? You throw them out when you leave?"

It wasn't any good to argue, especially when I had to admit that, aside from throwing our notes away, it pretty much was the way we operated. "It'll only take a few minutes...."

"Carlos," said Mrs. Lopez, dragging him out of the doorway. She motioned for us to come in while she lit into him in Spanish. I might not have been able to understand her word for word, but her body language and her tone were crystal clear: *Carlos, stop being a jerk*.

Zig and I crowded into the small kitchen. I swerved to avoid knocking over a table full of lit candles with my hip, or maybe setting myself on fire, though I suspected the polyester in my suit coat would melt rather than bursting into flames. But you never know with these mystery fabrics.

Zig got ready to take some notes while I stared at the makeshift shrine. Saints, crosses, a bunch of religious paraphernalia. And why not pray? Miranda was missing. But the candles triggered some other memory in me that wasn't entirely religious. I'd been to a few weddings, but aside from that, I wasn't a big church-goer. So why did the Saint Martin candle look so familiar?

Mrs. Lopez poured coffee while Zigler loomed over a sullen Carlos and told him to think back and recall everything he could about the day Miranda disappeared. That was good; Carlos would be distracted by a Q& A session with Zig, and it'd buy me some time.

Mrs. Lopez handed me a mug full of coffee pale with milk and I nodded gratefully. There was no spirit in the kitchen, but maybe Miranda had come back to her bedroom. I juggled the cup to my left hand while I attempted some made-up sign language: a person walking, and then me pointing to the doorway that let to the rest of the apartment.

"Si," she said, grabbing me by the forearm and towing me deeper into the house. She talked to me in Spanish as we went, and though a word here and there sounded familiar, I didn't attach any meaning to it. I suddenly felt like I was looking at yet another condo with Jacob, noticing the crappy light fixtures and the double hung windows sealed shut with at least twenty coats of landlord-white paint.

I felt vaguely guilty for phasing out of cop mode, though I suspected it didn't matter whether I was focused or not. If Miranda was lingering around, I'd see or hear her. I couldn't possibly miss her.

The sound of Carlos' angry voice drifted toward us from the kitchen, "Of course she wasn't going to the doctor's. We don't have health insurance like you do—and we don't got the money to run to the hospital for every little thing."

Mrs. Lopez met my eyes. Her expression seemed to be saying, "Look what I have to put up with." I nodded a little and looked inside one of the bedrooms. There were clothes everywhere, and CDs outside their cases just waiting to be stepped on. Bunk beds. Cool for kids Clayton's age, not so cool for kids as old as Carlos.

There weren't any ghosts. Top or bottom.

We moved through a living room crowded with brown and orange furniture from the seventies and way too many knick-knacks to a couple more bedrooms. Mrs. Lopez's room was the size of a closet, but the bedspread was so taut you could bounce a quarter off it. Miranda's room had one dresser too many crammed in there, but it was neat enough.

I pulled a pair of latex gloves out of my pocket and slipped them on before I entered the bedroom. If I were a precog, maybe I'd get an idea from handling Miranda's hairbrush. But I wasn't precognitive. The tests had been pretty clear on that. Didn't the city have another PsyCop at its disposal to figure out what'd happened to these people? Why send me—a medium—when they didn't even have bodies?

Miranda's dresser held a picture of her and two boys—one of them Carlos about five years younger, before he'd had to act like a tough guy. They were all smiling. A rosary hung from the corner of the mirror, and something else that looked like a religious press pass, only a flaming, bleeding heart with

a crown of thorns was in the spot where the laminated pass would usually hang. A silver charm of a woman's head on a white ribbon completed the grouping of weird, iconic religious paraphernalia.

She also had curling irons in three sizes. I didn't know they made such a wide variety.

"Senior Bayne," said Mrs. Lopez, touching me gently on the arm. I turned, and she pressed a Polaroid picture into my hand, which dragged at my latex glove. Miranda—a different picture than the one on her file. Her hair was shorter, permed and bleached orange, and she had on gigantic hoop earrings and a huge smile that lit up the room. She was dressed in purple. It suited her.

Mrs. Lopez pressed my hand over my heart with the photo in my palm. She said something in Spanish. "I'll try my best," I told her, feeling completely useless.

Lisa could tell me if Miranda was still alive. She'd have to make an exception for something so important. Maybe. Fuck, I didn't know.

"Abuela," said Carlos, storming into the living room where Mrs. Lopez and I stood awkwardly outside his mother's empty bedroom. He glared at me and said something else in Spanish.

"Do you want to ask Mrs. Lopez anything?" Zig asked me. "Carlos will translate."

I glanced over my shoulder, wishing someone would appear from the great beyond and tell me where Miranda really was. But, unlike the condo I'd looked at the night before, the Lopez's household wasn't haunted.

Mrs. Lopez and Carlos went back and forth in Spanish a few times, and then Carlos glared at me with his piercing, dark eyes. "You a priest?" he demanded.

"What?"

"My grandmother says you're a priest."

I felt my cheeks color, imagining Jacob ramming me over the kitchen counter. "No, I'm not a priest."

Mrs. Lopez seemed to understand that much English. She reached deep into one of the shelves among the statuettes and clutter and pulled out something so small that her thumb and forefinger hid it. She took my hand, the one holding Miranda's picture, and dropped a tiny silver charm, a little girl no more than a half inch long, on top of the photo. "Hallazgo Miranda, por favor."

I stuffed everything into my pocket, including my right glove. There was no ghost to tell me what to do, and Carlos' glare threatened to burn a smoking hole into the center of my forehead. "Those are all the questions we have," I mumbled, turning sideways to slip past Carlos in the narrow room, to get back through the kitchen and out the door.

The cadence of Spanish words flying back and forth sounded behind me as I tried to make my escape. Carlos slipped by Zigler and crowded me against the sink as I deposited my coffee cup. "You a witch doctor?" he asked me. I could see the whites of his eyes, and he looked more than a little freaked out.

"No," I lied, wondering how his grandmother had pegged me for a psychic, even if she lacked the right vocabulary, by simply looking at me. "I'm just a cop."

Chapter Six

As I drove back to the Fifth after a series of fruitless interviews, my phone rang and vibrated in my pocket. Jacob. "Hi," I said, knowing Zigler was listening from the passenger seat—how could he not? I wondered how gay I sounded. "What's up?" Ugh. Overcompensating.

"How late are you working?"

We were, in fact, just finishing up. It was past seven and the sun had set an hour ago. "Dunno." Okay, where'd that come from? "Why?"

"There's a house in Rogers Park I want to look at, and a couple more condos. Want me to check them out myself?"

The person behind me honked as I sat a half second too long at a green light. I resisted giving them the finger. "I, um.... Do you care?"

"I could eliminate all the places that won't work out for completely mundane reasons. Then you can check whatever's left."

It sounded logical. And yet, I couldn't help but wonder if house-hunting was something I was supposed to do with Jacob, now that I'd committed to living together for real. Maybe his ultra-logical tone of voice was masking some kind of unspoken disappointment in me.

Fuck.

I felt like I'd rather chat with a dead suicide bomber than look at another house just then. I'd been checking houses for ghosts all day. "Yeah," I said. "Sounds like a plan."

Zig tapped at the buttons of his cell phone while I hung up with Jacob. None of the apartments we'd been in had ghosts in them. None. People died all the time, so what was the deal? Dead people usually move along, most of them, anyway. Ghosts obviously had to move on at some point or another, or else I'd be swimming through an ocean of the dead every day. Murders, suicides, and accidents just took longer, as well as ghosts who were just plain stubborn.

"Are you holding supper for me?" Zig said into the phone. "No, that's okay. Half an hour. Uh huh. No, really, you can all go ahead." He sighed. "No, nothing. I don't know. I guess there weren't any spirits to see. Uh huh. Okay. Yup. Love you. Bye-bye."

"If they were there, I would have seen them," I said, wondering why it'd come out so defensive.

I took my eyes off the road to glare at Zig. He nodded at me, eyes round behind the mounds of his fleshy eyelids and encroaching cheeks.

"Seriously," I said. "There's one sitting at that bus stop right there. And another one on the roof of the hardware shop."

"The roof?"

I tried to crane my neck to see if the roof ghost was obviously a jumper, but it was difficult to tell at thirty five miles per hour, and her semi-transparent.

"Maybe they're not dead," I suggested.

"Who? Lopez and the others?"

"Sure. Maybe it's some kind of cult thing. Gathering up people for...?" It sounded retarded even as I said it. I flicked on my turn signal and pulled into the parking lot of the Fifth.

I dropped off Zigler and then pulled out into traffic. Chicago rush hour started before I even rolled out of bed and never ended before eight at night—though it was a little lighter on the weekends, at least before bar traffic started. I backtracked past the woman on the hardware store's roof and the ghost at the bus stop, and pulled up in front of the home of the last family we'd questioned, double parking. There weren't any spirits in my visual range. That wasn't so unusual. Maybe.

I wended my way past one of the other houses we'd searched and watched for a while. Maybe, now that it was full dark, a confused murder victim would make itself known. I didn't really think so, of course. Otherwise, I'd come clean with the family and get them to let me inside again. Or at least I'd pretend I had a few more questions for them so I could nose around.

I drove some more, and I thought. Three people missing. Probably dead. Otherwise, there'd be ransom—especially the alderman's nephew. Unless ... what? Their spirits were trapped, too? Or maybe tied to the spot they were murdered, which I hadn't found yet. Or maybe there was a succubus scarfing down their souls like big strings of oily, black pasta.

I looked up and found myself at the Lopez's apartment, double-parked. Yellow light shone through the lace curtains that covered the living room window and hid the shelves of knick-knacks and clutter inside. All that crap taking up space,

when the family sorely needed elbow room. Maybe it was a Hispanic thing, the need to have all that stuff around. Lisa would know.

Lisa would know if Lopez was alive or dead, too. She could even tell me where to look.

I had to call Lisa. She hadn't sounded very happy with me the night before, but she had to understand. I wasn't asking for myself. I thumbed in her speed dial and waited for her message, the one I always found myself mouthing the words to because she never answered her phone anymore now that she was being brainwashed at PsyTrain. Except that Lisa's phone didn't ring, and instead I got an earful of three dissonant tones.

"We're sorry. Your call cannot be completed as dialed. Please check the number and try again."

I figured I'd just fat-fingered Lisa's number and went to dial it again, when I realized I'd used the speed dial to get her. I pressed the buttons again with exaggerated care.

"We're sorry. Your call cannot be completed as dialed." Son of a bitch. Lisa had cancelled her cell phone.

I slammed my car into gear, pulled away from the curb, and drove. It was one thing for Lisa to tell me not to call her, but something entirely different for her to actually ditch her phone. You'd think I was some kind of psycho stalker or something. Who was the one who'd supported her while she was trying to figure out if she could be both a psychic and a cop? Me. Who was the one who took her under his wing when all her friends and family were across the country? Me.

I drove, and I swore, until finally I pulled my car over in front of a fire hydrant and slapped my police permit onto my dashboard. I glanced at the sidewalk. A couple inches of slush had hardened into a patchy obstacle course of ice, with crushed beer cans and cigarette butts and fast food wrappers sticking out here and there. The neon sign that said "Tarot Card Palm Reader" cast a pastel glow onto the hazardous walkway. I'd never met the palm reader; I was headed for Sticks and Stones, the shop upstairs, to see Crash.

The official business hours of Sticks and Stones are noon to six, Monday through Saturday. But Crash lived in a couple of rooms behind the store, and if he was home and had nothing better to do, he usually just left it open well into the night.

I followed the pattern of painted thumbprints up the stairs and wondered why I thought Crash wouldn't have anything better to do on a Saturday night than sit around in his store. He was probably out getting laid or something. The doorknob didn't move, and I felt like an idiot for not calling ahead, when suddenly the knob unstuck itself and turned, and the door jangled open with a giant fanfare of a dozen strungtogether bells.

"Oh. It's you." Crash sprawled on a threadbare recliner beside the counter, squinting at a catalog. His ancient Levis had been washed so many times that they molded to every intimate contour of his body, except his knees, which poked out through frayed holes. His T-shirt was screened with the logo of a band I'd never heard of before, and Jesus Christ, I felt every sad year of my pushing-forty life when I looked at

his spiked, bleached hair, his piercings and tattoos, and his long, lean muscles.

I stared at him, wondering what, exactly, I'd expected him to do for me. He ignored me and read.

"Do you sell anything that can answer a yes or no question?" I asked him.

"For entertainment purposes," he asked me, not bothering to look up, "or for real?"

I squelched the impulse to scream, "What do you think, you jackass?" Maybe he was asking a serious question—though I had my doubts. "You're the one with the metaphysical shop. If I wanted a Magic Eight Ball, I'd go to SaverPlus."

He looked up at me and grinned. "Did you notice the new guy who works at the return counter in the SaverPlus basement? He's kind of a creep—which I think I like about him—and he's got this monster bulge in his pants."

I could totally see him getting into someone who was a creep. "Um. No."

"They're still open. Why don't you go buy a Magic Eight Ball so I can return it?"

"No."

"Then what the fuck good are you?"

I turned my back to him and started flipping through rows of incense boxes on a shelf beside the door. "Don't you have something, I dunno, like one of those pendulum things?"

"They only work if you're a precog. Which you aren't."

I sighed. I knew that. I was just freaking out because of Lisa.

"So first it's this purported GhosTV you want me to locate for you," Crash said, the recliner creaking and protesting as he levered himself out of it, "which makes no sense, since it can't actually get rid of ghosts, only screw around with their signals so you can't see 'em." He looked like he was grinning, though I only saw him from the corner of my eye because I refused to give him the satisfaction of looking at him. Still, it was a pretty safe bet.

"That sounds way worse to me—knowing they're there but not being able to see 'em, just 'cos you flipped a switch. So tell me, Vic. What is it you really want?" He'd abandoned his catalog and swung the full weight of his focus on me, pouring himself against the shelf where I couldn't possibly not see him, running his tongue-barbell along his bottom teeth. It might've been full-on flirt mode for anyone else, but it was day-to-day attitude for him. No wonder Jacob cut him loose. I don't think I'd sleep well at night knowing my boyfriend was willing to drop trou for any Tom, Dick, or Harry, either.

"I really do want some kind of divination. How about, uh, tea leaves?"

Crash glanced down at the colorful box in my hand. "You won't find anything that benign if you keep shopping in the Voodoo section. Maybe what you really want is a bigger hard on."

I put the box of lodestone shavings back on the shelf, where it lived between a "Come to Me" aerosol spray and a candle with Saint Barbara on it. "You keep the Voodoo next to the religious stuff?"

Crash huffed and repositioned the lodestone box that I apparently hadn't shelved to his satisfaction. "Voodoo is a religion. What the hell did they teach you at psychic school—or where you high that day?"

I considered buying the Triple-X Curse mojo bag and dumping out the contents on his spiky, blond head.

"Saint Barbara is a Catholic saint," he said, "sure. But she also represents Chango, one of the Oshiras. The slaves who honored their African religions had to do a little creative improvisation to keep on worshiping while the whites were watching."

I thought about the shrine in Mrs. Lopez's house. "What about Mexicans—do they buy this stuff from you?"

"Who, the Santerians?" he shrugged. "They could, if they want to do business with a gringo. They prefer to shop at their own Botanicas, but once in a while they'll come here in a pinch." He tweaked the angle of the lodestone box again. "Shit. I gotta do inventory—this shelf looks picked over, and lately jimson weed is nearly impossible to find. Must be a Voodoo convention in town."

I noticed a Saint Martin candle just like the one in the Lopez apartment burning beside the doorway. "They have conventions?"

"It's an expression." Clash rolled his eyes. "More likely, some kid's figured out he can get high if he smokes it."

I nudged a stack of "Fast Luck Money Drawing" soap out of alignment. "So everything's connected to a whole religion, a giant ritual? You don't have anything that'll just give me an answer?"

Crash narrowed his eyes. "I can sell you something, sure. But none of the tools will work for you if you don't have the talent to use them. Come on. You and I both know a good precog can read the future in a chicken liver or a wet spot. You're the PsyPig. Don't you have a cop friend who can tell your fortune?"

"I do. Only she won't talk to me."

"Aha." I could see him grinning again in my peripheral vision, even though I was trying really hard to avoid him by focusing on an illustration of the Seven African Powers.
"That's why you're so tied up in knots that I can feel it from across the room. And here I thought you'd ditched Mister Perfect and come over to take me for a spin."

"You'll be the last person I'll run to if that ever happens."

"We'll just see about that." He grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me toward the counter. "Miss Mattie's not here, is she?"

I gather that when Crash was a child, he'd been closer to his neighbor, Miss Mattie, than he was to his own mother— who was still alive and heading up her garden club in the wealthy suburb, Arlington Heights. "Why would Miss Mattie be here?" I said. "You were sitting in her spot."

"She hung around here all the time before I even got her that chair. And I totally surrender the chair when Oprah's on. And The View." A small television perched across from the chair on an end table painted with zebra stripes. The TV was currently off.

"If she's not here now," Crash said, "then I don't need to behave." He pulled a wooden box out from behind the counter

as he spoke, grinning all the while. It was just banter. I don't think he actually had the hots for me. He just needed to preserve his reputation as a slut. Probably.

"I'll let you test drive a pendulum if you give me a blowjob."

"No!" I snapped.

He opened the box with a flourish. "Can't say I didn't try." He pulled out one of the pieces, a fancy metal pointer-looking thing on a chain, and held it between the two of us where it circled over the glass countertop. "But anyway, I won't let you get your wiggy vibes all over it and just sell it to someone else. Unless...."

I watched the charm circle around, and thought of the little metal person Mrs. Lopez had given me that morning. I dug in my pocket, hoping it wasn't so small that I'd managed to lose it.

"Ohmigod. I could totally market these as ... as Medium Charms. Or something. I'd have to think of a better name. 'Get messages from beyond the grave.' They'd have your name on 'em, endorsed by the most powerful medium in the United States. What do you say?"

"Right. Everyone'll believe that." I felt the cool metal between my fingertips, snugged up against a pack of gum and a Polaroid.

"That's the beauty of it," Crash said. "It'll be totally true. You can wear 'em under your shirt for a week, rub your weird mojo off all over 'em."

"No, I mean the 'most powerful medium' part. You'll need a bigger celebrity than me."

Crash twitched his fingers so that the pendulum spun in a figure eight. "Didn't you test out at level five? Or is that just another juicy Internet rumor?"

I avoided talking levels with Crash, since he'd bombed his testing and therefore couldn't get a government psychic job, and he got nastier than usual when his jealousy was aroused. Instead, I put the photo on the counter and laid the charm across Miranda Lopez's stretchy, purple sweater, and abruptly changed the subject. "Say, do you know what this is?"

"A Mexican chick with big boobs?"

I glared at him.

He smiled back, wide. "Oh. You mean the milagro?"

I looked at the little charm, hardly more detailed than a stick figure, standing with her feet planted far apart, wearing a wide triangular skirt. I concentrated on the word "milagro," but knowing the word for it clarified nothing.

Lisa could probably explain it to me. Damn it.

"I sell a few, though I don't bother keeping a big stock like the Botanica. It's a Hispanic thing, a form of sympathetic magic, though the more Catholic ones don't really acknowledge the paranormal connection. There are just a few different types: arms, legs, hearts, heads, and whole people. Someone might tie a heart milagro to a saint candle, and it could mean anything from 'help me lower my cholesterol' to 'gimme a boyfriend, now.'" He raked his tongue stud over his lower teeth as he toyed with the tiny figure. "So where'd you get this one?"

"A case I'm working on." I wondered if the charm of the woman's head on Miranda's dresser was a piece of jewelry or

a milagro. Given the items it was hanging with, I was guessing it wasn't just decorative.

"The girl," said Crash. "Someone's daughter?"

I poked the milagro Mrs. Lopez gave me and spun it around so that it faced me again. "Yeah. She's missing."

Crash slid the charm toward me. "Keep it on you. You never know, it might help you. Belief's a powerful thing."

Chapter Seven

I pulled up half a block away from my crappy courtyard building a little after nine. I'd fended off Crash's attempt to drag me out for drinks, but ended up agreeing to keep a handful of pendulums somewhere on my person so they could soak up my vibe. I wasn't supposed to put them under my pillow, since I was sleeping with a Stiff in my bed. I figured that meant the glove compartment was out, too, since that would put them in Zigler's range for a good part of the day, at least as long as we took my car. I ended up putting them in my blazer pocket. Seemed safe enough.

My body dragged at me as I headed toward the courtyard gate. A Valium would feel amazing. Too bad I didn't have any. Or maybe that was for the best. It was easy to stay clean when everything was going smoothly. Not so easy when I was putting in fourteen hour days with nothing to show for it.

"Hey."

A woman's voice—a familiar one. My insides sank as if someone had cranked up the gravity. All I had to do was get inside. She wouldn't follow me inside.

"Hey, white boy. Where you been at?"

One good thing about buying a new place with Jacob: I'd get away from the prostitute who turned tricks in the afterlife right outside my courtyard. "Not tonight, Jackie. I'm beat."

"I ain't see you in a long time. What's wrong wit you?"

"Your concern is touching." I picked up the pace. Just a few dozen more steps to the courtyard gate. From there, twenty yards to the vestibule door.

"C'mon, baby, don't be that way. You the only one who talk to me."

"Really?" I couldn't see her—which I was glad for. She had this ugly shank sticking out of her breastbone when she was visible.

"Whatsa matter? You don't look right."

I stopped and stared up into a streetlight. Snow whirled around in the yellow beam, and I realized I was shivering. I'd need to break out my winter coat. If I'd remembered to pick it up from the cleaner's. I slipped my hand into my jacket pocket and fingered the milagro. "Jackie, can you tell me if someone's dead or not?"

"Who it be? Maybe I heard something."

"Miranda Lopez." I pulled out the charm and balanced it on my fingertips, and then I realized that the photo was probably a better likeness. I pocketed the milagro and held up the Polaroid.

"I find out for you if you get me a dime."

I sighed and put the photo away. "You can't smoke crack. You're dead. And even if you weren't, I'm not gonna score for you. I'm a cop."

"You so full of shit. You ain't no cop neither."

"Would I be wearing this fucking suit if I wasn't a cop?"

"I don't know. I always thought you sold cars or somethin'."

I tucked my chin toward my chest and stomped toward my gate. Jackie couldn't help me. And how dare she call me a used car salesman? I wasn't always a dork in a blazer. Once upon a time I was actually cool. Until the Cook County Mental

Heath Center, anyway. After that, I guess I kinda stopped caring.

"Mmm, mm. Now there's a fine piece o' man."

I looked up and saw Jacob approaching the courtyard gate from the other end of the block. He wore a black leather jacket, black boots, and slim jeans, and he carried our laundry from the cleaner's in a sack as big as a body bag, holding it with such ease that he made it look like it weighed as much as the milagro. "That's my boyfriend," I snapped.

He stopped in front of me and raised an eyebrow. The corner of his mouth twitched. He loved it when he caught me talking when no one else was around, probably because he knew I'd never be so desperate as to talk to myself.

"Nuh-uh, he ain't no homo. Is he?"

"Tell me you saw a really great house today," I said to Jacob through clenched teeth.

"The one in Rogers Park had possibilities," he said, opening the gate for me even though he was the one carrying fifty pounds of laundry and I was empty handed.

"Did you happen to see my winter coat?"

"It's upstairs. They replaced the buttons at the laundry last month. One was missing, one had a chip out of it, and two were hanging off by threads."

I felt Jackie, her spirit-cold vaguely different from the nighttime winter chill, as she skittered along beside me and talked about how Jacob looked like he should be on T.V., wondered what he was doing with someone as raggedy as me, and speculated that she gave a better blowjob than I did.

Jacob and I crowded into the vestibule together, and I felt his breath hot on the back of my neck as he nuzzled at me while I jammed my key into the stairwell lock. My scalp prickled, and the thought of Jacob flinging me down on the stairs and having his way with me was starting to look good.

"I can still hear her," I sighed, rattling my key until the lock surrendered.

"Jackie?"

"Uh huh."

Jacob followed me closely up the three flights of stairs. Jacob's big into closeness. I was out of breath when we got to the third floor landing. He wasn't. "I think I want to live on the first floor when we move," I said. It occurred to me that walking up to my apartment was the only exercise I ever got. Oh well. I'd get a treadmill or something.

He dropped the laundry, mashed me into the wall beside my apartment door, and covered my mouth with his before I could even sort the keys out. He had me by the shoulders, kneading them through my blazer while his tongue worked its magic. He kissed me deep as he pressed his whole body against me like he could make me one with the wall. My cock thought that was a fine idea and perked right up. I was sure he could feel it swelling against the top of his thigh; I could feel quite plainly through his jeans that he was already hard.

I reached around Jacob and grabbed his ass with both hands, encouraging him to rub against me. He groaned deep down in his throat and sucked my lower lip into his mouth. His hips moved, stroking his cock against my hip, and I pulled

him against me harder, getting into the feel of his thick slab of meat grinding against me as he humped my thigh.

My fingers slipped lower, caressing the backside of his balls through his jeans. He broke our kiss to gasp, and I seized on the opportunity to blow his mind. "I want to suck you off. Right here."

If I've ever seen my across-the-hall neighbor, I don't remember him. Or her. But I'm pretty sure I have one. Sometimes I hear the ten o'clock news, or some hits from the seventies playing on a stereo. Whoever lived there, it wasn't very likely that they'd get an eyeful of gay cop sex, given that our paths never crossed.

There was an outside chance, though. A small one. Which must've totally gotten Jacob's rocks off, given the way he shoved me to my knees and whipped his cock out in no time flat.

He took my head between his big, strong hands and butted the crown of his cock against my lips. I watched his face as he did it. He stared into my eyes, a half-smile playing at his already-full lips, which were flushed from kissing. He was just as handsome from my angle on the floor as he was straight-on, or giving a press release with a dozen microphones pointed at him, or splashed across the front page of the Tribune for some high-profile crime he'd solved.

Jacob rolled his hips and his cockhead glided over my mouth, the skin silky smooth and hot against my lower lip. "Jerk off while you blow me," he said, gripping my head tighter, like it was an order and not a request.

Surprise, surprise. My cock enjoyed it when Jacob ordered me around. It strained against my boxers and slacks as I unzipped my fly to give it some attention. Funny, the fine line between a total turn-off and a kink. If anyone ever tried to tie me up, I'd probably start having Camp Hell flashbacks. But a little bit of bossiness? That took some pressure off me. I could get used to being told what to do.

I wet my lips and his cock pressed in, filling my whole mouth with its incredible thickness. I loved Jacob's cock, unapologetically huge like the rest of him. I felt the thick flare of the head drag along the roof of my mouth while the engorged veins that patterned the shaft bulged against my tongue.

Jacob's fingers wove through my hair, holding my head tight, and he started to move. He wasn't gentle, not exactly, but he took it slow. A muscle leapt in his jaw as his cockhead bumped my throat. He wanted to fuck my mouth to kingdom come and could hardly hold back, his massive body a tensed mass of barely-controlled lust. Yeah.

I slid my fingers down the length of my cock, then set a quick rhythm. I wanted to catch up to Jacob. I returned his stare, watching his eyes watching me as my hand moved faster on my cock. He saw something in me, evidently—something beyond a guy who was willing to do him in the hallway. He gripped my head and pulled out slowly, only halfway, then sank back in again, his cock filling my mouth and throat, obliterating my awareness of everything else but my hand on my cock, beating it fast, and the steely look in his incredibly dark eyes.

My head swam as I focused hard on Jacob, watched his eyes while he fucked my mouth. "You went out after work," he said, and I scrabbled to make sense of the sentence that I'd been expecting to be more of Jacob's dirty-talk.

His cock drove in deep, and I struggled to keep my throat open.

"Your hair smells like incense. Visiting Crash?"

I might have jumped a little, except that I couldn't move. He had my head in a vise grip, and his cock was so deep down my throat it could practically support me.

"There's just something about him," said Jacob. "Believe me, I know."

Okay. It wasn't fair to talk to me with his cock stuffed in my mouth, and even worse to make me enjoy it. I pounded my cock even faster and gave Jacob a nice, hard suck.

"God, Vic, that's so good." He rocked into my mouth while I jerked off, the fleshy sounds of cock against mouth and hand filling the hallway. I grabbed his balls with my free hand and rolled them together while I sucked, doing my damnedest to shut him up.

I must not have been trying hard enough. "If you've gotta be with him ... Jesus, Vic ... tell me, okay? We'll do it together."

I shook my head, dragging his cock side to side, and kept on sucking. Of course, a full blown threesome popped into my mind the second Jacob offered—and it wasn't lost on me that each of them had suggested it to me at one point or another.

I tasted the tang of precome at the back of my throat. "It's okay," Jacob murmured, "it's okay."

I shook my head again, a small jerk, and sucked even harder. No. It wasn't okay. I did not want to be with Crash. He'd told me that Jacob would never agree to a three-way, and here Jacob went and offered—and I suspected that it meant something. I just couldn't quite figure out what.

I forced my jaw to relax and I drove my face onto Jacob's cock as far as it would go. Jackie might've had more practice in her short, pathetic life, but damn it, I could give a blowjob every inch as good as one of hers. I sucked him and stroked his balls as my hand flew on my own cock, and I stared into Jacob's eyes, which never so much as blinked.

"I'm close," Jacob breathed, his eyes boring into mine, and yeah, I knew he was almost there by the way his thighs had clenched up and started shaking.

My balls tightened against my body and my cock leaked at the tip. The thought of a tongue stud wending its way to the base of my shaft while I gasped around the girth of Jacob's cock made me shudder. Jacob felt the motion course through me and his hands clamped my head tighter while he ground his fat cock in deep. "God, yeah, nnn yeah."

I wanted to take it back, but couldn't figure out any way to renege on a fantasy. That's all it was—a daydream. A stray thought. In real life, I'd known couples to invite a third guy into their beds and it never ended well, ever. There was always jealousy. Always mind games.

My hair tangled around Jacob's fingers as he squeezed, and my groin throbbed, hard. Pain ... another new kink. And relinquishing control, obviously, since my mouth was so full of cock I couldn't breathe anymore, cock that was going to burst

into a flow of thick, hot jiz any second. I made a strangled sound, and that was it for me. I came on the worn carpet, came on my hand. Came on the leg of Jacob's jeans, his Italian leather boot.

"Oh, God, oh yeah, oh, God.... "Jacob held my head against him hard. His cock pulsed, come shooting straight down my throat while I wondered if I'd pass out from a combination of lack of oxygen and the headrush from my own orgasm. His cock softened, just a little, and he pulled it out slowly. I felt his semen trail along my tongue, coating my throat with its bittersweet thickness. "Uhn, Vic...."

My head spun, casting a giddy tilt on the hallway and making me wish I could just roll into my bed and pass out. I was still staring up into Jacob's eyes, though my brain was in la-la land.

"I would do anything for you," Jacob said, and he seemed clear as could be, totally lucid. It wasn't fair that someone could shoot his load and then say things like that.

I tried to sigh and sputtered a little, what with a mouthful of come. I snorted and swallowed while his hands, suddenly gentle, cupped the back of my head. I brushed one of his arms away and used the wall to shove myself to my feet, needing to look anywhere but his too-intense eyes. I was just getting used to the idea of someone who would just be willing to live with all my hang-ups. I didn't know what to make of Jacob's willingness to please me.

"You dropped something," said Jacob.

I turned and saw one of the pendulums on the carpet, and the milagro beside it. And something thick and milky, which I

supposed I should clean up, only I knew I'd just grind it into the carpet with the sole of my shoe and hope it blended in. At least it hadn't landed on the milagro.

"I'll get it," I said. I grabbed up the pendulum before Jacob could touch it, since Crash would find out and get angry if I let him. Because everybody always finds out about everything. Especially when I'd rather they didn't.

Chapter Eight

Despite the fact that my jaw ached and my right knee was carpet-burned, I still managed to get to the precinct by eight a.m. on a bright, chilly Sunday morning. I guess that's what clean living does for you. Bob Zigler was already there, thumbing through the case files. He also had a thick, hardbound book open on his desk with a Sears Tower paperweight keeping it from snapping shut. I suspected it was the first time I'd ever actually seen a paperweight in action.

I sat at my desk and arranged my paper clips according to size, smallest to largest.

"If the victims aren't at home," said Zig, without any preamble like, *Good morning*, "then they're likely tied to the scenes of their murders." He put his finger on the big text—some kind of psychic handbook, then. I've hated any sort of academic study in the paranormal fields ever since Camp Hell. What I wanted to believe was that everyone's psychic experience was so subjective that it would be impossible to write about it. That made it all the more annoying that I agreed with what Zigler's stupid book said.

"I propose that we walk their daily routes and see what there is to see," said Zigler.

They probably weren't killed along their daily routes, just snatched. Or lured away. Or, heck, even teleported for all I knew. But it was the only place we had left to look that wasn't a long shot. I nodded and scooped my paperclips into a pile.

Zig stood and finally made eye contact with me. "Mind if I drive today?"

Cripes. The age old struggle of who was going to drive. Zig was supposed to drive; he was the rookie PsyCop. And yet, there was a whole guy-code that said I was the "wife" if I let him drive me around, even if I was the one calling the shots.

And yet, the more I insisted on getting behind the wheel, the closer I was to figuring something wrong and either swerving around a ghost and hitting a pedestrian, or taking a living, breathing person for a ghost and mowing them right down.

In the end, it wasn't worth using up all my driving credit on the job.

"Yeah, sure. Thanks."

* * * *

Ronald Adamson, a middle-aged bill collector, had disappeared the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, somewhere between home and work. He lived alone and kept to himself. His co-workers figured he'd taken some time off for the holiday, so his disappearance wasn't actually noted until late Tuesday night, when his ninety-five year old mother tried to call him from Akron and kept getting his answering machine.

Good thing they had a standing date to check in every Tuesday, or it could've been almost a week before anyone noticed Adamson was gone.

We drove to Adamson's house without speaking. It was a small, unremarkable bungalow that had been empty of ghosts, or any other sentient thing, when we'd checked it out on Saturday. We walked from Adamson's house to the El station, where we flashed our badges at the turnstile and

were clicked through by the attendant, who stared at us as if we might offer her some entertainment by arresting one of the people milling around on the platform.

"Spirit activity?" Zig asked.

I scanned the platforms and the tracks. "None."

It was Sunday, so the crowd wasn't exactly the same as it would've been on the weekday that Adamson had disappeared. We canvassed several people on the platform anyway, but even the two of them who said they recognized the victim from their daily rush-hour commute couldn't remember with any degree of certainty whether or not they'd noticed him on the morning he hadn't shown up for work.

The commuters didn't talk to each other, even the ones who were there together. Most of them kept their noses buried in novels or newspapers, or were zoning out to their MP3 players. A train clattered up and they filed in, taking their own little bubbles of personal space with them. The train was half full. Not bad for a Sunday morning. On a Tuesday during rush hour, it would've been stuffed to the gills. But could something have happened to Adamson without a single person seeing anything?

Sure. If they'd been that focused on their newspapers and their earbuds.

"Going in?" Zig asked, indicating the train car with his chin.

I looked at the mass of bodies in the car. Which ones were alive and which ones weren't? "I'll, uh, take a pass." The train had seemed a lot more interesting from street level. Now that I was up close, without an Auracel ready to pop, the claustrophobic cars seemed less than inviting.

A new stream of commuters filtered onto the platform while we scanned the area for anything that our cop instincts might flag as significant. We watched the crowd turn over three times. Nothing.

"What do you want to try next?" I asked Zig. I probably should have been all macho and opinionated and insisted that the next step we take be something of my choosing. In reality, I just wanted to find a talking corpse and get it over with.

"Lunch," Zig said firmly. "Then Adamson's workplace."

Sounded fine to me. I wandered back to Zig's Impala and tried for the umpteenth time to figure out what a middle-aged collection agent, a Mexican waitress, and a strapping, young DePaul student had in common. I came up with nothing.

Zig headed north, past a number of neighborhoods that Jacob was undoubtedly combing for un-haunted houses and condos even as we sniffed out a place to eat. "Going anywhere in particular?" I asked.

"Good spot near my old beat."

Seemed out of our way just for food. I could challenge him, tell him to stick close to the scene, but I guess I just didn't care enough to cause a fuss. If I was going to butt heads with Zigler, I wanted it to be over something that made a difference to me. It was bad enough working on a Sunday while Jacob had the day off. I didn't need to make things worse by starting a needless argument over something as trivial as lunch.

Zigler pulled up in front of a hot dog stand that was hardly more than a painted plywood shack. Hot dogs, onion rings,

fries, and bright bottles of condiments with happy faces on them adorned the front of the little stand in thick, amateurish brushstrokes. My mouth watered and my stomach rumbled. Little joints like that, they knew how to make a hot dog. It was definitely going to be worth the trip. Maybe Zigler wasn't so bad after all.

We each got a couple of hot dogs with the works, hold the jalapenos, and stood side by side, watching the sixteen year old kid assembling the dogs with robotic accuracy, hands flying unerringly over the bins of onions, relish, tomatoes, banana peppers, and pickle slices. He worked fast, incredibly fast, nudging a sliding pickle into place before it could leave the waxed paper wrap without missing a beat. I wondered how long he could've possibly been working there, given his age. Was hot dog assembly something they taught in school these days? Maybe it should be, given that hot dog construction can't be outsourced to a foreign country without considerable loss in product quality.

The kid wrapped each dog with three economical motions—side, side, middle—and slid them onto the counter. I shifted forward as I took out my wallet, since another customer had walked up while our order was being put together, and the guy behind me had started to crowd me.

I assumed it was a guy, anyway. Women didn't stand so close to strange men. Unless they were hookers.

The kid let the foam settle out of my fountain drink and then topped it off to the rim—a class act. The guy behind me crowded closer, and I glanced over my shoulder. Some people are just oblivious. Heck, I'm probably one of 'em, living most

of the time with my inner vision going strong and my normal five senses on cruise control. Still, he had no reason to get all up in my personal space. There was plenty of room on the sidewalk.

I aimed a perturbed look behind me, only ... there was no one there. I craned my neck and looked down. I'm taller than most people, after all. Nope. No one. I looked at the ground, which had a dusting of new snow blown over the old slush. Two sets of footprints: Zigler's and mine.

I turned back around to receive my paper-wrapped hot dogs and I felt it again, a sense of something moving in my peripheral vision.

"Sir?" said the kid with the fast condiment hands.

I handed him a crumpled five and took the hot dogs all in the same motion, like a guy doing an intricate hostage handoff. "Yeah, thanks." I looked to the side—no one. I checked the ground. No prints. The kid stared at me, bewildered, wondering why I didn't seem to want my change.

I looked around for a tip jar and didn't spot one. "Keep it," I said, waiving the fifty cents or so back at him. He brightened. People don't tip much at pressboard stands.

Zigler strolled past me with his hot dogs and coffee and ambled over to a molded plastic picnic table, the round seventies kind with the attached seats around it that looked like a couple of parentheses. I couldn't tell what atrocious seventies color the table was, being that it was buried under four inches of snow.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

Zig swept a space free on the bench. It was yellow. "I'm eating."

"Here?"

He knocked some snow off the table with his elbow, put down his coffee, sat on the yellow bench, and unwrapped the end of a hotdog. The snowy residue beneath his styrofoam cup turned into a melted puddle.

Was he nuts? "Can't we eat in the car?" I said.

He shook his head. "I never eat in the Impala."

I tried to visualize whether or not there were any fast food wrappers in Zigler's car, but I'd bombed the remote viewing portion of my tests, too. Good thing. Remote viewers either get snapped up by the military or they mysteriously disappear. I suspected the military wasn't very much like the *A Few Good (Hot) Men DVD* that Jacob and I had rented before our Wisconsin trip.

I walked up to the table and wedged my orange soda into the snow, but only because I didn't want to spill it. I had no plans to clear myself a place and sit down at a snow-covered table like a big freakin' idiot.

I stuck one hot dog into my pocket, figuring it would keep warm there, and unwrapped the other with as much annoyance as I could project by scowling as hard as possible and using jerky motions to pluck at the waxed paper. Also, sighing.

A pickle fell off and landed in the snow, which had drifted to four inches all around the plastic picnic table. The pickle was warm from the hot dog, so it sank fast, leaving a pickleshaped hole behind.

Damn it. Suddenly, I wanted that pickle more than I'd ever wanted a pickle in my life—but it was ruined. I bent over the hole in the snow, scowling down.

I hated Bob Zigler. And I wished to hell that I'd been assertive enough to drive.

"What're you looking at?" Zigler asked.

"Nothing," I snapped, while something else fell off my hot dog and plopped into the snow. Ketchup. I was leaking ketchup.

I struggled to wind the waxed paper around the bottom half the hot dog so that I'd get to eat at least a few condiments. After all, they were probably the only vegetables I'd get around to eating that day.

More ketchup spattered the ground. Damn. I thought I'd had it under control. I looked at the hot dog in my hand. There were a couple of diced onions fixing to pop out, but no ketchup. Unless....

It'd be just my luck to screw up another blazer by doing something as asinine as stashing a hot dog in the pocket. I patted my side, expecting my hand to come away wet and sticky. But other than a light dusting of snowflakes, my suit coat was dry.

I looked back at the ground and another spatter of ketchup hit. Only the trajectory was wrong for it to have come from my hot dog. Another red splatter, bigger now, like someone was just holding a bottle and squeezing.

I raised my head, confused, and that's when I caught a flash of him, the guy who'd been crowding me at the stand.

My height, Caucasian, mid-twenties. And half his head missing. His left, my right.

I flinched and tossed my hot dog from hand to hand a couple of times in an attempt to keep from dropping it into the bloody snow. The half-headed guy flickered out, like he'd been projected from an old film reel that'd hopped off its track. But the blood kept on dripping. Splat. Splat. Splat. It even made little holes in the snow, just like the pickle. Only I was guessing that no one saw it but me.

I looked at Zigler, sizing up his reaction. He watched me, chewing slowly.

"I'm not eating here," I said.

"Why not?"

Spectral blood pattered at my feet. I took a few steps back. The bloody snow followed me, like some weird optical illusion, while the pickle stayed in the same spot. Another flicker, and my eye found a flash of bone where it'd splintered at the cheekbone and eye socket. I saw brains—just for a fraction of a second—but that was enough. I don't know why I always look at the brains.

"Christ." I turned on my heel, but there he was in front of me again, the half-headed man. He flickered, more visible than not, and I did my best to focus on his remaining eye. It wasn't a bad eye. Blue, though not as pale blue as mine. It really needed the second eye to look its best, but that notion was going to make me contemplate the slick glob of gelatinous stuff on his shoulder—his left, my right—and I really, really didn't want to look there.

"What do you want?" I snapped. He didn't answer me. He just stood there and stared—not even at me, specifically—and bled. Drip. Drip. Drip.

I turned on my heel and stomped toward the Impala. My socks were wet from walking through snow banks. I'd left my orange soda on the snow-covered table, and I didn't give a damn. I pulled on the Impala's passenger door latch, and it slipped out of my freezing fingers with the unsatisfying thump of a locked car.

I was about a half second away from throwing a very uncoplike hissy fit. I'd cut my Thanksgiving plans, the first I'd had since I was fourteen, for this bullshit?

Zigler's cop shoes squeaked through the snow. I caught his reflection behind mine in the Impala's passenger door window. "Unlock the car," I said.

"Any particular reason you're so anxious to leave?"

"There's a guy bleeding all over the place, that's why. Now unlock the fucking...."

"What guy?"

"Just some guy! Even if you weren't an anti-psych, you still wouldn't be able to see him. He's dead." I yanked at the door handle, even though I knew the car was still locked, for the pleasure of making the metal snap against the door.

Zigler dangled the remote entry keychain beside my face, then yanked it away the second I focused on it. "What's he wearing?"

"You think this is a fucking game?"

Zigler's eyes went hard. "No. I don't."

I stared, and Zig stared back. "Christ. You're testing me?"

Zigler looked away.

"What, you knew him?"

"Maybe I do," Zigler said softly. "But I won't know for sure until you tell me what he's wearing."

Oh. Zigler's bizarre lunch excursion wasn't just a random test to see if I really was this big, bad psychic, but something personal. I took a deep breath and tried to pull myself together. Half-a-head Charlie could be Zig's son, for all I knew. He should have just asked. I would have looked. Christ. Why is dying so fucking complicated?

I turned around and looked behind us. Two sets of tracks, Zigler's and mine, led from the plastic table to the car. I could even see the hole left by the sunken pickle slice. But no blood.

I sighed. The minute someone asked me a question about a ghost, they almost always managed to ensure that I couldn't come through with the goods. No one ever went out of their way to make things convenient for me while they were alive. Why should death change anything?

I squinted, and waited for the flicker. If I was inside, I could look for cold spots. But Chicago at the end of November is nothing if not one giant cold spot. I walked back toward the pickle, placing my feet in my own footprints. They were far apart; I'd been walking fast. Angry.

I looked at the table. Orange soda. Coffee, steaming. Partially eaten hot dog.

No dead guy with half a head.

I rolled my eyes. There was a dead guy around somewhere, and he was making an ass out of me. "C'mon,

c'mon," I muttered, staring hard at the snow, willing some more blood to drip. Zigler hung back by the car, motionless, watching.

Another set of my tracks led back to the hot dog stand a dozen feet away. I followed those, coaxing the ghost to show himself just under my breath the whole way. Nothing.

I found myself back at the front of the stand, facing the plywood menu. The kid emerged from a clear plastic flap that separated a tiny part of the stand from the outside and served as a little windbreak. "Can I get you anything else?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I'm just, uh ... looking." Smooth. Really smooth.

"'Kay. Just holler if you need anything."

"Right."

The kid ducked into the back and left me there scrutinizing the number of toppings one could order on fries. Mayo. Vinegar. Chili. Cheese. I was more of an old-fashioned ketchup guy, myself. Not that ketchup was all that appealing to me anymore—at least, not until something worse came along and made me forget about the blood dripping into the snow.

Zigler had snuck up on me during my exchange with the kid; he stood along side me gazing at the menu. "He keeps flickering in and out," I admitted. "He's got blue eyes, sandy blond hair. But I didn't look at what he was wearing." Or did I? I thought back to the shiny trail of eye jelly I'd tried so hard to avoid looking at on his shoulder. "A plaid jacket ... no, hounds tooth. Black and gray."

There. That ought to be specific enough for Zigler. I looked over at him triumphantly ... only it wasn't Zigler standing beside me. It was Half-a-Head. He stood there, quite obviously concentrating, reading the menu.

Zig was still leaning against the Impala, arms crossed. "Hounds tooth jacket. Beige corduroy pants. Loafers." I took in what was left of his hair. There was something Duran Duran about the way it was cut. "I'd say nineteen eighty-five to eighty-eight."

Zigler froze. I guess the weather had finally gotten to him. He stared. The dead guy stared. I barely resisted the urge to flop down and make a snow angel just for the sake of being different.

Zig pried himself off the car and took a few faltering steps toward me. "Where?" he choked out. I guess he was having some big emotional moment. Maybe I could forgive him for dragging me to a spirit surprise party, given that he seemed to be twice as freaked out as I was.

"Right here." I pointed to the spot where the guy stared at the sign, comparing the double decker with cheese to the bacon ranch burger. "He's less flickery now. Something special about this spot?"

Zigler's eyes went red. He swallowed and blinked a few times. "That's it."

I sighed and stuffed my hands in my pockets. My hot dog was cold. "Who is he?"

"Graham Leonard. Twenty-nine years old. Killed by a truck in eighty seven."

Not his son. Good. I hate dealing with the relatives of the ghosts more than I hate the bleeding, wailing, moaning, intestine-dragging ghosts themselves. "What happened?"

Zigler cupped his hand over his eyes, squeezing his temples. "It was my fault. I was the one who couldn't just take down the license number of the drunk driver and catch up with him later when he wouldn't pull over. I had to pursue."

"A drunk ... truck driver?"

"No. But the car I was chasing ran the truck off the road. And Graham Leonard was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"He was reading the menu?"

"That's what the witnesses said."

"What happened to his, uh.... "I pointed toward the left side of my skull.

"The rear-view mirror on the passenger side struck him in the head."

Ouch.

Zig pulled a cloth handkerchief out of his pocket, ground it into his eyes, then blew. I stared at Graham, because it was easier to look at him than it was to see Zigler almost-crying.

"Look. Can you ... ah.... Can you ask him to forgive me?" Zigler said in a tiny, tiny voice.

Graham flickered a little, and kept on staring at the menu, frozen forever in that moment in time. Not the world's happiest ghost, but not persistently vindictive, either. "He says there's nothing to forgive."

Chapter Nine

Zigler did allow me to eat hot dogs in his car, after all. He even bought me new ones, since the first two I'd gotten were either frozen or squashed flat. I let him pay. I figured it was the least he could do after hijacking me to the near north suburbs to resolve a personal ghost issue while we were supposed to be turning up Lopez, Adamson, and Lynch.

Adamson's spirit wasn't lurking around his workplace, not that I could blame it. I hoped that I wouldn't end up hovering around the coffee pot at the Fifth Precinct for all eternity. Then again, maybe the problem had nothing to do with whether or not his job as a collection agent was emotionally or spiritually satisfying.

Maybe Ronald Adamson wasn't even dead.

Right.

And I was the poster boy for a Drug-Free America.

We headed back to the fifth to wrap up for the day about quarter after five.

Zigler and I both focused on our cell phones as we headed back toward our desks. He was saying something about dinner, and I'd hoped to figure out how many condo viewings I'd need to endure that night. Not that knowing the number ahead of time actually made any difference; I was just feeling masochistic.

Jacob was in the middle of telling me about a brownstone off Lawrence that had just been listed, when I stopped dead in my tracks. Zigler stopped behind me, too close for comfort, and backed off a step.

There was a white-haired granny parked in front of my desk on a candy apple red scooter. There were patriotic red, white, and blue plastic streamers dangling from the scooter's handlebars, and a "My Cat is Smarter than Your Honor Student" bumper sticker stuck crookedly on the fender. She looked me in the eye and glared.

"Jacob? I'll, uh ... call you back."

I glanced back at Betty's desk to try to get a hint as to what Granny Sunshine was doing in our office, but her computer monitor was dark and her blotter was neat and empty. Betty didn't work on Sundays.

So someone up front had let this old lady in, given her permission to drive up to my desk and just sit there for God knows how long. "Um ... Ma'am?"

"Are you the policemen looking for Ronnie?"

I looked to Zigler for help, but he just stood there and waited for me, as senior officer, to answer. "Well, we're, uh ... we're working on the case ... I assume you mean Ronald—uh, Ron—Adamson. Sergeant Warwick is actually in charge of the investigation...."

"Have you found anything?"

"I take it you're his...?"

"Ronnie's mother. Myra Adamson."

I maneuvered around her scooter and pulled out my chair. The paperclips on top of my desk were exactly as I had left them, in a tiny, neat mound.

"Mrs. Adamson. Right. Yes. I'm Detective Bayne and this is Detective Zigler."

Zigler flipped open his notebook, pen poised over the blank sheet. "The last time you spoke to your son," he said, "did you notice anything peculiar?"

I was thankful that Zigler was willing to interview everyone. In fact, I would've been more comfortable if he could just call all the shots and drag me along like a really expensive and high-maintenance piece of forensics equipment. When everything was said and done, wasn't that all I really was?

"There's an unmarried woman living downstairs from Ronnie. You have to keep your eye on them, you know. Women that age. I think maybe she's after his money..."

Zigler was more qualified to run the show than I was. He'd graduated third in his class at Northwestern with a BS in criminal justice. Then he did post-graduate work in political science. Me? I had a GED. I never even went to college. The force actually considered my two year stint at Camp Hell to be the equivalent of an undergraduate degree. Boy. Some college.

"...he has to cross the street at California and Montrose to get to the train station, and people come around that corner so fast! It's like they don't even look. And they drink their coffee while they're driving and talk on their cell phones. Everyone with their cell phones. I think one of those people ran him over on his way to work and didn't even notice...."

Maybe the problem with someone else being in charge was that they didn't necessarily have my best interests in mind. Zigler probably wanted to solve crimes. He'd want to succeed. I suppose that was what I wanted, too. Probably. Okay,

maybe I wasn't the world's most vigilant crime fighter. But murderers really were at the top of my shit list.

"...and he's allergic to shellfish, papayas, peanuts, wheat gluten, dust mites, and bee stings. You don't suppose Ronnie got stung by a bee, detective, do you?"

"I believe that bee activity is fairly unusual after the first hard frost," Zigler answered, deadpan.

"Oh. I see. Well, Ronnie had this pair of shoes that he had to take back to the cobbler. Fallen arches, you know. And the last repair he had done made one leg longer than the other, so that..."

I was pretty darn sure that Jacob wanted what was best for me. I well and truly didn't care what kind of house he picked out, as long as it wasn't already inhabited. And sex? It was starting to look like I got off handing over the reins in that department, too. But I still needed to make certain choices myself. I think I'd get resentful, otherwise—start lumping Jacob in with all the people who'd run my life from the shitty foster parents up through the psychos at Camp Hell.

"Did you have any questions, Detective Bayne?" asked Zigler. He stared at me hard. He must've been dying to get home before his Tater Tots got cold.

I gave Mrs. Adamson the once-over, but there weren't any prophetical spirit heads protruding from the slight hump on her back. "I think that'll be all," I said. "We'll be in touch, ma'am."

"Find Ronnie," she said. "You have to find him. He could be sick, hurt..."

I did my best to look reassuring. I nodded. "As soon as we find anything, we'll be in touch."

* * * *

It was nearly eight by the time I dragged myself up three flights of stairs to my apartment. The next place would either need to be on the first floor or have an elevator for sure. I'd have to tell Jacob. There had to be some place in a city of three million that was both easily accessible and not haunted. Right?

I opened my door and hung my blazer on its peg. A candle burned in my kitchen, which made it look nothing at all like my actual kitchen. You couldn't tell that everything was white, and as cheap as it was humanly possible to manufacture. But there were also shifting shadows everywhere. Not good. I flicked on the overhead. It may have totally ruined the ambience, but ambience was something I'd learned to live without.

Jacob came into the kitchen, squinting a little at its brightness. "Are pork chops okay? They might be a little dry."

"I don't care—I'm two hours later than I meant to be. Just don't put any ketchup on them."

Jacob took a foil-covered plate out of the oven. "Ketchup doesn't go very well with rosemary and fennel."

I wasn't quite sure what fennel was, but it sounded fancy.

"Sorry," Jacob said, sliding the plate onto the counter in front of me. "I already ate without you. I wasn't sure how late you'd be."

"Neither was I." I took a bite of pork chop. It might've been a little tough after sitting for two hours, but so what? It was tastier by leaps and bounds than anything I'd be able to produce.

Jacob sat on the stool beside mine and propped his elbow on the countertop, resting his cheek against his knuckles. He could've been modeling for a cologne ad—if the lighting were less severe. "I take it by the look on your face that you haven't found anything," he said.

"Nothing."

"It's pretty ballsy of the two of you to zero in on Adamson and Lopez when Andy Lynch was the last one seen."

At first I thought Jacob was criticizing our approach, but judging by the curve at the corner of his mouth, he was proud of us for not caving in and focusing all our efforts on the guy with connections.

"I think if we find one, we find 'em all. Besides, the NP detectives are all over Lynch's route." I plowed through everything on my plate, figuring the onion-looking thing that tasted weirdly sweet for the fennel, and waited for Jacob to tell me about the real estate he'd seen.

Only he didn't. He kept me company while I ate, got me a refill on my soda, and told me he was going to go and read.

No condos. No duplexes. No brownstones. No bungalows. Huh.

I took a shower, then walked through the apartment and turned on the two lights that were still off—a crooked torcheire behind the futon sofa and a reading lamp next to the laptop that I never open.

I found Jacob propped up in bed with all the pillows, reading a manual that looked like a cousin to that monster text that Zigler'd been reading at work. "What," I asked, "did someone reissue all that inconclusive bullshit they pass for psych research nowadays? The publisher must've wanted a new yacht."

Jacob smirked over the edge of the book. "It's the new PsyCop procedures that NYPD's going to put into place the first of the year. Chicago probably won't be too far behind."

I made a snoring sound.

Jacob shrugged. "You're not the only PsyCop in the room anymore, mister."

Sure. Only the most neurotic one. I stripped down to my boxers and crawled over Jacob with the intention of just resting my eyes for a couple of minutes. I faced the wall with my back toward Jacob and my head pillowed on my bent arm, and that was it for me.

I woke up confused. The bedroom lights were off, but there was enough light to see by from the living room spillover. Jacob was curled against my back and I was using his arm as a pillow. We were warm, almost too warm, but not quite yet, and his chest hair tickled my back when I shifted.

Then a noise from the kitchen: my cell phone ringing and clattering around on the countertop from its vibrating.

Had I overslept? I looked at the clock—two in the morning. At least, I assumed it was morning. I needed a digital alarm clock with a gigantic am/pm that was impossible to miss.

Jacob peeled himself off my back and re-established his domain over all the pillows. "You want me to get that?" he said.

"No. It's Warwick." I rolled over Jacob clumsily. He was smirking. I take it he recognized the ring and hadn't actually been offering for the sake of being helpful. I'd need to watch out for that sense of humor of his.

The call had gone to voice mail by the time I stumbled to the kitchen. It was silent for a moment, then started ringing and dancing around again. I got it in one ring, that time. "Bayne."

"The NPs turned up Andy Lynch's wallet in a Dumpster three blocks from the park. Money and credit cards gone, everything else intact."

Andy Lynch had been robbed? And then what? A whole bunch of crime scene techs were probably very, very happy that it was below freezing out as they combed through Dumpsters for body parts. Those things smelled bad enough even when they were frozen solid. "You need me to take a look?"

"Come down to the station, grab Zig, and get over to that Dumpster. It's the best lead we've had so far."

I took a quick shower, blow-dried my hair for two minutes on full power, and stepped into my shoes. Jacob met me by the door with my winter coat, a plain black wool number that I'd bought on impulse one day when I was freezing my ass off outside a Big & Tall shop. It had always fit me exceptionally well. It looked a lot better than I remembered it, what with all the lint brushed off and the buttons sewn on. "No rest for the

wicked," Jacob said. He pressed himself against me and took my chin in his fingers, steering my mouth against his for a long, slow goodbye kiss. His lips lingered over mine, mostly chaste, except for a hint of tongue that grazed my lower lip, leaving me wanting more. He pressed a travel mug of coffee into my hands and unlocked the deadbolt. No mention of real estate. None whatsoever.

My previous boyfriends would've been baffled by the latenight summons to the station, had we ever been in the habit of sleeping in the same bed. Jacob was a PsyCop too; he understood the stress of the job. Maybe he really didn't mind scoping out all the properties by himself. Probably.

Chapter Ten

I made it to the station first, about two forty-five. Zigler showed up a few minutes later—looking puffy, but otherwise unremarkable—as Warwick walked me through a map of the alleyways where the wallet had been discovered. Zigler and I went back to our desks, though I obviously didn't need anything from mine, and I watched him while he flipped through his files, making sure he had everything.

Zigler wasn't such a bad guy, was he? He'd dragged me out to the hot dog stand without telling me why, but given how broken up he was about the whole thing, maybe I could cut him some slack. And he never mentioned me being queer. I was fine with that. I told him my big, scary secret, he voiced absolutely zero opinion, and we moved on.

"I need you to drive," I said. "The ghosts are thicker in the middle of the night."

Zigler's eyes widened briefly, then he nodded. I guess he didn't know if he could talk to me about the things I saw any more than he could about my living arrangement with the hottest Stiff in Chicago.

"If you could do more of the talking with the witnesses," I said to his back as we headed downstairs. "That would be good. You could introduce us and all. I think you're better. With people. You know?"

He paused at the front doors and turned to look at me. He was slowly getting less puffy, but I'd hardly call him bright eyed and bushy tailed. "All right."

Zigler was probably a better cop, too. I didn't think I'd need to lay that on the table. That was the sort of thing that would prove itself over time.

We were both pretty groggy as we headed over to the scene, but I figured I should get some business out of the way. "There's gonna be other cops there. Techs, photographers, uniforms. You've gotta run interference for me, keep some distance between me and them the way you did with Lopez's brother. And if they start acting funny ... they're not usually too keen on the PsyCop unit barging in on their scene."

"Understood."

I thought about the silence that usually settled over a crime scene the second I showed up, all the regular, subdued banter that happened between co-workers draining away, replaced with only the bare minimum of information. Did that happen when Jacob and Carolyn showed up to announce to the world that, yes, their suspect was definitely lying?

I doubted it. I think Carolyn's co-workers may have silently hoped that she'd never ask them a point-blank question, even at a cocktail party, but they were probably pretty damn happy to see her when she walked in the door. Her presence on the job meant they'd be going home to their families that much sooner.

"It's, ah ... it's more that I'm a medium—instead of a precog or empath—than just the whole ... y'know. PsyCop thing."

Zigler glanced at me, then put his eyes back on the road. "I heard."

He seemed prepared. No sense in me beating it into the ground. He'd get to witness it first-hand in a few minutes, anyway. We parked and picked our way down the icy alley in our protective plastic shoe covers and gloves. I couldn't imagine a worse crime scene than a snow covered alleyway after dark. I'm sure one existed somewhere. I just couldn't imagine it.

"How fast should we walk?" Zigler asked.

"Pretty much regular." I tested the snow with my plasticwrapped foot. "Uh, slow enough to stay upright."

The perimeter seemed wide, barricades manned by uniformed officers—big, burly ones, many of them with mustaches like Zigler's—enough of them to do some serious crowd control. I saw a guy with a camera having a heated discussion with an officer in a cruiser, and I figured all the security was there to keep the press out of our way.

"Jesus," Zigler muttered. I guess he thought the cops were laying it on a little thick, too.

Spotlights shone on the alley from one end to the other, focused mainly on the Dumpster, while Non-Psychics walked a grid with baggies and tweezers and crime scene techs snapped photos like crazy.

"Cripes, that guy," I said, avoiding the eyes of an NP detective whom I'd overheard referring to PsyCops as "overpaid circus side shows" at a party once. As soon as he saw it was me, he also found something very interesting to focus on in the opposite direction.

A couple of techs muttered, "Spook squad," just loud enough for me to hear, probably on purpose. Techs took particular issue with my "nonscientific" approach.

Some NPs called Zig's name and motioned him over, but he just waved, nodded, and stuck to me like glue. "Anything?" he asked me.

The wind was howling through the alley and the groups of people who couldn't be bothered to actively snub me were all talking. Cameras clicked and plastic rustled. There was too much activity for me to spot anything for sure without really staring at people and getting a bunch of nasty looks in return. I probably had enough clout to get the whole alley cleared so I could scan it, but the thought of all the attitude I'd get in return made my coffee turn to acid in my stomach. I focused on the Dumpster. Everyone in, on, or around it looked like they had a pulse.

I entertained some sentimental longing for the GhosTV, though by now in my mind's eye it had morphed down to the size of a Dick Tracy wristwatch communicator that worked flawlessly on two AA batteries.

I could stand next to that Dumpster and crank up the juice on my GhosTV, and anything paranormal would shine like a big, dead beacon. I watched the personnel milling around, tagging, photographing, and collecting. Maybe there wasn't anything, or anyone, to be seen. Maybe there was just a wallet in the Dumpster, and that was all.

"Pretty."

I glanced to the side, moving only my eyes. No one was there, except for Zigler, who was a few steps away, scribbling

in his note pad. The voice hadn't been his. I'd peg it for a kid, probably a girl. It sounded like she was talking through a paper towel roll. Given that there were no kids around playing "megaphone," I figured it was safe to say I'd found myself a dead one.

"What's pretty?" I said. I really wished I knew ventriloquism. I'd be able to talk to dead people a little longer without anyone else noticing and acting like an ass.

"In your pocket. Pretty necklaces."

I patted my coat pockets. Nothing. But inside, tucked into my blazer, the silver pendulums were a solid weight against my hip. "They're uh..." I didn't know if I could explain what a pendulum was supposed to do to a child. Was she Clayton's age when she died? Older? Younger? And what if she'd died before psychics were certified? She wouldn't even know any of the psychic talents were real—despite the irony that I was the only one around in the teeming throng of investigators who could hear her. "What's your name?"

"Tiffany. Lemme see the necklace."

Zigler noted me talking to myself and casually wandered between me and the thick of the crowd. He'd also put himself in earshot.

"I can't," I said, wondering what a dead kid wanted with a pendulum. "All these other people will see."

"So?"

I filed the word "so" into a repertoire of snappy comebacks that I hoped would one day ease my social anxiety. "So that's it," I said. "Do you live here?"

"I dunno."

I sighed. "Are you here a lot?"

"I guess."

"Do you know why we're all here?"

"They're here to get the man's money back for him. He was rich."

I got Andy Lynch's file from Zigler, then dug inside my coat and pulled a pendulum out. I turned my back to the biggest group of techs, hoping they'd be too disdainful to gather around me and stare. Zigler kept glancing over his shoulder, doing his best to look casual, but I could tell he was dying to get a better look at what I was doing. "Think about the man," I said, flipping the file open to Lynch's photo. "Is this him?"

"It's so pretty. I wish I could touch it."

"You can have this necklace, but I can't give it to you until I figure out what happened to this guy."

"Really? How about gold? Could you get me a gold necklace?"

"Sure," I said, wishing Tiffany could let go of the whole necklace thing and I.D. the photo one way or the other. The dead are persistent like that. "Gold, silver, the works. But first you've gotta tell me if this was the rich guy or not."

"Not silver. I used to like silver. But not anymore."

"Okay, sure. Gold."

"You promise? It can't be silver."

"Yeah, I promise. Cross my heart."

Tiffany was quiet for a minute, while Zigler threw no less than three glances over his shoulder. "Yeah. That's him. But his hair was shorter."

Bingo.

"All right, good. Can you tell me how his wallet got in the Dumpster?"

"Mom says I should never tell on people. She says they always find out, and they'll do bad things to you later if you tell. This one time? She told on her boyfriend for hitting her, and he hit her so hard that she couldn't hear in one of her ears no more."

Oh, great. The only witness to Andy Lynch's disappearance was an underage jewelry fiend with blinders on. Though I could hardly argue with the motive of not wanting to be found out.

"Here's the thing," I said. "I just want to find this guy.
That's all." It occurred to me that Tiffany might or might not know she was dead, so I'd have to tread lightly. "Is he, uh ... around?"

"No. He left in the white van."

"Was he hurt when he left?"

"Yeah. He was bleeding. But a man and a lady came to help him."

"Was it ... an ambulance?"

"Nuh-uh. Just a van. The back doors were crunched in and they didn't close right, and the other man had to tie them shut with a rope after he put the hurt man inside."

Tiffany didn't seem capable of telling me a license plate number or even the model or age of the van when I questioned her about it, but that was all right. I'd rather search for a white van with screwed up doors than the same

damn silver sedan that everyone seemed to own these days. "Okay. Good. So ... why was this guy bleeding?"

"When the guy stabbed him..." Tiffany went abruptly quiet.
"Who stabbed him?" I whispered. "The guy with the van?"

Tiffany wasn't saying. I tried to determine whether she was still with me or not, but with all the activity and the hot and cold patches from the steaming spotlights and the bonechilling wind, it was too hard to tell without a visual on her.

I reoriented myself to the physical world—the alleyway, the slush under my feet, the sting of the wind on my cheek. Zigler was talking in low tones to a couple of the techs, and none of them looked happy. Whatever. I didn't become a PsyCop to win any popularity contests. If Zigler expected to make a bunch of new friends at this job, then he was in for a rough ride.

"Zig," I said, touching him on the sleeve. The techs shot me a look of pure venom, and Zigler's cheeks flushed. "We need to go talk to Warwick."

I half-slid, half-squeaked back to the car in my plastic shoe covers, relieved to finally be able to slip out of them once I got there and had something to lean against. I assume I was allowed to lean on the Impala, anyway. Zigler didn't tell me that I couldn't.

He beeped the locks open and we climbed in. "You know those two?" he asked, once the shut doors sealed us into a little bubble of privacy.

"Who, the techs? Uh, not by name. I guess I recognize 'em." Maybe I could piece together a specific time where I'd met one of them. A scene, a social function. And maybe I

could remember the exact point at which we mutually decided that it was better off if we didn't even pretend to be civil, that it simply cost too much energy. But I was too busy trying to sum up the things that Tiffany had told me, scribbling down everything I could remember by the passenger light on the rear-view mirror while my hand cramped from the cold.

Warwick was pretty tickled to get the lead on the white van with the doors tied shut. Not that he actually smiled or anything. He was one of those pale blonds that got ruddy when they were angry, and his coloration seemed pretty even as he repositioned a bunch of pushpins on the map and barked out orders to some other teams on the speakerphone while we waited. The location of Lynch's wallet marking his last known location tightened up the red pins on the map considerably. "I've got NPs out looking for the van. I want Bayne to walk this neighborhood, see if any more ghosts saw anything."

I knuckled my eyes. By the time Warwick was done, it was closing in on six in the morning and rush hour was almost upon us. Maybe a living person had seen something, too. Not that they'd feel compelled to tell me much about it.

Zigler parked at the northwest corner of our route and we got to work. I was grateful for my winter coat and all its shiny new buttons. It was well below freezing, and windy, with tiny snow pellets stinging my face.

"You know that the Supreme Court voted six to three in favor of accepting testimony from the deceased if the medium is certified level four or higher," Zigler said.

Goody. Someone else would probably try and kidnap me for fear that I'd testify on behalf of their dead witnesses. "I have a no-courtroom clause in my contract."

"It might not seem like it, especially with whatever it is you've got to look at day in and day out, but what you've got is a gift."

"I guess," I said, tuning him out. The conversation seemed like it was starting to go moral, and I figured I could avoid an argument if I just kept on agreeing with him. I stopped to listen to voices, but it was only yelling, a corporeal argument drifting out of a duplex doorway about a set of lost keys and the inevitability of someone being late for work.

"No visuals?" asked Zigler.

We were combing a residential side street jammed with parked cars. There was a convenience store at one end and a bus stop on the other, where it intersected Wilson, a main drag. "No ... not that I usually get 'em on streets like this." I thought of the condo I'd almost fallen in love with, the one with the broken record player of a ghost in the bedroom. "They're usually indoors on the side streets."

We trudged along for a few more minutes, looking and listening. Zigler must've noticed that I was focusing on something, and thankfully he shut up, maybe for fear of messing with my dubious "gift." We went single-file around a hunk of sidewalk pushed up by a tree root, and I stared at the back of Zigler's thick-necked head as he lurched around it. Somewhere between Saturday and Monday, my dread had disappeared. Zigler wasn't such a bad guy. Not pleasant, by

any stretch of the imagination, but smart enough to keep us from getting killed. I could work with him.

"Uh, Zig ... you're pretty well-read on the latest psych research, aren't you?"

He watched me as I picked my way around the scrambled sidewalk and caught up with him. "I try to keep up."

"A ghost said something to me about silver. Couldn't touch it. You know anything about that?"

"Well, there's the planetary associations, the vibrational properties, the high magic associations." His eyebrows scrunched together. "Are you testing me?"

"Huh?" I stared at him stupidly. "Oh, cripes, no. I'm serious. I was hoping you could tell me. I never read any of that shit."

"That's what you trained in, isn't it? At Heliotrope Station?"

"Yeah, uh..." Sweat prickled at the back of my neck even though it was cold enough out to freeze on contact. I scratched at it, ruffling my hair at the nape. "Not exactly. That was back before they knew much about ... anything."

Zigler's face relaxed. "Right." He chuckled, a little forced. "Silver, well, it can be potent stuff, depending on the purity. The folktale about the silver bullet killing the werewolf originated in some sort of fact."

Werewolves, shmerewolves. I found myself swallowing convulsively at the mere thought of Camp Hell. Maybe I needed therapy. Scratch that. Obviously, I needed therapy. But I was still holding a grudge against the German psychiatrist with the thick accent and even thicker nostril hair who'd initiated my transfer from the psych ward to Camp

Hell. Maybe looking him up and toilet papering his house would be therapeutic enough.

"The use of silver as protection against evil spirits is found in more than a few old religions. Driving silver nails into a threshold, for instance, is supposed to keep evil at bay."

Hm. I wondered which massive, mostly-wrong textbook he'd gleaned that from. Maybe the silver wasn't keeping evil at bay so much as repulsing the spirits. Right effect, wrong cause. A mental image of the stack of textbooks in the corner of my room at Camp Hell popped into my head. Sometimes I'd leave them in the doorway to trip up the Neanderthal orderlies with their hypodermics full of noxious psyactives, but after the first couple of spills, they got wise to it and just stepped around them.

We came to the end of the block, and even though it wasn't yet daylight, the convenience store was doing brisk business in Chicago Tribunes, high octane coffee, and pink frosted donuts. "I'm gonna grab a coffee," Zigler said. He wasn't puffy from sleep anymore, but he didn't look like he enjoyed being called to work at 2 a.m. any more than I did. "That okay?"

Sweat prickled at my armpits and I fought the urge to shiver. Fucking Camp Hell. "Yeah, sure. I'll wait outside."

Zig's brow furrowed. A normal guy would've welcomed the opportunity to defrost the tips of his ears. I hoped I wouldn't have to explain that I was waiting to see if I was going to hurl. "You want one?" he asked

"A water would be great." I dug in my pocket for a dollar to give him, but he made a "forget about it" motion and went inside.

I shuffled over to the side of the store in case I actually did puke. The gap between the building and the eight-foot security fence smelled like urine, despite the cold and the snow. I couldn't imagine how badly it stank in the summertime.

A Valium or a Seconal would've been nice. Or maybe the chakra stones that were supposed to help me get into "alignment," if only I had enough focus, enough belief, to make them work. They just seemed like a bunch of mumbojumbo to me, and though I found one or two of them in the courtyard a couple of weeks after I'd chucked them out the window, I never did recover the full set. The ones I'd rescued just sat on a windowsill, gathering dust.

"Rock?"

I jumped and my head snapped around. A ratty guy in a navy peacoat and a knit hat had snuck up the alley while I was busy beating myself up about Camp Hell. At first I wondered if he'd read my mind. But then I realized that most lowlifes aren't thinking about semiprecious gemstones when they say the word "rock."

"Don't need it," I said, wishing he'd go away and doing my best not to ask if he could get me some reds. Because he probably couldn't. Coke, heroin, weed, maybe even ecstasy. But if I wanted to score Seconal that easily, I'd need to time travel back to the seventies when people actually took it for fun.

"You a cop?" said a voice to the other side of me. I looked, and no one was there. Great. A drug dealer and a ghost. Just what I needed.

"Got a bone, got a boulder."

Persistent fucker. I wasn't up on the most current crackspeak, but I was guessing he was trying to unload his bigger quantities, given that all my buttons were sewn on and I'd washed my hair sometime in the last twenty-four hours. "Get outta here," I said. "I don't need it."

"C'mon, man, I see you jonesin' for a hit. How 'bout a dime."

"What kinda cop just stands there and lets this shit happen?" asked the disembodied voice. Sounded like a white male, twenties or thirties. There was a whiny quality to it, a voice I'd match up with a weasely sort of guy who stepped in front of cars and then sued the drivers. "Are you on the take? Or are you just a lazy piece of shit?"

"Nine dollar," said the guy in the knit hat. I guess he was running a blue light special on his dimes.

Zigler walked out to the center of the parking lot, his gallon-sized coffee leaving a vapor trail behind him. He frowned and scanned the sidewalk.

I gave him a quick whistle between my teeth. He turned, and the dealer muttered, "Oh, shit." I might not have looked a whole lot like a cop, but Zig couldn't have been anything other than a police officer or a football coach. The dealer's steps, loud, crunching through ice, receded quickly as he sprinted back the way he'd come.

"What're you doing?" Zigler asked. He came over and handed me an ice cold water, which I took with numb fingers.

"You let him get away," whined the voice. "Why didn't you do something?"

I cracked the seal on the water and drank deeply. I felt chilled through and through, but my shirt was stuck to my back with sweat. "There's a chatty one over here," I told Zigler.

He looked impressed. Or spooked. I didn't know him well enough to differentiate one from the other. "Did ... it ... see the van?"

"I dunno." I turned my head in the general direction of the whiny voice. "Have you seen a white van with damaged rear doors held together by rope?"

The voice snorted. "Why're you going after the buyers? It's the dealers you need to hit. I swear, the corruption in this city ... you got some kind of quota you need to fill?"

"Are you saying you have seen the van?"

"What if I did? You going to do anything about it?"

"I take it you've got an axe to grind."

"Well, I ... No, of course not. It's the principle of the thing. It makes no sense for you to punish the buyers, man. They're not the source of the problem."

Principle, my ass. He'd bought a bad batch of dope from this dealer and dropped dead, and now he wanted to get even. Still, there'd be no harm in tipping the station off to Mister Blue Light Special. "Okay. If the van checks out, I'll send someone from narcotics over for this jerk. Scout's honor."

There was a long silence. Zig's coffee steamed, and the automatic doors around the corner creaked open and whisked shut. Engines started as more cars pulled away with fresh coffee warming the cup holders.

I thought maybe the ghost had left, unwilling to barter. Or maybe he wasn't as lucid as I'd thought, unable to hold a conversation outside his usual parameters. But then he caved in. "The dude with the van comes Mondays and Thursdays after dark," the voice told me. "He's an older guy with glasses. I don't think he's scoring for himself. He looks clean."

I took another long pull at my water. My eagerness for cracking the case pushed memories of Camp Hell to the back of my mind. I still felt clammy, but at least the spinny-throw-up sensation was gone. "You ready to sink your teeth into a white van?" I asked Zigler.

Chapter Eleven

Zigler and I sat across from the convenience store in the Impala. Our hands were busy with deli sandwiches made from every possible form of meat that could be processed from a pig, washed down with coffee. Not the best culinary match, but we had to keep ourselves wired so we could stay awake as long as we needed to. A couple of cruisers waited nearby, one hidden in an alley, another shielded by the world's largest pickup truck. The murmur of the uniformed officers periodically checking in over the radio provided some background noise. Sundown was close. We ate, and we watched.

"Getting the paperwork together for this case is a dream," Zigler said.

I raised my eyebrows at him while I slurped my coffee. Still a little too hot, but impossible not to drink it.

"Your word's good enough for any judge. You're like a walking search warrant."

I shrugged. It was kind of embarrassing. "More like a drug-sniffing K-9 unit—white van," I blurted out, sinking down in my seat and doing my best to look forgettable.

The van pulled into the parking lot, leaving its back doors facing us. There was a crust of gray salt thick enough to write "wash me" in it, but nothing that suggested there was a problem with the latch. No rope. The driver, a black man in navy blue coveralls, went into the store. We watched him buy a pack of smokes and a lottery ticket, get back into his van, and drive away.

A white SUV pulled in, and though it was an outside chance that it would turn out to be our target, we watched it closely anyway. The driver, a young Caucasian woman in a skirt, did not pull to the side of the building to score crack.

"So you had no visual on this witness, right?"

It seemed bizarre to be calling the whiny ghost with the chip on his shoulder a witness. He was a witness, technically—or maybe an informant. I guess I just didn't really think of him as a real person. Oh, he was "real," all right. Undoubtedly, I could coax some verifiable fact from him that would corroborate his existence. Maybe I just didn't think of him as a person.

"Only his dulcet voice," I said around a mouthful of cold cuts.

"How can you tell, when it's just a voice? At first, I mean. That it's not coming from somewhere ... mundane."

"I can't. That's why everything takes forever to sink in. I've got to figure out where it's coming from."

"What about visuals?"

"White van," I snapped, and we both hid behind our gigantic sandwiches.

I held my breath as the van slowed nearly to a stop before pulling into the lot. It lurched on worn-out struts as it made its way over the hump of the driveway, then crept up to the convenience store, then past it. Toward the alley.

A bungee cord held the rear doors shut.

"Don't just sit there," cried a familiar whiny voice from the back seat of the Impala, "do something!"

I scrunched my eyes shut and debated telling Zig about the "witness." Would it freak him out, knowing we weren't alone in the car? Or was he like Jacob, a psych devotee ... though hopefully without the major hard-on Jacob got from all things paranormal.

"Let's go," I told Zigler, ignoring the ghost. I picked up the radio and gave the other guys a heads up. "This is it," I said, and one of the cruisers nosed out of the alley.

"Oh my God," said the whiner. "It's just like Law and Order."

"Shut up," I snapped. I needed to focus on the van; I couldn't afford to be distracted by some dead jerkoff's commentary.

"This is so cool."

"You've got visual, or just auditory?" Zigler asked as he eased into the parking lot. One of the cruisers pulled up behind us, blocking the driveway.

"It's the guy from the alley," I told Zig. "Still can't see 'im." I glanced toward the back seat, but it just looked empty. I wished I could see him, at least an outline, a glimmer. That way I could do my one and only mental trick: a balloon of white light to contain him. It wasn't exactly foolproof, but sometimes it really did work. Unfortunately, it only worked if I had a visual—probably due to my limited imagination—and since I couldn't see the ghost, I couldn't conjure up any kind of barrier between the two of us.

We pulled up behind the van. I figured I'd have to just threaten the whiner and hope it was enough. "I mean it,

fuckhead. You wanna screw it all up 'cos you couldn't keep your mouth shut?"

"No," he said, sullen and quiet.

"Then stay put and shut up."

Zigler shifted the car into park, close enough to the van to block it, but far enough away so that it wouldn't seem obvious, not right off the bat, anyway. We got out of the car. My feet slipped against the frozen slush of the lot.

A uniformed officer rounded the opposite end of the lot, crouching behind a parked SUV. A long, brash honk made me glance toward the street. Someone really wanted their hundred and twenty ounce fountain drink, and they wanted it badly enough to piss off the cop who was deliberately blocking the lot.

"Stupid fuck," said the whiner. "It's a cop. Go around."

"I told you to stay put," I hissed, though I wasn't particularly surprised that he hadn't listened.

Zigler circled around the far end of the white van while I hung back so we'd both emerge at once. "He's there," said the whiner, so close to my ear he could've been riding on my shoulder. "Hurry."

I whipped my head around and glared in the direction of the voice, but I couldn't see anything ghostly. I tried squinting harder, but it didn't help. "Get back!" I whispered.

"But he's...."

I think it was the only time in my life that a psyactive, a drug that would actually amplify psychic powers, sounded good. If I ever saw this guy, he was gonna get the biggest, nastiest white balloon my poor, abused brain could cook up.

"Hands where I can see 'em! Get down on the ground!"
Zigler's voice. Shit. He already had a visual on the actual suspect. I hustled my way toward the side of the building and my heel skidded out from under me on a flat patch of ice. I hit the van shoulder first, smearing the entire sleeve of my freshly cleaned winter coat with road salt.

A guy rounded the corner of the van just as I hit it. Caucasian, mid sixties, with a crazy shock of white hair and big round glasses that made him look like a cliché from an eighties' music video. Absent minded professor character, maybe.

"Stop," I barked at him in my most badass cop voice, "now!"

I made a grab for him, but he weaseled his way past me, agile with the adrenaline rush he was on from the possibility of getting caught.

"He's getting awaaaay.... "said the Whiner.

"Then follow him," I snapped, my feet scrabbling around on the ice as I struggled to pursue him.

"Really? Me? Don't you have to deputize me or something?"

"Go," I said, taking off toward the fleeing Professor. He was fast, way faster than me, and he never slid. A couple of uniformed officers sprinted after him: Brett Warjovsky, a young guy in his twenties who looked like he was in pretty good shape, and Mila Franco, a petite woman who'd probably fall behind because of her shorter legs. Franco split off and went up an alley while Warjovsky stuck to the suspect. I did

my best to keep Warjovsky in my line of sight. The Professor had already effectively lost me.

Zigler's heavy cop shoes crunched through the ice-crusted snow beside me. He was breathing hard, and he was proving to be no better of a runner than I was. I shouldn't have been happy about that, but come on. Misery loves company. It was fine by me if was the beat cops who took the Professor down.

We rounded a corner onto a side street and found Warjovsky scanning the sidewalk for footprints. It was too dark to tell the fresh tracks from the ones that were hours old. "I lost him," he said, disgusted.

"He went into that house," said the whiner, his voice triumphant. "The one with the lights on."

"Mila," I called out. I caught a glimpse of her in the back alley and pointed at the house. She nodded and covered the exit.

Zigler, Warjovsky, and I thundered up the steps. Zigler fell to the back, and Warjovsky easily outpaced me, leaving me in the middle. "Police," Warjovsky barked, pounding on the front door. "Open up."

I fully expected Warjovsky to have to kick the door in, but a large Greek woman with mascara running down her face yanked the front door open. "A man," she wailed, "there's a man!" The Professor didn't live there, probably didn't even know her, and had managed to scare the crap out of her.

She opened the front door wide and we all thundered in.

"Stop where you are and put your hands behind your head," Warjovsky yelled, but the Professor had gotten this

far; he wasn't going to stop now. He plowed into the back hall.

We poured into the hall, through the door, and out into the alley. Officer Franco was there, gun drawn, eyes fixed on the back door. No Professor. "Shit," Warjovsky said. I had to suppress a smile. He was so darn sincere. I don't think I'd ever been that sincere, not even at twenty-five, or however old he was.

"The basement," said the whiner. He sounded breathless, probably from excitement, since he didn't actually have to run anywhere, being a ghost.

"Downstairs," I said, slipping back inside. We pounded down the steps, ready to corner the guy. Only there was nothing down there but stacks and stacks of moldy magazines, neatly bundled and peppered with mouse turds, and a boiler with a puddle of rusty water beneath it.

"Detective," said Warjovsky. I looked, but he'd been talking to Zigler. He pointed with his flashlight. One of the magazine bundles listed to the side, and the squat window above flapped open as the wind hit it.

We all scrambled into the back alley, then swung around the side of the building where the suspect had slipped our net. "Where is he?" I said.

Franco shone her flashlight at the narrow sidewalk. "He went north."

"He went toward the street," said the whiner. "Y-you want me to follow him?"

"Go," I said. I realized that Franco, Warjovsky, and Zigler were all staring at me—and they all looked like they'd seen a ghost. "Come on," I told them, and jogged toward the street.

I welcomed the yellow circle of streetlight after the close, cold darkness of the alley, but I didn't have any idea which way the Professor had run once he'd slipped the alleyways. "Um...."

"You're tracking him with a spirit?" said Warjovsky. He was breathing fast and shallow, probably not from running.

"I, um ... Yeah."

"Ohmygod," said Franco. She sounded like a mallrat. I don't think she even noticed.

"That doesn't mean we forget about old-fashioned police work," said Zigler. "Try to pick out his footprints."

"Yes sir," said Franco, turning her flashlight beam to the ground.

Zigler and I stepped to the side to have a little chat without the awed looks from the peanut gallery. "I wouldn't count on this guy," I said. "He's a dead junkie."

His eyes scanned the street for movement. "A lead's a lead. We check it out."

Franco and Warjovsky were conferring over a stack of overlapping, half-frozen footprints when the whiner returned. "I think I found his house. He let himself in with a key."

Zigler was right. A lead was a lead. And this one really, really wanted me to catch the Professor. "Okay," I said. Let's qo."

Chapter Twelve

Claymore Avenue was just like any other side street in this neighborhood: trees, brownstones, and every inch of curb space taken up by parked cars. Until you got to the end. Claymore Avenue terminated at an old set of railroad tracks, the other side of which was occupied by a wide, uninviting stretch of overgrown field. Papery, brownish stems of dead weeds poked up through the snow, which mounded over humps that might be rocks, or low bushes, or possibly old tires. At the edge of the snow where the plow had left a small, gray cliff edge, crushed soda cans and plastic shopping bags poked out from the slushy mess. Windows were lit all up and down the street, except for this weird, forgotten end, where a neighborhood full of half-million dollar condos suddenly turned seedy.

Chicago's just weird like that.

It was a mixed zone, residential and light industrial. Only the industries weren't doing very brisk business these days. I stood in front of a small, red brick storefront whose entire facade had once been a plate-glass window, but was now covered by sheets of particleboard with Disciples symbols spray painted at varying heights. There were lights on upstairs, as if the flat above was occupied.

"Not there," said the whiner. "Across the street."

"I'm waiting for my partner. Do you mind?"

Franco radioed in for more backup on the 2-way radio she carried on her belt while Warjovsky scanned the street in search of our suspect. Zigler caught up with me and I nodded

at the building across the street. It was a dingy three-flat with all its windows dark. A parking spot stood empty in front, a big black asphalt rectangle on a street dusted with snow. The white van's usual space?

"Go around back," I told Franco, who'd gone pale. And I don't think it was the suspect who had her freaked out.
"Warjovsky, cover the front door."

"You're going in?" he said. "You don't have a warrant."

"You gotta hurry, man," said the whiner. "He's in there with his missus, and I think they're gonna pitch all the evidence before you catch him."

I sure hoped that didn't mean he'd cut Lynch into little chunks and was in the process of flushing the body down the toilet. "I'm going in," I told Warjovsky simply. His face screwed up, but he didn't try and stop me. That was that.

Zigler and I went to the front stoop and I tried the door. Locked. I pounded on it hard, and shouted, "Police, open up!"

"Don't do that," whined our spirit guide, "they'll hide everything. Quick! You gotta hurry...!"

"Fuck," I muttered. I could hear running footsteps, hollow on hardwood floors, on the other side of the door. "Zig, we gotta go in. Now."

"Move," said Zigler. He backed up to the edge of the stoop and charged.

The door and the lock held firm, but the doorframe gave. The long, rusty nails that held it shrieked as if Zig had caused them pain.

"In here, in here," said the ghost, his voice piped up high in excitement.

"In where?" I demanded. "I can't fucking see you!"
"End of the hall, then through the narrow door. The

basement."

I'd barreled in quick, but slowed at the mention of the word "basement." There's always such nasty shit in the basement.

"Which way?" said Zigler. I pointed to the narrow door and he rushed forward. Better him than me.

He kicked the narrow door open, gun drawn, and charged down the stairs, bellowing, "Freeze! Police! On the floor! On the floor!" I let myself be towed along behind him, like I was swimming in the current of events and didn't have enough motivation to pull myself out of the stream. My gun was out, a familiar weight in my hand, and my feet found the stair treads, soft, rubbery non-slip pulling at the ice-damp soles of my shoes.

There were lights all over the basement ceiling, bare bulbs every few feet, but the dark, raw wood of the bottoms of the upstairs floorboards ate most of the light they gave out. It felt dim and shadowy, damp and unfinished.

"Drop it," Zigler hollered. "I said drop it!"

I hunched back against the basement wall to keep myself from getting shot. There was movement everywhere, and I looked around wildly, trying to get a bead on whatever it was I should be shielding myself from. My first thought was that I'd stumbled into some kind of underground hospital ward. There were half a dozen gurneys lined up neatly under all those bare bulbs, and stainless steel carts full of equipment pressed against the walls.

The patients all rocked and flailed on their gurneys, and my eyes went to the restraints—black hook-and-loop tape against upper arm, belted closure over chest—don't look. Find the guy with the gun. Don't fucking look. I couldn't afford to have another Camp Hell flashback, not if I wanted to walk out of there on my own two feet.

I tried to focus on something else. The little black designs drawn on their foreheads. The way the patients were all strapped onto a bed of dried leaves that went shush-shush-shush as they moved. That was nothing like Camp Hell at all. Camp Hell had at least been sterile, if nothing else.

"Drop it," Zigler yelled again, and he crept between a couple rows of gurneys with his gun leveled. I spotted the Professor against the back wall, waiving a telescoping steel baton. But not like he was trying to hit one of us with it. He looked more like an orchestra conductor who was trying to get a guy on a gurney to follow his cue.

"Drop the club," I yelled, because two cops screaming at you is way more scary than one. "Back away from the table."

He lunged for the guy on the gurney instead, and cupped the twitching patient's chin in his hand and ... it's hard to say exactly what he intended to do. Maybe he was giving the patient the metal rod to bite on. Thinking too hard about that would not only result in a Camp Hell flashback, it would give me a month's worth of nightmares about the Cook County Mental Health Center, too.

A round from Zig's weapon spun the Professor around, sent the metal rod clanking to the floor. Zig had nailed him in the arm. Dark blood oozed through the hole in the Professor's

coat. It didn't spurt like an arterial hit would have, so he wasn't in any danger of dying from it, not unless he was a hemophiliac or he had a weak heart. But I'm sure it didn't tickle.

"Oh, God," he said, knees buckling. "Oh my God." Maybe he'd faint. Most people make it through their lives without getting shot; he wasn't one of the lucky ones.

"Put your hands where I can see 'em," Zigler shouted, closing in on the guy fast.

I had my cuffs out, moving around a gurney to get to the Professor before he realized he wasn't actually hurt all that bad and started to rally, but I just couldn't stop myself from looking at the patient.

It was a hefty Caucasian guy, maybe fifty, twitching so much the whole gurney shook, giving off a kind of shush-creak, shush-creak noise. Weird thing was, his arm looked like Uncle Leon's. A ghost arm, slapping itself against the gurney, right on top of the physical arm, almost in synch, but not quite. What the hell?

"Keep your hands up or I'll shoot you again," Zigler barked.

"Oh my God, you shot me," the Professor blubbered.

I rounded the gurney with the flopping guy on it and snagged the professor by his wrist. He was as thin as I was and not quite as tall, so I was more worried about getting stuck by a wayward needle than I was about him overpowering me. "Take off your coat," I told him.

"You shot me," he said again, crying full-force now, snot running into his white mustache, tears fogging his big, round glasses.

I'd expected a struggle when I grabbed him, especially since he'd run so hard from us. But the fight had gone out of him, either when Zigler'd shot him or when he'd started to cry like a baby. "You have the right to remain silent," I told him. "Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law..." I'd usually let my old partner, Maurice, be the one who slapped the cuffs on. Either it was easier to arrest someone than I'd always thought, or the Professor was such a pushover that Jacob's sister could've taken him down. Maybe I'd expected Zigler to step in, but he hadn't. He was taking his cues from me. "Hey, Zig," I said, once the Professor'd been secured, "Check that guy. What's wrong with him?"

Zigler turned toward the gurney. And while he did that, the basement got even more crowded.

"Holy crap, it's herrrr," whined someone who'd been blessedly silent for the past five minutes—the ghost deputy. I'd been hoping he'd moved on already. Dang.

But wait. Who was she?

"Zigler, behind you," I called out.

An old woman rounded the foot of the stairs. She wandered behind Zigler, maybe five feet tall, stooped with osteoporosis. Her face was set in brown, leathery lines and her hair hung to her waist, black streaked with gray. With her broad nose and flattened, aboriginal face, she could have been one of many ethnicities: Hispanic, Native American, Inuit, Maori. She wore a floor-length denim skirt with the hem

in tatters and a mishmash of men's shirts stacked one on top of the other, gingham, stripes, paisley.

Zigler swung around, gun in hand, but the woman ignored both of us, fussing over the patient strapped to the gurney nearest the stairs. She laid something over its eyes, and it stopped twitching.

"Ma'am," said Zigler, his voice low and dangerous. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

"Look out, Esmeralda," cried the Professor. "They shot me!"

Esmeralda ignored the Professor, ignored Zigler, and made her way over to the next patient. This one was another Caucasian guy, mid to late forties. Somehow familiar.

Esmeralda hummed to herself as she placed small discs over the patient's eyes, one at a time, thumbing them out of her cupped palm like tokens at a roulette wheel. The patient settled down immediately, but the things on his eyes looked like coins weighting down the eyelids of a corpse, and the double images I got from the patient next to me were starting to freak me out.

A flash of navy blue, and Warjovsky appeared on the stairs. "Detective?" he asked, looking from Zigler to me.

"Stop her," said Zigler, gesturing at the Esmeralda as she shuffled to another patient, hand cradling her corpse coins protectively. I guess Zigler couldn't bring himself to shoot an old lady, especially one that was doing nothing more threatening than ignoring him.

"Freeze," said Warjovsky, but Esmeralda kept on walking, unfazed. She had her hand up, ready to thumb a coin onto

the eyelid of the next twitching patient. "Alto," he said, trying again in Spanish.

Zigler and Warjovsky closed in on Esmeralda from either side as she went about her business and subdued the patient with her coins. Three down, three to go. I glanced at the one closest to me, keeping one eye on the Professor. I peered at the patient's face to see if he was in pain, but his expression was unreadable. Lopsided. Glazed.

Frankly, he looked dead. Except that he was moving.

"That's enough, Ma'am," said Zigler. "Drop it. Leave your hands where I can see 'em."

I almost wondered if maybe Esmeralda was deaf, or didn't speak English, but given that the Professor had spoken to her—in English—I couldn't be sure. Maybe she only spoke English selectively.

She was trapped between two gurneys with Zigler in front of her and Warjovsky behind. She tried to sidestep Zigler, but he matched her. She dodged back to her original position, and he lunged to block. She toppled into a gurney and it rocked ominously, a handful of dried leaves rustling over the side.

"What's wrong with these people?" I asked the Professor.

"I don't know," he wailed. "We found them this way."

He didn't know? Maybe I'd buy that, but I suspected that even if he didn't, Esmeralda did. I grabbed the Professor by the hair and forced him to look at me. His eyes went round with shock and his mouth worked as sobs died in his throat.

"I'll ask you again," I said, my voice low and calm. Cripes, I was channeling Jacob. And it felt amazing. "What's wrong with them?"

"They're ... they're...."

"Shut up, Irving," warned Esmeralda. So. She did speak English.

I squeezed his hair harder and glared. God, I was good. "They would have died anyway," he blubbered.

Esmeralda sighed so loudly I could hear it from across the basement. I glanced up and she was rolling her eyes. "I don't know nothing," she said. "Now get me a chair. I gotta sit down."

"Hold on to her," Zigler told Warjovsky. Zigler approached me. I let Professor Irving slump back down onto the floor. Zigler's eyes flickered over to one of the patients who was still moving around. "What's going on?" he asked me, voice low.

"I dunno." I moved to let Zigler keep an eye on Irving while I got a better look at the patient. "Sir?" I asked the guy on the gurney, not that I really thought he could hear me. I slipped into a latex glove and fumbled for my penlight to check his pupils. "Can you hear me, sir?"

"Jesus," said another voice, a new one. "My mother's gonna have a coronary."

I glanced up to find the second patient over, the one who'd looked familiar, swinging his feet to the floor. He cracked his neck, one side, then the other, and smoothed his hair.

Only his body was still strapped to the gurney. Damn. "Ronald Adamson?" I asked.

He frowned. "Um. Yeah. It's a little foggy, though. But I'm pretty sure that's me. Call me Ron ... I think I prefer Ron. Alls I know is, my mother won't like this. And when something sets her off, it goes on, and on, and on. I'm talking letters to the editor, phone calls to her Congressman's office ... anyone who'll listen. And even the ones who don't. You should've seen the trail of bodies she left in her wake when my cousin Frankie forged a check from her bankbook."

"That's Adamson?" Zigler asked. He shifted his weight, unsure whether to run over and look at Ron's body or stay and see what was going on with the twitchy guy in front of me. There was just too much to see.

"What's going on here?" I asked. Because if Adamson could tell me, I'd save a lot of time poking at this stranger who was afflicted with God-knows-what.

"I, uh ... I'm not really sure."

Great. A vague ghost. I don't run into too many confused dead, the ones who just wander around without any malice or important messages to convey to the living. I think that either their families' prayers or the intervention of a low-level medium were usually enough to get them to float off toward the light.

I wasn't sure if he'd disappear if I let him know he was dead. "This guy," I said, pointing to the guy on the gurney in front of me. "What's wrong with him?"

Ron Adamson's ghost cocked his head. "I wanna say he had a heart attack. But I'm not sure how I know that."

Zigler snapped his gloves on and pressed his fingers into the guy's neck. "I can't find a pulse," he said. "Pupils are unresponsive."

"Oh boy," said Esmeralda. She looked up at Warjovsky.
"Can I get a drink? I need a drink. And I need to go to the bathroom."

I glanced at Ron Adamson's quiescent body, and back at the body on the gurney in front of me. If I looked hard enough, I could see a ghostly face overlaying the slack features. "I don't think he has a pulse," I told Zigler.

"What do you mean?"

"His, uh ... his spirit's just kinda laying there on top of him. It's not inside him where it should be."

"Oh, God," muttered Professor Irving from the floor. "Oh, God. What are you?"

Of all the nerve. I gave Irving the filthiest look I could muster. I might be stuck seeing double, but I wasn't the one with half a dozen bodies in my basement.

Zigler kept digging around for a pulse. I didn't have a shorthand to explain to him that he couldn't find one. Electric frog—that wouldn't mean anything to him. Not now. Not unless we worked together for a good long time, and I did something that was like pulling teeth to me. Not unless I opened up a little and showed him some of the skeletons in my closet.

"He's dead, Zig."

Zigler kept poking his fingers into the folds of the guy's fleshy neck.

"What do you mean, he's dead?" said Warjovsky. "He's moving."

I could've kept on insisting, but I figured Zig would come to the same conclusion soon enough. I looked back down at the Professor. He'd rolled himself into a ball. "What the fuck were you doing?" I said, voice low. "What's with the coins on the eyes? What are they, silver? That club you had out—is that silver, too? What were you trying to do with it?"

"I don't know, I don't know," he sobbed.

I looked over at Esmeralda. She knew. And she was considering me with her eyes narrowed—probably wondering how much I'd figured out, and what she could get away with lying about.

"Zig, I gotta take a statement from Ron Adamson before, uh ... while I still can."

Zigler, however, had just come to the realization that he was touching a dead body that was still moving. His face went so white it looked like skimmed milk, and he yanked his hand away, shaking it as if he could dislodge death-cooties.

"What the fuck?" Warjovsky blurted out, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed, and swallowed again. We needed to get him upstairs before he contaminated the basement. "You saying these are zombies?"

"Stupid gringo," Esmeralda muttered from her seat in the webbed nylon lawn chair that Warjovsky had found for her.

"Zig? Let's have Warjovsky get Esmeralda to the station and call the paramedics for Irving." I was about to tell them that I could handle the basement myself, but then I thought better of it. Sure, I saw nasty stuff every day, ghosts with big

chunks missing out of them, and shattered bones sticking out, glistening organs sloshing around, and blood perpetually dripping.

But so did Zigler. The corporeal equivalent of that, anyway. He'd seen hundreds of dead bodies if he'd seen a dozen. I wasn't going to get our partnership off on the right foot if I talked down to him, let him know that I could handle these bodies, since I thought they were too much for him. Even if that was actually what I thought, I didn't have to come right out and say it.

"I kinda need to focus," I said. And I think a little color came back into Zigler's cheeks with the promise of the rest of his work happening upstairs, away from the twitching dead people. "So you get Irving out of here."

Zigler nodded and hauled Irving to his feet. "Let's go."

Meanwhile, Ron Adamson had started to go shimmery around the edges, staring off to the side at something, someone, I couldn't see. "Dad?" he said. "Dad, is that you?"

"Ron," I said, hoping to grab his attention. "What were these people trying to do?"

"Dunno," he said dreamily.

"What happened on your way to work last Tuesday?"

"Dad—how'd you get here? You look so young."

I started losing my visual on Adamson as he began to fade. He was transparent now, and he glowed a little. "Ron," I said. "How did you get here?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, it was really the pits. There was a bee on the turnstile at the El station. Do you believe it? A bee, in November. Stung me right in the palm of my hand..."

Adamson grew fainter, and fainter still, until he was gone, leaving me to join his father. Zigler was barking orders at Warjovsky to clear the room, a little harsher than he had to be, doing his best to keep a handle on a situation that could go south, fast. I went over to Adamson's body, and yeah, the right hand was gigantic. He'd probably died of allergic shock.

Esmeralda watched me examining Adamson's body as Warjovsky herded her up the stairs. "You just happened to be there to grab him as he was stung by a bee?" I asked her.

She smiled to herself and shrugged. "Some people are just lucky," she said.

Once Zigler and Warjovsky got the two of them upstairs, I was finally alone with six bodies—three of them dead and three of them twitching. Lynch, the alderman's nephew, was the third one that'd been ... released, for lack of a better word. I hiked up the edge of his shirt and found a puncture wound in his abdomen that was consistent with the story that the kid in the alley had told me. His spirit hadn't stuck around to give me a play by play.

I looked over the three bodies whose spirits were still somehow attached and struggling to get free. There was the hefty Caucasian who Zigler'd been trying to assess, a young black guy whose skin was the color of ash, and Miranda Lopez. Her dead face was bloated, with one eye open, one shut. Maybe she'd had a stroke. Maybe an aneurysm. The coroner could sort that out. My only concern was that she was still moving even though she was dead.

My bile rose, seeing her like that, body rocking rhythmically against her restraints. I knew her mom, her kid.

I had that snapshot of her in a tight, purple sweater. Cripes. It just wasn't right.

I glanced at the three still bodies with the coins on their eyes. Silver. I didn't think it would hurt anything if I removed them and used them on the bodies whose spirits were still stuck; after all, the first three spirits had moved along, right?

But what if I moved the coins and it didn't work? What if Esmeralda had been humming some kind of spell under her breath? I didn't remember squat about Voodoo from Camp Hell and I wasn't sure if I even believed in spells, but I didn't want to risk contaminating a crime scene for something that might not even help.

"Miranda," I said, putting my fingertips on the back of her hand. I don't think she heard me. Her bloated body kept convulsing against the bands that held her down, arms and legs rustling the dried leaves.

I squinted at her and tried to see whatever it was that Zigler and Warjovsky had seen—a moving body. So what? Oh, a body that was dead. Yeah. I guess that would've spooked me too, once upon a time.

It was the sight of the overlaid spirit that bothered me more. Miranda Lopez's physical body was just a puppet. It didn't register pain, or fear. But the clenching fingers of the spirit hands, the flashes of horror I saw when the ghost eyes slipped out of alignment with the physical eyes ... that was rough.

The number one crime scene rule is that you're never, ever supposed to touch anything. The number one exception to that rule is that if you've got an injured person, you should

try to save them. Lopez was already dead; the milky sheen of her open eye made that pretty damn obvious. But it didn't mean she wasn't suffering.

I fumbled in my pocket, feeling the poke of the tiny metal feet of the milagro through my latex glove. I took it between thumb and forefinger, careful not to drop it. "Miranda," I said, bending over her. It didn't seem right to put it on her eye, so I set it on her forehead and covered it with my palm so it wouldn't fall off. "This is from your mother."

Miranda Lopez's body gave a long, drawn-out shiver, and then it was still. I got a quick glimpse of her spirit as it floated out of her body. It looked surprised. It was there, and then it was gone, dissolving in a mist of sparkly ether.

I did the same for the other two victims, using the silver pendulums that Crash had given me to separate the spirit from the body. Neither of them stuck around to chat with me, either. They were there, and then they weren't. And when I stuffed the pendulums and the milagro back into my pocket, the bodies remained only bodies, dead and quiet, and the rustling of the leaves was silenced.

The sound of sirens threaded through the high basement windows as our backup arrived, and my phone vibrated in my pocket, chirping. Jacob's ring. I flipped the phone open and held it to my ear. "You'll never guess who I'm looking at," I said quietly, gazing down at Miranda's pale face.

"I'll bet it's not the Tooth Fairy."

"What's up?"

"Carolyn and I have been called in to question a couple of suspects in the disappearance of Andy Lynch. Anything I should know?"

Whoa. The department was pulling out the big guns on this case if they were using me to locate the bodies and Carolyn to do the questioning. "Yeah. I think Esmeralda's the brains of the operation, but you'll get more information out of Irving. He's a wuss. Although, Esmeralda's a crackhead, so maybe you can work that to your advantage."

"I see." I could hear Jacob smiling in the tone of his voice.

"Any chance I'll be home by breakfast?"

I resisted the urge to pick a silver coin off Andy Lynch's eye. Bad enough that I'd have to try to convince everyone that all I did was touch the other three with some silver to stop their thrashing. "Six bodies," I told Jacob. "I'm guessing the coroner will need to determine whether or not they were dead when we found them."

There was a moment of silence on the line while Jacob considered what I was telling him ... and what I wasn't, too. "You want to give me your professional opinion on that? I mean, if anyone can tell whether someone's dead or not, it should be you."

I stared down at Lynch's slack face and imagined his spirit features superimposed over it. There was a body, and there was a spirit, and they'd been somehow linked so that they could both move around. And yet there'd been no pulse and no consciousness. My gut told me that I couldn't really call that living.

"They were ... um ... they were dead. More or less." I sighed. "Anyway, they are now."

"Right. I can see I've got my work cut out for me tonight."

I said goodbye to Jacob and took one last look at Miranda. Poor girl. She looked worse than either Lynch or Adamson, what with the one eye open, one eye closed. I hoped her mother didn't have to see her like this. And I wondered who'd have to tell her mother what had happened. Me and Zigler, most likely—translated through Carlos. Wonderful. I really, really missed Lisa, and not for her "si-no" ability, either. I bet Miranda's mom would take the news a whole lot better coming from Lisa.

I went upstairs and found Officer Franco walking a crime scene unit through an office stuffed with paperwork. "What's all this stuff?" I asked her.

"Get this," she said, leaning toward me. I could count the number of times a uniformed officer intentionally moved closer to me on one hand. It made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. "They had fake social security cards and state I.D.s made up for all those people in the basement."

The techs were scooping all the files into boxes, labeling them with thick, black marker, while I considered the dubious merit of providing a corpse with a new identity. "Insurance fraud?" I ventured. "Credit card scam?"

"Not very likely, with fake Social Security numbers. They run a credit check on them before they issue cards."

I nudged open a narrow closet and found stacks and stacks of videotapes. When cops find a large amount of videotape, they think sex ring. I know I do ... but then again,

Jacob and I did just make the happy discovery of the shop with the gay porn section not two miles from my apartment.

These tapes looked different, though. Housecleaning hints and tips. Cooking. Gardening. Most of them bearing labels and barcodes from the public library.

"I don't get it," I said, "but it looks like they racked up a hell of a library fine."

Chapter Thirteen

I'd eaten some of the gourmet leftovers that had miraculously appeared—labeled, no less—in the fridge, slept all by my lonesome, and was currently attempting to fit another 3 into a Sudoku square when Jacob came home. His neat, sharply-creased edges were slightly softened and a hint of a five-o-clock shadow darkened his jaw, and that was the only testament to the fact that he'd been up all night interrogating my good buddies from the basement.

"Tell me they weren't cooking up a zombie employment agency," I said.

He eased his necktie off, considering. "Irving flipped out every time I used the word zombie. According to Carolyn, that wasn't what he thought he was doing. He was a big environmental activist forty years ago, the type of guy who'd scrub seagulls with dishwashing liquid after an oil spill. He really thought he was creating a viable alternative to a conventional burial."

"Get outta here—he thought people would let themselves be zombified voluntarily?"

Jacob hung up his suit, stripped off his shirt, then settled beside me on the futon couch in blue striped boxers and an immaculate, white, sleeveless undershirt. White couch, white undershirt, pale blue underwear. He coordinated very well with my apartment, when he was mostly naked. He made it look kind of classy.

"Irving had a certain type of ... client ... in mind," said Jacob. "Someone who thought burial was a waste of natural

resources, and someone who'd be thrilled to keep on contributing to society, despite the fact that they were dead. Esmeralda, on the other hand, had a little more business acumen."

"And how were they gonna send them to work with leaves all over them?"

"The jimson weed?" Jacob asked. He shrugged. "Creative use of down jackets, I guess. And don't forget the *veves* on their foreheads."

More voodoo talk. There'd been shelves and bins full of other stuff, too—herbs and powders, candles and incense. I thought of Irving or Esmeralda methodically draining all the paranormal suppliers in the city—heck, of them shopping in Crash's store, close enough to make a zombie out of him if he happened to die from too much exotic sex while they were shopping—and I shuddered. "Esmeralda is scary."

"You're not kidding. She's a rogue precog."

"Precog? Like Lisa?" I nestled against Jacob and let the sudoku magazine slip onto the floor. He put his arm around me, tangling his fingers absently in my hair.

"In a way, yeah. Like Lisa. Her precognitive abilities had a limitation—kind of like the 'si-no,' only darker." His fingertips traced patterns on my scalp, and I felt my eyelids drooping. "Esmeralda knew when someone was going to die. That was the extent of her talent."

So she and Irving could be in the right place at the right time to find volunteers for their experiment in alternatives to burial. Sick.

"She'd probably been trying to figure out ways to exploit her talent for years," he said. "Though I'll bet she would've preferred being able to pick the winning lottery numbers."

I sighed and snuggled my head into Jacob's lap. He traced my ear, the long muscle running down my neck. I shivered a little and pressed against him harder. "I miss Lisa."

"Give her some time," said Jacob. "She's figuring out her talent."

I wrapped my arms around Jacob's thigh. "Oh, that makes me feel a whole lot better." Given that I'd lived with mine since the summer I turned twelve and I still hadn't figured it out, I wasn't looking forward to waiting for Lisa to gain enlightenment.

Jacob continued stroking my head, tracing patterns as if he was writing a secret message on my scalp, and I let myself be lulled into a relaxed state that was drowsy and alert at once. "We don't have to move in," Jacob said, "if you don't want to."

"What?" I sat up and banged my knee against the coffee table.

His expression seemed mild, but then again, it might have been practiced-mild, and not this-isn't-such-a-big-deal-mild. "The whole ghost thing—I hadn't realized that finding somewhere clean would be such a bitch. I should've known."

"Gimme a break," I said. "There's plenty of places around here that aren't haunted. I've seen 'em myself." Places like Miranda Lopez's apartment. Places with clanging radiators and sagging ceilings—places that Jacob wouldn't set foot in voluntarily.

A crease formed between Jacob's eyebrows and he looked at me hard. Maybe it was a residual expression from interrogating crazy zombie-makers all night, or maybe he really was scrutinizing me that much.

"We'll look tonight," I said. I think I sounded optimistic. I hope I did, anyhow, because inside I couldn't stop thinking, please, please, let there be somewhere we can both stand living, or else he's gonna get fed up and nix the idea of the two of us living together. And that would really, really suck.

I have no idea who I was praying to, given that I was agnostic. But it didn't stop me.

While Jacob got his beauty sleep, I spent my afternoon in the SaverPlus jewelry department looking for a necklace. Okay, maybe not the entire afternoon. I made a quick stop in the tool section, and then, since I was already in the basement, I veered down toward the return desk to see if I could get a look at whoever it was that Crash was fantasizing about. I didn't think the two octogenarians who were staffing the desk in crisp, silver wigs and pearls fit the bill.

Jacob had a condo, two houses, and a duplex slated for viewing by the time I got home. He'd pre-screened all of them for things like roaches and railroad crossings, so there was nothing left for me to look for but ghosts.

Even I felt somewhat hopeful.

We'd left a little early so that I could swing by the alleyway where Andy Lynch's wallet had been found in the Dumpster. The crime lab equipment was long gone; we may not have found the guy who'd stabbed Lynch in the gut for whatever cash he'd been carrying, but we got Irving and Esmeralda,

and my guess was the alderman was happy enough that he had someone to throw the book at.

I would've been happy to question Lynch about his stabbing, but he hadn't stuck around. Not very good closure for the family and friends he'd left behind; but I, on the other hand, thought it was probably for the best that he'd hit the ground running in the afterlife instead of lingering, waiting to tattle to someone like me.

Jacob put the car in park and looked me over. "Do you want me to stay here?"

"And dig the hole all by myself? Ground's frozen."

Jacob reached into the back seat for the trowel and tub of quick-set concrete I'd brought home from SaverPlus. His face was very still, but his eyes looked kind of intense. If I didn't know him, I wouldn't have any idea what was going on in his head. But having spent so much time with him ... crammed together in that lousy little apartment ... having met his family ... having watched him sleep, early in the morning, his eyes moving back and forth beneath closed lashes, dreaming his verifiably non-precognitive dreams?

I could tell he was totally getting off on this.

Late November days are short, and the sun had already set by the time we came to visit Tiffany. The dim alleyway was lit by widely spaced yellow streetlights and everything looked washed out and surreal, like a poorly developed photograph. Except Jacob. He looked like he'd just stepped out of some noir film set. All he needed was a fedora. He called Stan and told him we'd meet him in half and hour, then he set down the tub of concrete, planted his hands on his

hips, and looked around the alley with much more glee than I thought the situation warranted. "Is she here now?"

"I dunno. I never did get a visual on her." I dug in my coat pocket and pulled out the necklace I'd settled on. Gold. Very shiny. A butterfly with wings set in sparkly pink gemstones swayed as I held it out in front of me, trying to get Tiffany's attention. Which is stupid, when you consider that she'd seen Crash's pendulums straight through my pockets. "Hey, kid," I said. "C'mon out. It's safe."

Jacob found a patch of snow where an electrical line was anchored into the ground. He kicked the hard packed snow away, exposing a patch of dirt beside the asphalt. "How about here?" he asked me.

I looked around, wondering how Tiffany could possibly resist a sparkly butterfly. "Uh, yeah. That's fine."

Jacob crouched down and started digging a hole while I paced up and down the alley, absentmindedly walking a grid. Tiffany might not show up, I reminded myself. She might be like Jackie, my most irritating dead neighbor—some days there, some days not, with no rhyme or reason that I could discern. Or she might be like the dead baby in the basement of my apartment building, visible only in the wee hours of the morning.

Or maybe she'd moved on. I looked down at the butterfly in my palm. Somehow, I doubted that. Ghosts that stuck around had their reasons. Otherwise, they'd be like the six victims in the zombie factory, dissolving like smoke on the wind as soon as the tie was severed with their bodies.

"Who's that man?" said someone in an outrageously loud stage whisper.

I looked around. No one here but us PsyCops. "That's my ... friend." I'd almost said boyfriend, which was reassuring, that truth mode had somehow begun trumping my natural impulse to hedge. It was just that I couldn't tell how old Tiffany was. Had she had friends with two mommies or two daddies—or had hers been a world where the adults had loveless hookups for a few bucks or a nugget of crack? "He's helping me make a spot for your necklace, so no one else can take it."

"Really?" she sounded dubious.

"Didn't I promise?"

Jacob bent over the hole he'd made, neatening up the sides, but I could tell he was watching me talk to Tiffany out of the corner of his eye. Guess I was showing Jacob a really good time.

"Let me see it again," she said, her whisper grown frantic with excitement.

Though she could probably see it through my clenched fist, I let it dangle. The streetlights caught the pink gemstones. They twinkled.

"It's really for me?"

"Really. We're going to put it right in there, for safe keeping. And you can visit it any time you want." I was assuming a gallon of post anchoring concrete wouldn't hinder her enjoyment of the butterfly, since she was so good at seeing through things.

The butterfly charm rotated, though the wind was still, and a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature raced up my arm. "It's my favorite thing," Tiffany said. "Ever."

I walked up to Jacob, my arm trembling from the ghostchill, and looked down at the hole. "Is it deep enough?"

He nodded, his eyes roaming up and down my body. I don't know if he was looking for evidence of the supernatural, or just taking in a good eyeful of me. I crouched across from him and dropped the necklace into the hole while he broke open the seal on the plastic tub. The plastic gave with a pop and a sigh. It was then punctuated by a squeal and the smack of metal on metal at the end of the alleyway, the ugly clap of a fender bender.

Figured. Just when we were having fun delivering presents to ghosts.

"We should probably go call that in," I said. The collision didn't sound loud enough to have caused injuries, but we'd need to check it out anyway since we were the good guys, Jacob and me.

Jacob handed me the trowel. "I'll go," he said. He slipped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me toward him for a kiss.

Just a quick one, a warm brush of lips, the tickle of his goatee, but still—what a rush, out there in public where anyone could see us, heck, the ghost kid probably did see us. I licked my lips as he stood up, dark bedroom eyes lingering on me for just a moment before he turned and sprinted to the end of the alleyway to check out the crash.

"Why did he do that?" said Tiffany.

I shrugged and stuck the trowel into the concrete. It was so stiff with cold that I could barely shove the blade in, like ice cream so frozen it bends the spoon when you try to shave a little off for yourself. "Because he likes me."

"But you're both boys."

"Sometimes boys like each other that way."

"Oh."

I scraped out a few puny scoops of the mixture, then decided that if I sat there scooping at it all night, it was going to air-set before I got halfway through. I upended the bucket, slid out the contents, and tried to jam the cylindrical mass of concrete into the hole with the flat of the trowel, instead.

"Just step on it," said somebody. I looked over my shoulder and found a Caucasian woman, maybe seventy, seventy-five, watching my progress. I would have taken her for a live one, if she'd been dressed for the weather, or if I could see her breath. She had on a shapeless, brown, smocktype dress, bright purple socks, and Birkenstock sandals. Her white hair was cropped short and stuck up at the crown of her skull. She looked like a hippy punk grandmother. Or maybe an ageing lesbian.

"It's too cold out to scoop," she told me, arms crossed, gesturing toward the cylinder of concrete with her chin. "Just step on it."

"I'll ruin my shoe."

"Oh, for God's sake," she said. She had a voice like Ethel Merman. "Cover your foot with a plastic bag."

Luckily in the city there's never a shortage of plastic bags when you need one, especially if you don't care whether it's

coming apart at the seams or not. I pulled a fairly intact bag from between the links of a chain link fence, wrapped it around my shoe, and stomped.

It took a few good stomps, but I mashed the cylinder of concrete all the way in.

"Now some dirt," instructed the ghost. "Don't worry, it'll still set. And then some snow."

I realized Jacob would have a field day if he knew we had spirit supervisors on our team. He'd been out on the street for quite a while. "Say, you didn't just die in a car crash, did you?"

"Me? Oh, hell no. I fell through a rotten stair and broke three vertebrae."

"Gee. Sorry."

She shrugged and peered between a couple of buildings. "I should've known better. I'd been stepping over it all week, but had my arms full of power tools, the phone was ringing, and I miscounted." She pointed, and I came over to look. It was the back of a building. Brick. Square. Flat roof. Pretty plain, pretty industrial.

"It took me years to get through all the legal red tape and buy that place. Know what it is?"

"I dunno."

"Used to be a cannery in the eighteen fifties. Come look."

I glanced back at the other end of the alley. A police light strobed, red, then blue.

"Don't worry," said the old woman. "I won't bite."

"It's not that," I told her. "My, uh, boyfriend...."

"The handsome one. What about him?"

"He'll wonder where I am."

"You've got a cellular phone, haven't you?"

Cellular phone? It seemed like on odd thing to call it. I wondered how long she'd been dead. "Uh. Yeah."

"Then come look. I just want to show someone, before it gets torn down or made into condominiums."

I took a few steps down the narrow gangway between buildings. The ghost woman waited for me. She was smiling. She seemed pretty jazzed to have me looking at the old cannery.

"See here?" she said, pointing to a rectangle of bricks that were a different shade of brown than the others around them. "Used to be a coal chute."

"And here I thought someone had been bricked up alive."

"Hah! I like you. You're weird."

"Thanks."

We went around to the front. The facade was flat, with a patterned ridge around the top that flared out. "It took forever to get this side of the street zoned for mixed use," said the ghost, stepping through a gap in the fence. "I wanted a live/work studio, and the city wanted ... oh, I dunno what they wanted. A big manufacturer wasn't gonna pick this place up. Needed too much work. Cheaper to build new."

She ran her hand over the carved stone that framed the doorway. "See this? Lotus. A student attempt at Egyptian revival. This place is full of subtle details."

"What do you ... did you ... do?"

"Sculptor. I would've really done right by this place, you know?"

Graffiti covered the front doors, gang symbols, and more mundane stuff. The word "fuck." No explanation, just "fuck." I felt bad for the sculptor, having to see her beloved cannery like that. Unless maybe she was some kind of weird performance artist who'd done it herself. You never know, with artists.

"There's a key hidden under that round rock," she said, "if you want to go inside."

"Under a rock?" I said. "Cripes, the only other place that's worse is on top of the door frame."

"No one's bothered it for seventeen years, have they?"

I wasn't exactly itching to go inside, but I picked up that rock anyway, intending to show her how ridiculous it was for her to have hidden her spare key where any old crackhead could find it—and there it was. Fused to the mud. Right where she'd left it.

I pried the key up and wiped it on my jeans. I realized belatedly that I'd been trying to look somewhat decent for the realtor, which was why I'd been wearing good shoes rather than ratty high-top sneakers. Oh well. A little mud never hurt a pair of jeans.

"It's dark inside," she said as I turned the key in the lock. I'd expected it to be stiff with age, but it felt like a regular lock.

"That's okay," I said. "I've got a flashlight."

"You just carry a flashlight around," she said.

"I'm a cop." I twisted the beam on and opened the door.

I'd expected the skittering of rats, but there was no movement. The old cannery was quiet and still inside. And huge.

The floorboards were gigantic, ten inches wide, and scarred with the footprints of machinery long gone. The bare brick walls were rough, and ancient wooden signs with ridiculous slogans like "Think safe!" hung on the wall that had no windows. A very scary wooden staircase hugged the opposite wall, leading to a second floor that extended maybe half the length of the building, loft-style.

"Are those the stairs you, uh...?" I searched for a broken tread with my flashlight beam.

"That's them. I guess I didn't follow the signs' advice. Say, you're really a cop?"

"I'm kind of a specialist. Y'know. With the talking to dead people and all."

"Doesn't that beat everything? You're all right."

My phone chirped and vibrated, and I nearly dropped the flashlight. Jacob. "Uh, hey," I said. The sculptor was watching me.

"Where'd you go?"

"Not far. There's an abandoned cannery a block over. You can see it if you go one building west from Tiffany's necklace and look down the gangway. I'll shine my flashlight at the back window."

I heard Jacob's boots crunch through the snow over the phone. "Got it," he said. "Anything you're doing there in particular?"

"Just ... uh ... talking to the late owner."

I started to hear his rapidly approaching footfalls with my other ear, too. He moves fast. It's all that exercising and running he does in his spare time.

Jacob paused in the doorway, hands on hips, and took the whole cannery in by the light of my flashlight beam.

"How was the accident?" I asked him.

"Fine," he said, waiving away my concern. "No one was injured. They just wanted me to sign a few things."

"Who, the patrolmen?"

"No. The drivers." He pulled his own flashlight out and shone it at the retro safety signs, and gave a low whistle. "What did you say this place was?"

"A cannery. What did they want you to sign?"

"You know," he said, his light moving over the texture of the brick wall. "Just some autographs."

"Autographs?"

"It's not that big a deal."

I did my best to scoop my jaw up off the floor while Jacob disappeared around a corner. "Hey, there's an amazing kitchen in here."

"I'll have you know that was state of the art when I had it put in," said the sculptor.

"The owner thinks so," I told him.

Jacob peered around the wall. "You see him?"

"Her," I corrected.

"And, what? You're not dragging me back to the car because the place is haunted."

I wasn't, was I? "It's not haunted," I said. "Not like that. She's not a repeater or anything." Repeaters really creeped

me out, saying the same sentence or doing the same motions over and over, like never ending instant replay.

"The plumbing's all updated," said the ghost. "All you need to do is have the shower and toilet installed." She sighed. "It really would've been beautiful."

"Who owns this place now?" asked Jacob.

He'd been talking to me, but the sculptor answered. "The city. They're doing their best to offload it to the most horrible developers they can find."

"The city," I said. I omitted the part about the developers, in the interest of staying neutral. "Why?"

Jacob ran his fingers over the bare brick wall, pressing his fingertips into the grooves of the mortar. "Couldn't you see it?"

"What?"

"Living. Here." He walked faster, palm skimming over the brick, enjoying the huge expanse of empty space. "I've always wanted to live in a loft."

The sculptor watched Jacob closely. Either she wanted his autograph, too, or she'd found the perfect buyer for her converted cannery with its Egyptian revival bricks. "You sure you can't hear her?" I asked Jacob. "'Cos it looks to me like she's got you wrapped around her callused little ghost finger."

Jacob turned to face me, placing his other hand on the wall, like he didn't want to let go of it. "Do you hate it?"

I shone my flashlight toward the ceiling. Twenty, twenty-five feet high in the open part of the building, fifteen feet where the loft extended over the main floor. The place was huge. Cavernous. And I had a sneaking suspicion that, as

indulgent as Jacob was, he wasn't going to let me paint everything white and light it up like a baseball stadium so that I could make sure there wasn't anyone around but him and me.

And yet, if I emptied my mind and just stood there, still, it felt ... okay. There I was, in the dark, my breath streaming in white clouds through the flashlight beams, and I didn't feel that panicky edge that compelled me to turn on all the lights. "I don't hate it," I admitted.

Jacob pocketed his flashlight and pulled out his cell phone. The lit keypad threw a greenish light over his features. He was smiling to himself as he dialed. "Hello. Stan? Change of plans. I need you pull some paperwork for a city-owned property on West Loughton."

Jacob went back outside to get the address, leaving me alone with my flashlight and the sculptor. "I know you'll love it as much as I did," she said.

"You're gonna move out if we move in," I said. "No offense."

"Are you kidding? I thought I'd find a decent buyer years ago. I'll be out of here before the ink's dry on the deed."

Jacob's flashlight preceded him as he came back in. It bounced from corner to corner. "Look at that," he said, lighting up a doorway. "There's a basement."

"How creepy is it?" I muttered as Jacob pulled the door open and fearlessly stuck his head in.

"It's fine," said the sculptor. "There was a spot that was just perfect for my kiln. And, of course, the freight elevator.

That doesn't work anymore, but I think a good electrician could get it going again."

Jacob turned away from the basement door and headed toward me, taking long strides across the industrial wooden floor, boot heels ringing; a man on a mission. He pocketed his flashlight again and grabbed me around the waist, pulling me against him. "I'm not gonna lie to you," he said. "I really like this place."

Judging by the bulge that he pressed against my hipbone, I'd say the word "like" was an understatement. And then there was the look on his face, that intense, hungry look that he flashes my way that tells me he wants something, and damn it, nothing's going to stand in his way. That look he gave me the day we met at Maurice's retirement party.

I cleared my throat. "We're not alone," I mumbled.

"Don't worry about me," said the sculptor, her voice retreating towards the front door. "I'll give you some privacy. I can see the two of you need to talk." She'd managed to say "talk" without any trace of sarcasm. Even with Jacob breathing hard against my cheek and grinding the bulge in his pants into my hip.

"All this space," Jacob said, dragging his mouth over my cheekbone, down my jaw. "We can park in the back—no more circling the block looking for a space." Actually, I usually parked in front of the hydrant. Though I suspected that wouldn't be a good thing if the fire department ever needed to use it.

He shuffled his feet, one between my shoes, the other outside my right foot, and walked me backward until my

shoulder blades bumped the ten-foot wall that divided the kitchen area from the main room. "We could get a pool table," he said, covering my mouth with his before I could mention that I hadn't played pool since I'd lived at the Cook County Mental Health Center, where Big Martha, the scourge of the rec room, routinely cornered me into games in which I was sure to lose my every last cigarette to her. Which was fine, since I'd never really gotten the hang of smoking.

Jacob's hand worked its way inside my coat, his thumb brushing my nipple through my shirt. He buried his face in the crook of my neck, his breath hot under my ear, and when he talked, his voice was low and hypnotic.

"We'll clean it up, finish the remodeling that was started. I can just see it. Our stuff will look great with the bricks and the wood floors. And it is on the first floor."

I'll admit, Jacob did paint a very nice picture of his fantasy loft. Especially in his sexiest voice, rolling my nipple through my shirt. It was stiff and tingly, pulsing in time with his insistent squeezes. I shifted my hips and my balls settled on his thigh. I tilted my pelvis, enjoying the feel of him, his body pinning me there while he talked all low and sultry against the side of my throat.

"I dunno," I teased. Because, of course, I'd already decided that if he liked the cannery that much, what the hell. It wasn't haunted. That's what mattered. "Maybe it's not white enough."

Jacob's tongue was hot against my neck, and his free hand was busy at the fly of my jeans. He was willing to do whatever it was going to take to convince me. I leaned

against the wall and shone my flashlight on him while he sank down to his knees—and damn, maybe I wanted his autograph, too, that movie star face peering up at me, watching me watching him.

And that was unusual, because I was usually the one to ambush him, but it felt right. It was good that each of us pushed the other one's buttons. That kept things a little more even. "C'mon, mister," I said, "you want this building so bad? Earn it."

Jacob pinched my nipple and arousal zinged down my spine to my groin. "Tell me," he said, his voice excited and low.

If I gave it too much thought, I'd come up with nothing. So I just went with whatever popped into my head. "Lick my balls," I told him, flashlight in one hand, handful of his hair, however much I could grab, in the other.

He needed both hands to ease my jeans down over my hips, and I focused on the sweet pain that followed the release of my tightly pinched nipple. I felt my cock swell, twitching as Jacob pressed it up against my stomach, his breath hot and moist on the skin of my scrotum.

"Lick them," I said, and it was so incredibly quiet behind the wide stone walls of the old cannery, the rest of the city felt like it was miles and miles away. "Slide your tongue in there, all over. Suck them into your hot mouth."

My voice went a little wobbly toward the end there, because Jacob had been busy following orders, his tongue snaking between my balls, cupping around them, wetting them with his spit.

I let go of his hair, which was too short to get a good hold on anyway, and took my cock in hand, rubbing it against his cheekbone. He rumbled something against my balls, and I was hard, good and hard now. I pumped my cock slowly, jerking myself off against his face while he sucked on my nuts.

He slipped a finger behind my balls, teasing the taint, promising my ass a little action, but not until I asked for it. I gave my cock a few more pulls and the pressed it against Jacob's temple, his hair tickling the shaft.

"That's right," I told him. "Keep going."

He slurped my testicles into his mouth shamelessly, encouraging groans muffled between my legs, first one nut, then the other.

"Work your finger," I said. Because he wasn't going to until I told him.

He slid it higher, spit-wet, and I shivered as he pressed it in, feeling his sigh against my damp balls as he inched it up my ass.

He finger-fucked me, working some kind of magic with the flat of his tongue, and I sighed, long and loud, pumping my cock lazily against his face. There was some sense of urgency, sure. For all I knew, Stan's office was right around the corner and he was a computer wizard who could pull paperwork in the blink of an eye. But I felt no anxiety about anything paranormal. I didn't sense anyone in the bushes, or the loft, or the basement. Just me and Jacob, and his mind-blowing tongue.

I'd double check the basement to be sure, of course. Oh God. I'd get right on it, once Jacob brought me off doing tongue-dances against the underside of my cock.

"Suck it," I growled, shoving my cock against his face. Jacob rocked back on his heels and opened wide, sliding his hot, wet mouth all the way down. I pocketed my lit flashlight, which threw a single, jittery beam at the ceiling, and held on to Jacob's head with both hands. My fingers found the bony ridge at the back of his skull and I pressed my fingertips into the hollow.

"I'm so close," I said—I mean, I think he can tell by now, but it just seemed like it was the polite thing to do, to let him know I was going to shoot in his mouth. But Jacob didn't back off. He never does. He went at it even harder, which I suppose I could also liken to the rest of our relationship.

His finger slid in and out, in and out, and he swallowed my cock down as deep as he could take it, his lips pressing into the root at the downstroke, and if I listened closely, I heard a tiny grunt each time he'd taken my cock all the way in. So wet. So incredibly hot. And then he sealed his lips around my shaft and he sucked.

"Please...."

My whole body arched against Jacob's face, his head in my hands, and everything clenched tight while my cock spurted its blessed release. His sucking grew gentle while I shuddered, gritting my teeth and trying to wring one more twitch, one more spasm, out of the orgasm, though the intensity had grown uncomfortable, almost painful. But I couldn't help it. I'm greedy that way.

I think Jacob likes that, too. He goes all gentle after I've come, tries to see if he can milk just a little more pleasure out of me. I pushed him off when I couldn't stand any more, and he stood up and pressed himself into me, nuzzling me with his forehead. He smelled like earthy sweet semen.

"I really do want this place," he said, smiling, "but I don't think I've made a good enough case for it. After we talk to Stan, I plan on spending the rest of the night convincing you."

I cleared my throat. My mouth was dry from panting. "I see."

Jacob licked his lips while I buttoned my jeans and wrapped my winter coat tight around me. I felt like Stan would be able to spot something in my expression that would give away the fact that I'd just come really hard, but there wasn't much I could do about it. At least it was dark out.

Eventually, Stan joined us at the cannery, a sheaf of paper fresh from his laser printer in hand. "So," he said with false brightness. His flashlight beam trembled on the wall. "This is it."

He and Jacob went outside to look at the property lines while I sidled over toward the door to the basement, sneaky, so it couldn't get any nasty surprises ready for me.

I didn't go all the way down, not by the light of a flashlight, but I did descend a few steps and have a look. I figured that any remnant worth its salt wouldn't be able to resist flickering to life inside the flashlight beam.

The basement was still. Not empty, though, not at all. There were big, industrial troughs of sinks, and machine

parts, and even the rusty cage of an elevator. But nothing that would go bump in the night without being activated by someone corporeal.

I'd make sure to check the place out thoroughly before we started the process of buying the building, but for now, I was reasonably sure that it would just be Jacob and me hanging around, assuming the sculptor kept her promise.

I heard Stan's voice, and then Jacob's, the two of them squabbling, as I came up from the basement. They stood outside on the stoop, the front door—the one with the word "fuck" painted on it—slightly open. I shuffled over to see if I could accidentally overhear what the problem was.

"...don't know if you can even afford it."

"Vic's going in on it with me. Between the two of us? We'll see what the bank says."

"And you realize the amount of work it's going to take to bring it into a livable condition?"

"I can see that."

"And here you busted my balls over a few roaches."

"Stan ... don't push your luck."

My flashlight had been going for quite a while and was starting to dim. I shone it on the wall Jacob had been caressing while he was looking at me with his big, earnest eyes and asking me if we could keep the place. "Think Smart—Think Safe!" said a jaunty poster in turquoise script letters.

"The thing I don't get," said Stan, his raised voice filtering in through the open door, "is that of all the available properties on the north side, you end up asking me for the

place that no one can sell, on account of its reputation for being haunted."

END

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