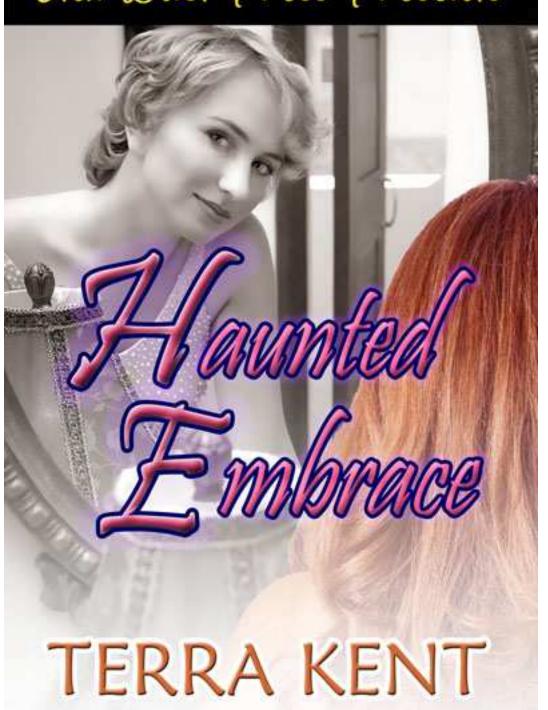
Star Dust Press Presents



Reviews for Haunted Embrace

"Haunted Embrace by Terra Kent is the intriguing story of Isabella, a feisty young woman and Elijah, a ghost that lives in an old abandoned mansion. It's a wonderfully written story, with a new twist on an old plot. The love scenes will leave you wanting more."

~ Isabelle Rose, Naughty Fairy Tales Vol 1 & 2 (available now from StarDust Press)

"Haunted Embrace is a beautifully descriptive historical paranormal romance that is marvelously crafted to draw a reader in. Ms. Kent spins a delightfully spirited ghost tale about a civil war era couple whose love is so powerful it transcends time, and a modern day miss whose desires and dreams catapults her into correcting a past wrong. It's an emotional roller-coaster that will keep you turning the pages until the end. I couldn't put it down until I finished reading it. Bravo Terra."

~ Imari Jade, Death Takes A Holiday (coming soon from StarDust Press)

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Pending ISBN Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Published by StarDust Press Private Limited www.stardustpress.com

Printed in Singapore

Edited by T. Markou Cover art by Tracy Lee

Haunted Embrace

Terra Kent



www.stardustpress.com

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Chapter One

October 24th, 2004

Isabella heaved the last of her luggage into her green station wagon. She headed for her new home with high hopes for a better future. Her thoughts returned her back to her childhood, when life had seemed easier. Recollections of cooking bacon on her grandmother's old wood stove made her stomach grumble. The scent of fresh cut flowers left her reveling in joyful memories of the house she would soon call home. Every Sunday, her grandmother made sure to place fresh lilies by the entrance as well as at the bottom of the winding staircase leading to the upper floor.

The sun, at its zenith, littered the wispy clouds with subtle shades of oranges, reds, and purples. Isabella squeezed the steering wheel as her stomach twisted into knots. Never in her wildest dreams had she thought she would own a luxurious home. Montague County boasted some of the finest historical homes in all of Texas, and now one was hers.

Her anticipation grew with each passing mile of the road. The small vineyard lining the outskirts of the plantation, where she'd often played as a young girl, came into view. The old tales about the plantation came to life as the sun began to fade. Even being a romantic at heart, she didn't believe a two-hundred-year old ghost lurked in the plantation's halls.

Bits and pieces of the stories she had heard concerning the plantation

from her granny began to tickle the edges of her consciousness. Elijah had been hung on Halloween. Some said the song of Maggie's mournful cries could still be heard beneath the tree where he died. Maggie had always been a thorn in her side. Not for one minute did she accept herself as this woman's reincarnation. Even to this day, no one was quite sure why he'd been hung.

A mixture of feelings overtook Isabella as the car coasted down the long, winding driveway of the old plantation. She flipped on the headlights as the sunlight faded. A swirl of trepidation, eagerness and hope settled deep in her gut. She knew, in just minutes, she would be home. She took in the faded beauty of the plantation house.

The moonlight cast an eerie feeling over the abandoned structure. Chipped paint flaked from the weathered wood. The front banister looked as if it was barely attached to the supporting pillars. Most of the upstairs windows were busted out. Numerous columns lined the front, wrap-around porch supporting the open balcony above. Heavens, Elijah spared no expense in building the two story brick home. Restoring the old home to its original beauty would take even more.

Her hand trembled as she killed the engine. She wiped a sweaty palm on her faded blue jeans and fumbled with the door handle before managing to open it. Determined not to let fear get the best of her, Isabella stepped out of the car. She took a deep breath and picked her way through the overgrown weeds that nearly blocked the path to the front door. Her fingertips grazed the peeling, painted railing by the steps. Cobwebs clung to the broken windows on each side of the entrance. To her surprise, an old brass knocker remained intact. Well, obviously the ravages of time didn't take a toll on everything.

Anxiously, she unlocked the door and stepped over the threshold before she lost her nerve. The door protested with a loud creak that echoed through the house. A heavy dose of stale, musty air assaulted her senses. She fought the urge to gag. Digging the flashlight out of her coat pocket, she turned it on, and scanned the main entrance. She stood rooted to the spot.

A strange feeling of déjà vu came over her, creating the illusion of stepping back in time. She swayed, fearful she might fall. Vomit reached the back of her throat. Silently, she counted: *one, two, three, breathe, Isabella*. The world righted, and the feeling passed as she regained control of her wild emotions, and continued to survey her surroundings.

A tarnished, crystal chandelier hung above her. A portrait of a young man graced the wall to her right. Her heart skipped a beat at the piercing color of his eyes. She felt drawn toward him. Reaching out, she found the need to run her fingers over his face. She couldn't shake the sudden rush of familiarity. It's as if I know him, and yet, we've never met. Memories of a happier time as a young girl playing hide and seek with Elijah over the summer, flashed before her eyes. Startled, she whipped back her hand, yet she couldn't look away. Elijah Whick had been a handsome man. She could see why Maggie, his fiancée, had been attracted to him. Dark, shoulderlength hair hung to the top of his broad shoulders with the sides short and feathered back. His eyes were a deep brown, and a straight nose with a cleft in his chin added to the charming smile. Even in this day and age, he could be a woman's undoing.

A sigh escaped her lips. Why can't there be any men like you left alive today, Elijah? She shook her head, and smiled. Isabella, old girl, you really need to get a life, and find someone who's still alive, you know. Her uneasiness faded as she became familiar with the surroundings. She took in the open French doors off to her left, which led into the ballroom. The view stole her breath away. Fading pastel cream paint still caressed the walls. The ceiling sported four magnificent brass chandeliers. The floor was done in black and white flecked tile.

She closed her eyes and could almost imagine the gay laughter as people danced to lively melodies, or maybe even Mozart. Double glass doors toward the back of the room led out to a spacious garden area, allowing shafts of moonlight to filter through. Isabella was pleased when she spied a floral print loveseat against one wall. It was the only piece of furniture she could ever remember her granny refusing to part with, no matter how torn and ratty it became. It was more or less as old as the house itself. She made her way over to it, and sunk into it, astonished at its softness after so much time had passed.

Nervous tension still hummed in her veins. Isabella curled up on the dusty loveseat. She smiled to herself, remembering the one tale that always followed her. Distant memories nibbled at her. No matter where she went, no matter how old she became, she would never forget it.

Her grandmother had invited an acquaintance over during one of her stays. Neither of them realized it at the time, but the woman was psychic, and the moment she saw eleven-year-old Isabella, she had pointed a gnarled finger at her, claiming, "Maggie's soul shall return and free Elijah, the man she loves, from his ghostly existence." Everyone said a painting of Maggie that would prove it existed, but to this day, Isabella hadn't found such a painting.

It's nothing more than supernatural nonsense. I can't see how people can put stock in such drivel. See, there's absolutely nothing to be afraid of. Sighing, she tried to rub the sleepiness from her eyes. There was still so much more of the house she wished to explore, but it was just too dark. Sweeping her hand along the wall, she stumbled upon a light switch, but it refused to illuminate her surroundings. Giving up, she walked back to the loveseat and made herself comfortable. The more she relaxed, the sleepier she became. Before long, she drifted off.

* * * * *

Puzzled, Elijah gazed upon the beauty sleeping soundly on the loveseat. It's true, Maggie looked different, but he knew deep within the confines of his soul who it was—his Maggie. He knelt on one knee beside the loveseat and looked closely at her face. I never thought I would ever behold your beauty again. Your screams have haunted my ghostly existence across the crevasse of time. Tentatively, he reached out to brush the silky curls of her hair aside, afraid that at any moment, the magic would flee, and he would find himself only dreaming her into existence. Loneliness has been a companion I grew quite fond of against my will. I can hardly believe you're real, that you're here. Oh, my beloved, after all this time, you've finally returned to me.

Passion stirred within him, making him feel a surge of emotion he hadn't realized he was still capable of. But, upon seeing her, thoughts of them together emerged. One memory in particular that he was quite fond of surfaced. A time she'd dared him to play a childhood game of hide and seek. He found her wading into the pond on other side of the vineyard.

"Come out wherever you are, Elijah!" her voice sang out, as she lifted the skirt of her blue checkered dress, wading into the blissful coolness of the water. "Ahh, that feels so good."

Before she knew what was happening she found herself sinking into the cool depths of the pond. Flustered, she popped her head up long enough to see Elijah laughing like a young boy. She had found nothing funny about the fact that she was absolutely soaked to the bone.

Later, she stood on the edge of the pond glaring at her fiancé. Slowly, she started toward him, all the while unaware of the effect her appearance was having on his body.

"Maggie, we should go back to the house now." He swallowed the lump in his throat. Her hardened nipples showing clearly beneath the wet fabric teased his feasting eyes.

"Oh, Maggie," he whispered. His dick became instantly hard, straining at the confines of his clothing.

"Maybe you ought to be as wet as I am, you scoundrel."

She strolled up to him, smiling. Maggie leaned into him, melding her body next to the hard exterior of his. Enticing him, she rubbed her hard nipples against his chest. He buried his face in the hollow of her neck. Her earthy scent engulfed him, making him ache to possess her.

The tick of the grandfather clock brought him back to reality. It'd been so long since he'd felt anything, other than the burning hatred that had infested his lost soul. Maybe there was still some hope left.

Tenderly, he pushed back her unruly, strawberry-blonde hair. His chest grew tight with choked-up emotion. He'd never thought he would find her again. Tears of joy blurred his vision as he bent close, inhaling the sweet scent of her perfume. The desire to hold her close raged within him like an out of control inferno. Bittersweet memories consumed him and made him hunger to have his mortal existence back.

"Welcome home, my darling Maggie," he whispered into her ear as tears spilled down his cheeks. Before he realized it, his fingers trailed down her face to her chin and he tilted her face toward him. So soft, just the way I remember. His fingers played with the fine strands of hair clinging to her earlobe as a faint hint of lavender invaded his senses. The beast within him stirred, trying to rise to claim her once more. No matter how much Elijah wanted to take her into his arms, he knew it was too soon. He had to leave her before he couldn't resist the urge to embrace her. He ached for her

touch, and to hear the soft, velvety tone of her voice. He rose and moved toward the doorway. He glanced over his shoulder one last time, satisfied that she still slept. He took comfort in knowing that she had, at last, returned home.

He wandered up the long, winding staircase to the second floor. His shadowy form glided down the length of the burgundy carpeted hallway. Small floral prints decorated the fading white walls. Their designs barely visible to the naked eye, they were clouded with dust and grime. A heavy sigh escaped him as he vanished before a bedroom door—their bedroom.

He smiled, remembering the first time he'd shown her the room. A deep crimson blush had stained her high cheekbones when she saw the four-poster bed. She'd wept at the sight of their initials carved into the cherry walnut headboard. Elijah opened the matching armoire to the right of the bed. Only one article of clothing still remained inside—her wedding gown.

A soft ruffle filled the room as he took the gown from the armoire. A tender smile graced his powerful jaw as his big, callused fingers caressed the white fabric and fine lace edging. He held it to his face, imagining her wearing it, them dancing around the grand ballroom. A single tear slid down his pale cheek as remnants of their wedding day surfaced. Never again did he wish for her to relive that kind of pain. Angrily, he swiped at the tears as he placed the gown over his arm. Maggie had never gotten the chance to wear it. He'd found it at a small, tucked away boutique on a backstreet in New Orleans, and his heart had ached to see her in it. He gathered her dress in his arms and laid it on the bed. Maybe if she sees her wedding gown, she'll remember me—our life together—and our love.

Since his death, he'd wandered throughout the abandoned plantation house in a lonely existence, filled with despair. There had been no one he could reach out to. When he tried, they all ran away, terrified.

The first rays of the golden dawn began to shine, promising a new day, a day of beginnings and hope. Elijah knew that, for the time being, he had to return from which he came. Maggie must not see him yet. If she did, most likely, she'd reject him for who he'd become. He needed time to prepare her. He didn't want her to run.

Frustration boiled deep within the confines of his existence. Over the years, he'd tried to reach out to others, to prove to them he wasn't just a phantom spirit. There'd been the time when a woman had wandered the halls seeking him out, or so he thought, but when he made himself known, she ran away screaming. Of course, there had been scores of others, including teenagers, trying to prove their bravery, or manhood, by trespassing on his property. It was always the same scenario. He even tried to befriend a little girl once, thinking that maybe she would be different. As he materialized before her, she too went running and screaming, never to return.

At the moment, he was determined to keep as much distance between his sweet Maggie and himself as possible. Now that she'd finally returned, every stolen moment seemed precious. He desired to know that she was near, not just another illusionary fantasy. The lilting sound of her voice made him weep with joy. The thought of her leaving him because of fright tore him apart. He had lost her once and wasn't about to lose her a second time. My Maggie—my love, you'll be with me once more.

He glanced out the bedroom window overlooking the vast backyard with a neglected gazebo, and beyond it to the path leading to the pastures, where herds of longhorn cattle once grazed. Beyond the pastures, rows and rows of cotton used to stand, littering the fields with white, puffy balls. His father had been determined to make a success of the plantation. A barn stood there before the ravages of time tore it asunder. He dared not linger for fear Maggie might discover him and all would be lost.

Chapter Two

"No, no, please no," Isabella mumbled, over and over again. She tossed, and turned upon the king size bed, her breath ragged and beads of sweat covering her brow.

A week had passed since she arrived at the plantation, and, out of concern, Elijah had kept careful guard over his beloved. Love filled his soul with a passion that he'd long craved to taste the ecstasy of. He gently pushed back the cascading curls from her eyes. He had a great desire to touch her as he once had in life, a longing to quench the fire that raged in his soul and now consumed his every thought. He needed to feel her warm, silky skin against his own.

No, I mustn't think about myself. She needs time. Hell, I don't even think she remembers me. Something has happened to cause her to forget about the passion that once warmed our bodies and souls.

Slowly, Elijah rested himself against her and gently brought her body closer to his. The fresh scent of lavender that clung to her skin overwhelmed him. In the many generations that had come and gone since his death, never had he been able to feel so truly alive, nor had he smelled such beauty, or felt such passion. Unable to stop himself, he ran his fingers down her cheek, the side of her neck, and over the swell of her breast. Instantly, her nipple hardened, causing his body to respond in kind. He pulled her closer, rubbing

up against her, letting her feel his arousal. His lips descended. Ever so gently he took her nipple in his mouth, letting the tip of his tongue glide over it.

* * * * *

Isabella stirred. Bit by bit, her eyes fluttered open. Her body felt cold, yet her insides were on fire. Her pale skin prickled with gooseflesh at the sight of the ghost. The bed springs creaked under the strain of her frantic actions.

"Whoa...what do you want?" she stuttered, nearly screaming.

"Maggie, don't worry. I'm here," Elijah spoke in soft tones, trying to pull her back into his embrace.

"I... I'm not worried. You shouldn't be here, there's no such thing as ghosts." She tried to scramble to her feet to get away from him.

"I won't harm you. I love you. Don't you remember the love we once shared?"

"I'm not Maggie! I never loved you!" she screamed, scurrying away from him. Her body shook. She backed into a corner, looking frantically from side to side, seeking a route of escape from the iridescent figure looming only a few feet from her.

"I'll go for now. I can see you don't want me here. I didn't mean to frighten you, love." The crack in his voice—as if he might cry—made Isabella cringe. Elijah's shoulders slumped in defeat as he turned away, his head hanging low.

Relief flooded her as she watched the ghostly figure disappear. *Get yourself together, Isabella. You don't believe in this ghost, remember? Then how in the hell do I explain what I just saw?* A ragged breath escaped her small frame. She rushed through the house. *There's no way I'm staying here.*

Isabella slipped into her tan, thong sandals at the bottom of the staircase, grabbed her purse, and ran out of the house. Oh God, I still have on my clothes from last night. Eww, but there's no way I'm going to go back in there to change now. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't being followed. She needed time to think. Quickly, she climbed into her car and sped out of the driveway, heading for the supermarket. By the time she entered the lot, her nerves were calm, and reasoning had returned. Isabella walked into the crowded market, and was greeted by and odd mixture of stares from everyone. She held her head high as she forced an unconcerned smile on her face.

"Isabella! Hold up a minute. I want to talk to you," yelled Helen, practically running to catch up to her.

"Well, hello, Helen," Isabella said, waving to her girlfriend. She looked down at her friend when she approached, noticing a new wave in her short blonde hair. The orange shirt and green pants she wore blared, declaring her position as a cashier. Helen's blue eyes widened. I still can't stand that tacky uniform of hers. She noticed though that Helen didn't smile back at her.

"Are you crazy? Have you lost what brains you have left in that head of yours? What the hell were you thinking, moving into that creepy, old mansion?"

"Hmm...crazy...I don't believe so. You're lucky I consider you a friend. Otherwise, I'd be pissed off right about now at that insult of yours. And for your information, it isn't a mansion. It's a plantation!"

"Oh Isabella, everyone knows what you've done. How could you be so thoughtless? Don't you care what people think of you anymore?"

"Are you quite finished? Thoughtless and crazy—is that what you think? I never thought you, of all people, would become like the rest of these

townspeople. Everyone in this town is nothing, but a bunch of small-minded, hypocritical busy bodies. Truly, you don't believe in all of them ghost stories? You're not that naive, are you?" She spoke barely above a whisper, her throat tight with anger and hurt. Isabella narrowed her eyes to small slits, unable to contain the rage that burned within her.

"Well, it's dumb to have moved just like that, without a single thought. You should've come and talked to me first," Helen said, crossing her arms over her chest. Her toe tapped impatiently as she stared her friend down.

"When did you become my mother? The last time I checked, I was well over the age of twenty-one and capable of making my own decisions. I didn't know I had to ask you first," spat Isabella, trying to grab hold of a nearby empty cart. She decided to ignore the other woman.

"Oh really, quit being such a drama queen," snapped Helen as she grabbed a hold of Isabella's cart, refusing to let her move.

"Well, if everyone is so concerned about what I'm doing, let it be known, for the record, they don't need to be. Honestly, I'm shocked I haven't made the front page of the daily paper declaring my insanity." Sarcasm laced her voice. She jerked her cart free from the offending woman's hand.

"I'm sorry, but there's no way I'm coming there to visit you," declared Helen in a last, desperate attempt to get Isabella to change her mind.

"Then there's nothing more to say. We're through, considering you no longer wish to remain friends because of where I now live." The sudden loss of their long-term friendship made Isabella want to break down and cry. If that's the way she wants it, then fine!

Isabella hadn't realized until that moment just how shallow her friend was. She couldn't believe that it'd come to this, but if Helen couldn't respect her decision, then she refused to socialize with her ex-best friend. She turned

away from Helen and went about doing her shopping. She wandered the aisles aimlessly, trying to gather what few groceries she might need, but she found it difficult to focus. Giving up, she made her way to the front to checkout. The only register open was Helen's. Squaring her shoulders, holding her head high, and with a stiff upper lip, she moved toward the lane. The last thing she wanted to do was talk to her. The loss of her friendship was more than she could bear, let alone having to go through her line and deal with her attitude. Why can't she accept where I live?

"Honestly, what's wrong with you?" Helen ran a jar of peanut butter across the scanner and it slammed at the end of the counter. "You're tossing our friendship out the window. Why are you acting like this?" The scanner beeped three times before Isabella answered.

"What's wrong with me? Oh, that's rich. For starters, friends don't act this selfish. You're the one who said you wouldn't come and visit me. For another, I'm tired of your nagging. I must've been blind not to realize how shallow you really are until now. Find someone else to involve yourself with. Until you get off of your high-horse attitude, we're through!" Isabella slammed her money on the counter, grabbed the sacks and stomped out of the store. She headed home.

Her heart felt heavy and tears threatened to flow as she weaved her car through the streets. She and Helen had been good friends for well over two years, and now it was all gone just because of where she lived.

She pulled into the driveway, punching the brake with her foot. The car came to a screeching halt. Her jaw fell open. Amazed, she stared at the house. The grass was a lush green with wildflowers of various colors bursting through. The mansion looked as if it had been built only days ago. Long, white banisters lined the front deck, wrapping around the house. Each red brick was perfectly shaped. White shutters rested against the windows. She

viewed long, tapestry drapes through the windows. Gold lanterns lined the driveway.

A striking banner decorated the entryway reading: *Congratulations Elijah and Maggie.* The banner was done in white, black, and gold. White flower petals rested on the deck in the thousands. The house stood two stories high, screaming out its beauty to all those who passed by. *It's absolutely breathtaking.*

When she blinked, all the beauty vanished, but the initiative to restore it came in strong tidal waves. Chills ran down her spine as she remembered reading the sign that once hung over the entryway. Did I just see what I thought I saw? Maybe moving into this place wasn't such a good idea after all, especially if I end up going mad over it.

Isabella clutched the grocery bags, heading for the door on shaky knees. She welcomed the work ahead of her, especially now that she'd captured the image in her mind. She struggled with the door for a moment before it creaked open, and then she gasped. All the bags fell to the floor in a cluttered heap at her feet.

Pictures lined the walls. A large, framed painting hung above the couch. A beautiful woman she assumed must be Maggie had her arm entwined with the man she knew to be Elijah Whick. The woman's hair was done up in a fashionable bun in accordance with the style back then. She wore a full-length blue gown that just allowed the tip of her toes to peek out from under it. Elijah wore a white shirt, and light brown trousers, and black boots. The front of the house stood as the background in the painting.

Isabella almost fainted at the sight of Maggie in the portrait. There was no mistaking the similarities between herself and the woman. They looked identical. How can this possibly be? No wonder he keeps calling me by her name. Isabella collapsed to the hard, wooden floor, trying to gather her

thoughts. Shocked and numbed, her mind reeled. All the stories she'd ever heard about reincarnation danced in her head. She trembled, and her heart raced as she looked up at the painted portrait. Never once had such a possibility ever crossed her mind. Hell, it was damn near insane thinking that one person could live in two different time periods.

What have I gotten myself into? Afraid and alone, she didn't know what to do next. She couldn't leave. She had nowhere else to go. This was her home no matter what. She knew she'd been given a rare glimpse into the past. Is this all Elijah's doing? She rose on unsteady feet, gathering the groceries; she placed them back in the bags and made her way to the kitchen. In a blur of muddled confusion, she put the items away.

There was no time like the present and what better way to get her mind off of things than to clean. First on her cleaning agenda was the newly remodeled and updated kitchen. The spacious room was more than she could have hoped for. Fresh lemon-colored paint covered the walls. Marble flooring with yellow roses in the middle of each tile covered the walking surface, gleaming in different shades depending on how the light hit it. Double doors framed the entryway with small, diamond-shaped windows in the middle. What a shame that the rest of the house never got the chance for such a make-over.

Chrome appliances covered the left wall. The stove top had six burners and a ten inch square grill off to the side. A large gold and silver chandelier hung in the middle of the ceiling. Crystal gemstones dangled seven inches from the fourteen-foot ceilings. Four large sinks dominated one area of the counter. She was thankful that the room could still use some polishing and dusting. If I'm cleaning, I sure won't have time to think about the crazy turn my life has taken. Cobwebs lined the ceiling, yellow film covered the chandelier, and grimy dirt covered the floors, yet the beauty was recognizable.

As she worked, nightfall brought a thunderstorm in its wake that rattled the structure. Lightning danced, bringing back an eerie feeling. It made her wonder what other surprises lurked within the mansion's walls. Isabella finished and stood back to look over her progress. The room now sparkled from ceiling to floor.

Six hours in one room. Girl, you have to move faster. At this rate you'll be cleaning for several years to come. Isabella grasped the bucket of cleaning supplies with aching hands and ascended the creaky stairs, trudging down the hall and into her room. She moaned, glancing around the room that was now hers.

Dingy yellow and beige curtains covered the windows. Without hesitation, she removed them, throwing them into a pile on the floor. They weren't even fit to wash, and they were going directly to the trash. The four-poster bed with an intricately carved headboard rested against the left wall. A fur rug lay on the floor at the foot of the bed. Before long, she'd stripped the room of all the linens and fumigated the furniture with Lysol. Fresh, clean bedding made a huge difference in the room. The cherry wood armoire stood straight against the right wall. There was a full size standing mirror close to the window. Once the dusting was done, the room shined with potential. Exhausted, Isabella threw herself onto the king size bed, vowing to finish first thing in the morning. After all, it wasn't getting done on its own.

Exhausted and spent mentally from the day's harrowing events, all she wanted to do was sleep and forget any of it had ever happened. She let go of a long sigh as she curled up, trying to find just a moment's comfort from the mess her life had turned into. Within moments, she slept soundly.

Standing in the bedroom, she looked out on the grounds of the plantation that was their home. The moon shone bright, stars decorated the night sky.

"Hey, what are you doing?" asked an all too familiar voice from behind her as his strong arms circled her waist, hugging her tight.

"Waiting on my husband. What else?"

"Well then, he must be a very lucky man indeed to have such a sexy wife."

"So you say -. "

Her words were cut short as he turned her around and devoured her mouth. Firm hands glided down to caress the soft mounds of her buttocks. His fingers pulled up the length of her gown as he backed her up toward the bed.

"Hmm... do you know what you're doing to me, my dear husband?"

"Why don't you show me, wife?"

She shoved him away, breaking their contact. Within moments her nightgown fell discarded at her feet. She stood before him nude, needy and wet. In one swift motion she grabbed his hand, placing it at the junction between her legs, letting him feel just how ready she was for him.

Something brushed her cheek, stirring her from her sound sleep. Frantically she looked around, but saw nothing. *Damn, it was only a dream.* She lay back down and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Three

Elijah appeared at the foot of her bed, the wedding gown dangling over his arm. He watched her sleep. She seemed so peaceful, yet she was just as feisty as he remembered his sweet Maggie to be.

The scent of lavender swirled about him, bringing his senses to life. He leaned in close to the angel sleeping so contentedly, letting his fingers trail down her cheek, to the hollow of her throat. A shudder ran through him. If only I were human once more, my darling, I would show you the true depth of my love for you.

His lips brushed the top of her head. He straightened and took a step back, letting go of a ragged breath. His soul ached for a life he knew he could never have again. He reclined in the chair next to her bed. He would wait 'til she awoke to surprise her with the gift. If the portrait wasn't enough to make her remember, will the gown be enough? What else can I possibly do?

Winning Maggie over was becoming more difficult than he thought it would be. She left him confused and bewildered. One moment she seemed happy to be back where she belonged, and then the next, he found her in the throes of despair. Women never change, no matter what century they live in.

He squirmed in the chair, his large frame growing increasingly uncomfortable. He stood to work the kinks from his ethereal body. The wedding gown fell to the floor. *Maggie, when will you realize how much I love*

you?

A shimmering veil of fading moonlight filtered through the bedroom window. He remembered a time gone by, a time when they had both been happy and alive. He could still remember the leisurely, evening strolls that they took down the vineyard lanes. Oh how I long to have you back at my side. Just to hold you, to feel my love returned. They had only begun to plan their lives together, and then the war broke out. A war that tore families apart and needlessly ruined homes and lives. Brother was pitted against brother and all for what? A bloody thing called politics. Everyone on both sides suffered dearly.

Desire stirred within him as Isabella awoke. She stretched languidly. Her loose hair fell about her shoulders. She sat up in bed, slowly rubbing the last remnants of sleep from her eyes. It wasn't quite daylight yet. Even with her hair disheveled, she was beautiful. Longing overtook him.

She sucked in a startled breath, her eyes widening. "God, Elijah I wish you would quit scaring the hell out me like that! What do you want?" She stared at him, drawing the covers close under her chin as if to protect herself. He couldn't help but laugh at her antics. After all, he was a ghost, a cover was no form of protection.

"MaggieE "

"Oh, don't Maggie me, how many times do I have to tell you that isn't my name? Either call me by my correct name, Isabella, or get out."

"Once again, I'll go. It seems all I ever do is upset you."

His form faded before her. She threw back the covers. "Why do I feel so lonely when he isn't here? I feel more alone than I ever have in my entire life. Elijah?"

Silence greeted her.

* * * * *

I wish people would realize just because I'm a ghost it doesn't mean I can't feel joy, sorrow, love or pain. He wandered along the barns and down to the vineyards. I wish I could make her understand what it's been like all these years without her. His soul ached. He reached above him, taking his pent up frustration out on the tree limb, trying to relieve some of his anger. There's been no one, absolutely no one, I could turn to. I've been miserable wandering the shadows of my existence. He fell to his knees, cupping his face in his hands as he cried for everything that had been taken from him. God, how I would give anything, including my soul, just to have another chance at life with her.

"Elijah, wait!"

Her desperate call pulled him back to her. Invisible, he watched as she hung her head in defeat.

"What?" he asked.

"Where are you?"

"I'm here. That's all you need to know."

"Very well, I guess I deserve that, but could you please just call me Isabella?"

"You go by your middle name now. Why?"

"That's my first name. Magdalena is my middle name." Her tone softened and he caught the subtle change.

"Hmm, it used to be the other way around."

"Would you please show yourself to me?"

"Why? I thought you liked it better when I wasn't here."

"It makes me feel like I'm crazy talking to someone I can't see. Look, can we just come to some sort of truce?" Isabella stretched her arms above her head. She eyed him wearily as he took shape.

"Will that make you happy?"

"For the time being, yes." She sighed, a heavy breath that shook her small form.

"Very well, we've a truce for now, but I want something in return."

"What's that, Elijah?"

"I want you to stop treating me like I don't exist. I want to be able to spend time with you."

"You're forgetting you're a ghost. Men can be such idiots at times." She rolled her eyes.

He set his jaw. There was only so much a man could take, even if he was a ghost. He vanished, determined to leave her and her insults behind.

"Elijah, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. Please, stay with me."

Her voice drew him like a moth to a flame. It was useless to try and resist.

"What is it now?" he asked, standing at the foot of the bed.

"You have to understand, I'm not used to having to share my home with someone who isn't, alive. It's going to take some time to get used to."

"And what am I supposed to do in the meantime, Ma—Isabella?"

The blank look she gave him said it all. Frustration controlled his mind and his body, and he turned his back on her, taking several deep breaths until he was able to speak to her in a civilized manner.

"What's this?" The bed creaked and her footsteps sounded on the floor in delicate whispers.

He turned back to face her.

She held up the white bundle of fabric in her delicate hands, breaking him out of his reverie. Puzzled, she stood beside the bed, tracing the lace with her thumb.

"It's for you. I hoped when you saw it, you might, in some small measure, remember what we meant to each other in another time. It's your wedding dress, my beloved."

She held the gown against her body. It fell in luxurious folds of white silk taffeta until the hem just barely touched the floor. Small, glass beads decorated its full folds in a rose pattern. Delicate lace trimmed the neckline, the long flowing sleeves, and bottom of the gown. Small tassels hung on each side of the waistline.

"Elijah, I'm speechless. This is absolutely beautiful. I've never seen anything like it."

"You like it then?"

"Yes, very much so. This must've cost a great deal of money though."

"It's worth it just to see the smile upon your face."

"Oh, Elijah, I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything, my beloved, just enjoy it."

She raced across the bedroom and stood before the full length, cherry wood mirror. It pleased him immensely to see her swirling before the mirror admiring his gift. Sadness replaced her happy expression of just moments before.

How I would give anything to walk you down the aisle, my beloved.

She stood frozen, holding the precious gift against her slender body.

"But I couldn't possibly keep it. It's way too expensive."

"It's yours, and it always has been."

Chapter Four

Where's Elijah this morning? Before Isabella could give any more thought to him, she heard the shrill ringing of the phone. The constant calls only served to irritate her more. This was the sixth call of the day already, and it was barely ten in the morning.

Don't people have better things to do than to bug me? She had plenty to do if she could just stay away from answering the phone long enough. She stomped toward the offending object lying upon the stained maple stand in the hallway.

"Hello?" She groaned, tapping her foot impatiently.

"Ms. Reynolds, please hear me out. I'm begging you not to hang up again," rushed the male voice on the other end of the line.

Closing her eyes, she silently counted to five, waiting for the wave of annoyance at the man's stupidity to pass. She sighed. Restless and bored with the conversation already, she wanted nothing more than to be rid of this pest. Why can't people just take no for an answer?

"Mr. Williams, I already told you that I'm not interested in any type of deal that you've got to offer. Get the point, and that it's—not happening! I've done my best to be nice about this, now please quit calling me before I forget I'm a lady. My answer isn't going to change now, or ever. Have a good

day, Mr. Williams."

The echo of the slamming receiver made her ears ache. She prayed the aggravating salesman would quit calling her. As she turned to go about the rest of her day, the knock of a visitor stopped her. She glanced at a nearby mirror to check her appearance. It wouldn't do to have visitors thinking she was nothing more than a ragamuffin who didn't care about how she greeted them. Isabella's plain white T-shirt fit snug against her chest and gray sweats clung to her slender body. Her hair was pulled back in a navy blue ponytail holder, with a few straggling curls floating around her face.

The brass door knocker sounded, echoing throughout the first floor of the house as she headed toward the parlor. She entertained the idea of not answering it at first, until the person began banging earnestly. The constant slamming of it was unbearable. *Talk about giving a person a headache, gee wiz. This had better be good or else.* Isabella made her way to the door, cracking it open.

"Now what?" she demanded, totally exasperated as she stared at the offending man just on the other side. Closing her eyes, she leaned her forehead against the wood before glaring at him.

"Hello again, Ms. Reynolds. I beg of you, please just give me a few minutes of your time," Mr. Williams pleaded, sticking his foot in the door while pushing it open with his hand.

"You know, Mr. Williams, you really are the reason why people hate door to door salespeople. I already told you I'm not striking a deal of any sort with you. What does it take for you to understand the English word: *No!* Is there something about it that you just can't quite grasp?"

She glared at the short, chunky man. His dirty blond hair appeared pasted to his head by sweat. To top it all off, he wore dark shoes and a red,

white, and blue checkered, business jacket. He backed up a step but forged ahead anyhow and ignored the blatant insult. How she wished she could smack the smirk off his face as he waved his cell phone in her face like some kind of mystical object.

Elijah, right about now would be a perfect time for you to make an appearance. Where the hell are you when I need you?

"You called my love?" asked Elijah.

"Some help here would be nice." She stamped her foot, her hands on her hips as she looked directly behind her offending guest.

He looked over his shoulder to see who she spoke to, shrugged and returned his attention back to her. "But that's what I'm trying to do, help you by making you this once in a lifetime deal, Isabella."

"Humph...I wasn't talking to you," snorted Isabella, backing away from him and the offending odor his overpowering, cheap cologne. Suave and debonair he ain't, the grease ball.

"Then who were you talking to?" he whispered, moving in closer to her. He reached out a hand to take hers.

"My name is Ms. Reynolds. Don't ever call me Isabella." She growled, taking a step toward him, then quickly backed away to be sure he didn't touch any part of her. The look of fear on his face was laughable. She would've done just that if she hadn't been so angry.

"Ms. Reynolds, my reliable sources tell me that you're now the new owner of this old, depleted plantation." He paused. "Well, what I'm here to do is make you a very lucrative offer. One that I don't see how a lady in your situation could possibly turn down."

"Excuse me? My situation, just what do you mean by that?" she

demanded, her frustration mounting. Her toe beat out a steady, annoyed rhythm as her arms crossed over her heaving breasts protectively.

"A single woman here all alone can't possibly be serious about restoring this old dump. I realize you moved in here because you've got nowhere else to go. You've put up a fine front like a good little girl, but now, the game's over. I'm just the man to help you."

"Yes, I do intend to restore it all by myself!" *Oh, the nerve of this man.*"Now would be really nice, Elijah."

Mr. Williams winced when she mocked his exact tone, then scanned the room for whoever she spoke to. He licked one finger and rubbed back several strands of grease slackened hair, his pot belly protruding over the belt of his checkered tweed pants.

She shuddered.

"Mr. Williams as I..."

"Please, please call me Bob, all the ladies do." He winked at her, trying once more to get closer. "Please, just calm down, you're starting to act like a crazy woman."

"Do you mind? I wouldn't be acting crazy if you'd get it through your thick skull what the word *no* means. I'll say this one last time. I've no interest in selling my home now or in the future. Is that understood?"

"What if I were to offer you a million dollars for this old hole?"

Fury rose inside her with a speed that not even she understood. Her body shook with repressed rage. Her chest hurt; it was so tight. She clenched her fists at her side causing her nails to dig in painfully to the palms of her hands.

"There's no way in hell I'd ever sell my home to an idiot like you, Mr.

Williams, not now, not ever! Now, I'd appreciate it if you'd leave, and don't bother contacting me ever again."

"You'll live to regret your decision, Ms. Reynolds, mark my words." His pockmarked face turned beet red as he wiped the sweat from his brow. Finally he started backing toward the door as fast as his roly poly body would allow.

"If I were you, I wouldn't go around threatening an innocent woman, such as myself. Obviously, you've forgotten about the ghost who haunts and protects these grounds. If you don't leave me alone, and get off of my property, I'll have Elijah Whick haunt you for the rest of your miserable life. Do you get my drift?" She spat at him.

"Uh...uh, I didn't mean any harm, Ms. Reynolds. You really are crazy, lady. Have a nice day. I'll be leaving now." He turned and fled.

She watched him waddle back to his Dodge pickup before she slammed the door and locked it. After all of this, the last thing she wanted was anyone else dropping by for an unannounced visit. I can't believe it. I just turned down a million dollars.

* * * * *

Elijah heard the entire conversation between Mr. Williams and Isabella. There were some advantages to being a ghost. He intended to make sure that the creep never bothered her again, and there was no time like the present.

"Damned crazy wench. Doesn't know what she's doing..." the chubby man muttered.

Resentment filled Elijah as he listened to Mr. Williams cursing the woman he loved. How dare he call her a crazy wench! Maybe it's time to live

up to some of the townspeople's ridiculous stories about my haunting.

Another long line of curses erupted as the man dropped his truck keys. He went to reach for them, and the keys levitated until they were jingling at eye level. Elijah gave him time to take all of this in, making sure to stay invisible. He watched as the man became rooted to the spot, unable to take his eyes off the keys. His jaw fell open in horrified silence. When he reached for the keys, the unseen force moved them out of his reach. They landed two feet from the green pick-up.

"Damn it all to hell! I just had to come out this morning."

Elijah watched as the stubborn mule glanced around, frantic. Obviously, assuming no one had been witnessing this event, he attempted to gather his keys. His well-rounded backside faced Elijah as he bent over to retrieve them. A solid kick sent the chubby salesman flying to the ground, face first. He spit and sputtered the flecks of dirt from his mouth as he attempted to rise. Elijah pinned him to the ground.

"Ouch!"

His keys were flung even further from his pudgy grasp. He rolled over to his side and tried to scoot closer to the keys. Elijah rammed his booted foot into the side of the fallen man's ribs. Mr. Williams clutched his stomach, fear apparent in his eyes.

"Don't ever come back here again, or you'll be the one who lives to regret it!"

Elijah tapped him on his shoulder, causing Mr. Williams to turn on his heel, searching for his unseen opponent. He watched the terrified man run like hell for his truck. He almost fell as he frantically threw open the door and propelled his rotund body inside. He never looked back as he sped away.

Elijah made a solemn vow right then. "Never again will anyone cause

my beloved harm in any way, shape or form. My sweet, sweet Maggie, I'll never give up on us, or the love I feel for you. One day, I'll reclaim all that's been lost to me, including your love."

Chapter Five

24th of April, 1864

My dearest Maggie,

The news of your family's death and the loss of your home pains me greatly, my beloved. I'm sorry I can't be there with you. Albert, my overseer, and Lily the housekeeper will see to it that anything you need done will be taken care of.

Maggie, you know that I love you and I'd be there with you if it was possible, but I must continue the search for my missing brother, William. There are rumors running rampant that he has turned spy. Rumors are surfacing saying he has fled north to seek refuge from the Union Army. God, nothing makes me angrier than him being called a traitor. We both know he would never do such a terrible thing. I truly believe that he's alive out there. I will not be convinced otherwise unless his body is found.

Hopefully, my dear, my search will be over soon, and I can return to your side. I'll spare you the details of the many horrors that I've been forced to witness as countrymen fight countrymen. I'm sorry my duty to my brother has torn us apart for now, but I promise I'll be home soon.

I miss you so much, my darling. The days have been relentless and the nights filled with nightmarish images. The only thing which keeps me sane is the fact that you love me. Be strong for me, my darling, and remember, without you, I'm nothing and with you, I'm truly everything. You're the other half that makes me whole, completing me to the extent that only a man in love could possibly understand.

With love,

Elijah Whick

The rain outside sang against the windowpanes. Isabella jumped as a boom of thunder clapped loose. The discarded letter fell, unnoticed, to the floor. Lightning flickered against the glass in an eerie dance. She rubbed her arms, trying to ward off the chill. Her emotions raged out of control. Retrieving the letter from the floor, she held it close to her heart. Never had she read a letter so filled with love and sorrow. She ached to be held by a man such as Elijah Whick. *I wish I could feel your arms holding me close*.

Poor Maggie. Not only was her life devastated by the images of a country knee deep in war, but to have lost her entire family, and then to have the man she loved out in the midst of it all searching for his brother. I'm so sorry Elijah, for what you had to go through. Isabella felt Maggie's pain as if it were her own. Heated tears toppled over her eyes, slipping down as she shook, wiping the wetness away with her silken palms. Her hands were so jittery, she almost dropped the letter.

Why aren't there any good men like him left? Why can't I find a love like that, filled with such passion? Does that kind of love even exist anymore?

She opened the next envelope carefully, making sure not to tear it in her eagerness. She just had to know what the other letters contained. Why do I feel so damn empty inside? Why must you always find a way to consume my thoughts, Elijah?

1st of May, 1864

My dearest Maggie,

I felt a deep-rooted need to write today after what I've seen. It wasn't pretty. So many innocent deaths litter the hills and valleys of this country. I do believe everyone involved in this senseless act has totally forgotten the politics that motivated us into such chaotic times. Why can't we act the like the civilized human beings we claim to be? I can only pray that in my absence, My Darling, that you're well and doing fine. I pray to God that you shall remain so, dearest.

Often, I can't help but wonder why in the hell I'm out here. I know my brother needs me, and I'll continue my search until he is found, but it gets harder each day to keep the faith that I'll yet find him alive.

They say General Grant is only days from conquering our troops. I'm afraid to say that it just might come to pass, my love. I don't wish more tragedy to befall our beloved south, but surely, something has got to give. I don't know how much more of this I can take, Maggie. This war has an odd way of doing things to a man. I don't know if I'll ever know another peaceful night's sleep.

I want nothing more than to be home with you, to see your smiling face gazing upon mine, to feel the warmth of your body pressed against me. Maggie, not one moment of the day goes by in which I don't think of you. I keep your hair ribbon in my pocket close to my heart, to remind me there is still some goodness, some sweet innocence left in this world.

I love and miss you, my darling.

Love,

Elijah

Isabella gently rubbed the frayed red ribbon between her fingers. A shock of electricity shot up her arm. She stared at the ribbon in her lap,

baffled. Her throat grew tight with emotion, her heart felt heavy, and her mind clouded with conflicting thoughts. A long sigh rattled her frayed nerves, and her shoulders drooped a bit. Her eyes stung from all the tears that had spilled. She leaned her tired, sore body back against the soft cushions of the couch, stretching, trying to work out all of the kinks. She yawned, glancing at the clock which read five fifty-eight pm.

I need a break; I can't take any more of this. Elijah, why are you doing this to me? Why do I feel like you wrote those love letters to me? It's impossible, and yet... Her soul ached, but for what, Isabella couldn't say. She wiped the tears from her damp cheeks. She closed her eyes in an attempt to gather herself. Too many emotions ran deep within her soul, cutting to her heart. She longed for a love such as Maggie's and Elijah's. She let go of a suffocating sigh, and pushed her hair back from her eyes. She clamped her teeth over her quivering lower lip until she drew blood. Confused, perplexed, and frightened, she stared at the television, but didn't watch the drama flashing on it.

No matter how hard she tried to fight the feelings of déjà vu, she just couldn't shake the sensation. She had lived in the house two weeks now, and she knew, without a doubt, that ghosts did, indeed, exist. She found herself missing him, wanting him to be near. Every since their truce, her feelings toward him kept changing, becoming something more. Aggravated with the overwhelming emotions, Isabella rose with cat-like grace to make her way upstairs.

Isabella wanted nothing more than to sleep. She stripped off all except her panties, before sliding in-between the firm mattress and the soft comforter, sinking into its warmth, purring softly like a kitten. She prayed for sleep and forgetfulness, but it wasn't to be. Strange images fluttered here and there.

She stood out in an open meadow as the sky filled with smoke. Her eyes and her breathing came with difficultly. Her right hand clutched her throat. She watched as her home went up in a broiling mass of flames set by the Union soldiers. Frantically, she searched for her father, mother and little sister, and her heart seized in terror when her sister's screams of horror fled into the night from an upstairs bedroom window. She was trapped. Her mother ran back toward the massive scene of destruction, screaming out her grief.

Gun shots rang out as a soldier leveled his gun and shot her in the back. Her mother went tumbling face first, in the dirt. The soldier's eerie laughter of glee filled the gloomy night. Bile rose in her throat and spilled forth, rendering her helpless to move from the horrid events being played out. Trembling, she watched her father run full force at the soldier, determined to get revenge for his wife's murder. Within moments, his lifeless body laid sprawled out on the blood-soaked earth. The soldier shot him without remorse. Their earsplitting cries of triumph made her quake.

Black smoke billowed toward the heavens as the men rode out of sight. Her home was nothing more than cinder, ash and soot leaving her desolate. The only thing she had left to cling to, were memories from a time gone by. The ones she loved were as silent as their tombs would be. Her body was racked with sobs as she fell to her knees. Her chest heaved with the effort to release the emotion that choked her to an unbearable means. There was nothing or any family she loved left.

Everything went black.

Screams filled the night as Isabella sat bolt upright in bed clutching the covers to her heaving bosom. She wiped tears away as she scanned the room to make sure she was indeed in her own house. She took several deep breaths until her breathing returned to normal.

Oh my god, what a nightmare. I never want to experience that again. Even though she lay back down, it was a long time before peaceful sleep claimed her. Just shortly before midnight, she awoke to strange noises filtering up through the wooden floorboards, soft and melodious, a sound so sweet, it wove a circle of enchantment about her. It tugged at her very being until she could resist the urge no longer. She had to find out where it was coming from.

She climbed out of bed, tiptoed down the winding staircase, gripping the banister for added support. Her heart thumped in her chest. Her breathing came in quick, short gasps. Her eye caught a dim glow coming from beneath the door of what once was Elijah's study. What the hell is going on? Cautiously, she peered into the room lit by several black and orange candles.

Before the red brick fireplace stood two women. "Maggie?" choked Isabella staring in disbelief at the women, but neither acknowledged her presence. She assumed the other was a slave of sorts, but if she was a slave, she looked nothing like one. There was something very different about this woman, a regal air. Her hair was done up in a rustic turban, and she wore a free-flowing, sleeveless dress, with several pouches.

Isabella stood in the open doorway, watching. She couldn't hear what was being spoken. The dark-skinned woman leaned in close to Maggie, offering her a cup of something to drink, before she sprinkled a powdery substance over a wall hanging that she held. Maggie drank the contents from the glass in one gulp.

"May the desires of your heart and soul become reality," spoke the woman as she sprinkled the same powder over Maggie.

What's going on? Just what the hell did she mean about it becoming a reality? Isabella scratched her head in a state of confusion. A small ripple

exploded across the room, filling the air with a blue mist that turned green, then red before disappearing altogether. Maggie retrieved three golden coins from the folds of her mauve gown which was adorned with a black apron. She handed the money over to the strange woman.

"Speak of this to no one. Do you hear me?" asked Maggie, grabbing hold of the woman's arm.

"So be it, but heed my words well, Mistress."

The last words she heard of their conversation would be forever etched into the hollows of her mind. In the blink of an eye, the scene disappeared, leaving only her in the doorway and the room as it had been. The old grandfather clock chimed upon the twelfth hour bringing Isabella out of her daze. The witching hour, when magic and reality become one, and a time when the veils between the worlds are thinnest.

She rubbed her tired eyes, but when she opened them, she was still the only one in the room. Gone were the black and orange candles, the two women, and the wall hanging that she couldn't quite make out. The chill of the room wrapped itself around her. The fireplace stood cold and barren except, for the iron poker that leaned against the hearth, and an old, rusty, banged-up coal bucket. The bookshelves stood empty. The window was clouded over by years of accumulated dirt and grime leaving no room for sunlight to gleam through the glass.

She wrapped her arms around herself, shivering from the cold air. She shuffled around the room, looking over the furniture still remaining, a small, roll-top desk, one chair, and an oversized cedar chest that stood directly beside it. Isabella half expected to see Elijah sitting at his desk, working on the plantation ledgers.

She rubbed her hands against her arms trying to warm herself but was

unable to. "What exactly just happened in here?" she mumbled. *I'm not insane. I know I saw Maggie and that strange slave woman.* She closed the door and made her way to the kitchen. "I need a drink, something, anything to calm my nerves."

Scouring the cabinets, the only alcohol to be found in the entire house was a pint of vodka. Reaching for a glass she poured a hefty amount of the clear liquid. It left a burning sensation in its wake as it sped down her throat causing her to sputter and shake. She nearly dropped the glass when she remembered the black woman's name. Sienna, only she wasn't a slave, she was a healing woman, a witch to the local folk. Living in this house wasn't turning out to be anything like she expected. Why in the hell can't both the dead and the living just leave me alone?

* * * * *

"What is wrong, my sweet? Why do you look so pale?" Elijah asked, concerned with the look that had been pasted to Isabella's face for the past thirty minutes.

"Damn, there you go again, scaring the hell out of me! You have to quit doing that. I've been terrified enough for one night, all right?"

"Sorry, I just can't stand seeing you like this." He hovered close; searching her face, his hand reaching toward her but he couldn't bring himself to touch her.

"Well, you coming in here and scaring me isn't helping matters any."

His jaw line grew tight, and his lips pressed together. A low growl rumbled through his ethereal form.

"I've done nothing other than to try and befriend you, and still you treat me like I'm a piece of furniture in our house!"

Exasperated, she threw up her hands crying out, "What do you want from me?"

"Damn it, Isabella, what happened to the day when we loved each other? Do you really have to be such a bitch all of the time? I'm exhausted from trying with you. You're lucky I'm here. I hear your thoughts, and I'm not stupid. You want me around, so why don't you work on acting like it?"

"Well, um..." Speechless, she just stood there staring at him, unable to find the words.

"Well, um what? Can't you handle the fact that you love me still? Am I truly that horrid?"

"It's not that! And I don't like you insulting me."

"Doesn't feel good, does it? Don't ever talk to me in such ways again. Now answer me, do you want me here?"

Isabella fell to her knees, sobbing into her hands as she trembled.

"Y... Yes, but this is all so strange to me. I'm not Maggie. At least, I don't believe I am. My name is Isabella. I've never loved you, nor have I thought, for one second, until I stepped into this place, that you were real. Now, I have all of these strange things happening to me. I'm having nightmares. You're a ghost, nothing more than a spirit that has an attachment to a mortal woman who no longer exists in my time. Can't you see this?" She folded her arms across her thighs, her face drenched with tears.

"I know exactly what I am. Yes, I'm a spirit, and I'm here for my bride. If you would just allow yourself to see, and understand the truth, it won't be so difficult." The anger of earlier gone now, his heart ached for understanding, and the return of the woman she used to be. She's just as stubborn as she was then.

"Hold me, please?" she begged in soft gasps, tears still welling in her eyes.

"Yes, my beloved. I've wanted nothing else." He wrapped his arms around her shuddering form. Happiness filled his soul. For once, something good was happening, something he could actually grasp the feel of.

* * * * *

She sat on the floor, her eyes closed as her lips quivered with emotion. Every nerve ending sang in disbelief as Elijah folded his arms around her. Can I really be feeling his touch? How's something like this possible? Warmth surrounded her, and peace overtook her. Her heart raced in excitement. He smelled like the outdoors, and tobacco, as if he'd just smoke a cigar. She gave in to the longing, the need to have him near. Love filled her soul. Shock grasped her heart. She could feel something, something that was strong. A sense that she had never felt before, or even heard described.

Was it love, lust? Could it have been memories finally settling in, or just the mere fact that she could feel Elijah hold her as if he were truly there? She sighed, her crying calming into small sniffles. She closed her eyes, her head resting against the broad chest of a man who, she once thought was nothing more than a tale kids made up to scare one another. She knew without a doubt, he was real, whether in ghost form or not. He was real and he loved her. She knew, no matter what happened, he would make sure he was there, for her whether she wanted him around or not. And oh how she wanted him there. Only with him around was there a true sense of peace and comfort to be had.

Chapter Six

Isabella's eyes sparkled as she crouched down before the old cedar chest. She admired the intricate beauty as she ran her fingertips over the smooth wood. Her mind filled with the endless possibilities of what could lie within it. She lifted the lid and to her amazement, it was almost full. Timidly, she reached into the trunk, and removed what appeared to be a woman's diary along with a neatly folded, multicolored cloth. The next two items shocked Isabella.

They can only be Elijah's. There was a pistol still in its holster and his Confederate uniform. It was tattered, and torn from the ravages of time and the war itself. Seeing his gun and uniform reinforced the history of the house, and the man who had roamed its halls. The man she knew she was beginning to fall in love with.

Several loud knocks sounded, ending the peacefulness of the morning. Sighing, she threw the uniform over her arm. She took the stairs two at a time until she stood at the front door. She hoped that, whoever it was, it wouldn't take too long. She was anxious to get back to the chest to discover what other hidden treasures lay within it.

She opened the door and glared. The woman who stood before her wore a business dress of teal green and high heel shoes. Her hair was done up in a bun. She reminded Isabella of an old school teacher.

Oh no, not another visitor.

"May I help you?"

"I presume you're Isabella Reynolds, are you not?" came the woman's haughty question, as she looked down her nose at Isabella.

"Well, who else would I be!" The woman rankled her nerves already, and she didn't even know what she wanted yet. How dare she show up on my doorstep and then talk to me this way? Who does this woman think she's talking to?

"I am Victoria Hamish, with the historical society here in the area. Maybe you've heard of us?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Could I come inside and discuss an important matter with you?"

"Such as?"

Victoria shifted her weight back and forth, and clenched her fists at her sides. Her lips pressed tightly together, and Isabella could have sworn that her nostrils flared.

Isabella waited, refusing to budge one inch until she answered her question.

"The society wishes to discuss making you an offer. This would be much easier to do inside. May I please come in so we can talk about this like civilized human beings?"

Isabella smiled and waved the woman through the entrance, allowing Miss Hamish to follow her into the living room. The afternoon sun filtered through the windows, giving the room a warm, cozy feeling. They sat across from one another at either end of the couch.

"What exactly is all of this about, Ms. Hamish?" Isabella eyed her suspiciously.

"I don't know if you realize it or not, but as that uniform shows, Mr. Elijah Whick and his brother William were once Confederate soldiers. He, like many other southern families, owned slaves, and produced a great deal of the south's cotton and cattle. It's on these two bases as well as the plantation's architectural build, that I've made this visit today. It has a great deal of historical value. We would like to purchase the plantation to preserve it, and let it be shared with the rest of the world as it was meant to be. And of course, in time, it would become a tourist attraction."

"And I suppose the fact that it's haunted means nothing to your society? Is that considered an extra bonus feature?"

"Now Ms. Reynolds, as both of us know, ghosts don't exist. Those are merely fairytales, for young children. Please tell me you're not that naive?"

"I see, but I'll tell you there's no way you can top the offer that has already been made by Mr. Williams."

"Oh?" asked Ms. Hamish, shock clearly written all over her face that someone else had beaten her to the punch.

"Yes."

"What kind of offer?"

"Can you beat a million dollars?"

"Someone...someone offered you a million dollars?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"In all honesty, no, we can't, Ms. Reynolds. But, I would hope that you would rather see it preserved than turned over to just anyone. Who knows

what they would do to it?"

"I'll tell you the same thing as I told the other person, Ms. Hamish. I don't care what reasons you've got behind your offer, but my answer will be the same. No!"

"You can't do that!" hollered Ms. Hamish, interrupting her, nearly coming off the couch.

"Can't? I can, and I will not change my mind. I'm not interested in selling my home now or in the future."

"Do you realize what kind of backing and funds you'll have to acquire to restore the plantation to its former glory? I think not. Nor are you capable of undertaking such a feat alone. So, why don't you just be sensible about this whole thing and accept my offer?"

"I don't believe you realize exactly who you're talking to. I don't care what you think. This is *my* home and will remain my home until I die. You're on my property, so kindly remember your manners. This meeting is over and you have my answer, *no!* Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

"Well, I never," huffed Victoria Hamish, grabbing her purse as she headed for the front door.

"You never will," Isabella called after her. She stifled a laugh as Victoria Hamish almost fell on her tush before making it out the door.

* * * * *

Isabella laid the uniform next to the chest in the attic. She needed some fresh air. Especially after Ms. Hamish's visit. The sun shined through the dusty attic window and birds chirped merrily in the trees, beckoning her outside. She grabbed her blue shawl and headed out the back door. Her strawberry-blonde locks fluttered in the breeze like baby birds trying out

their new wings. She stuck her hands in the pockets of her jeans as she ambled on.

She took in the fact that there were several unkempt rose bushes around the house. She walked further back toward the path leading out to the fields and pastures. There were numerous small, simple houses that must have served as worker's quarters. She refused to believe that Elijah had ever owned slaves. Throughout this part of Texas, slaves were a rarity. They were owned in the larger cities such as Dallas and Fort Worth. She wondered what the prim and proper Ms. Hamish would have thought of that news. Shaking her head, she chuckled and made her way along. She caught sight of one small cottage which stood apart from the rest and was somewhat larger in size. *I wonder if that one belonged to Sienna*.

A stray black cat lounged on the step, enjoying the warmth of the sun. Isabella moved closer but still managed to keep a safe distance from the feral cat. She noticed several strange markings at the top of the door. They seemed to be some kind of ancient symbols or runes, ones that only witches knew the meaning of. Chills ran down her spine. The cat hissed, its fur standing on end. She hurried along, not wishing to raise the creature's wrath any further.

Everywhere she looked, there were pecan trees. Their seeds littered the ground. More than halfway down the path, several barns came into view. She moved along each time-ravished barn slowly checking out the structure. They wouldn't be of any use to her now. The poor, old things looked ready to collapse at any moment under a good Texas wind. Beyond the barns, one could see open grassland for miles and miles.

It was almost dark now as she made her way back toward the house. Her mind wandered to the journal she had found. Her legs ached from the exercise. Some nice hot cocoa sounds good right about now.

The hairs stood up on the back of her neck as she rounded the gazebo. She cringed when pitiful wails punctured the early evening breeze. Isabella's stomach flip-flopped. Bile rose up as she took it all in. The woman's arms were wrapped around the man's legs and feet as sobs continued to drift upward toward the darkening heavens. The man's head lolled to one side, and his hands were tied behind his back. He just dangled there from the old oak tree.

She couldn't hold it in any longer, and she retched. Her hands still covered her ears as she bent over from the pain. Tears blurred her vision. Taking several deep breaths, Isabella gathered strength to take a closer look. She inched forward as the woman dropped the rest of the way to the ground then crouched over, crying, and letting her heartache fill the earth. Isabella swallowed the lump in her throat when she realized the woman was Maggie. Frightened, she glanced up; the man who hung from the tree was Elijah. The tears that danced at the back of her eyelids spilled forth. *No, no this can't be.*

Maggie's cinnamon hair cascaded down her back over a fine blue silk dress with lace edging around the sleeves, neckline and the bottom ruffle. Elijah wore what once was a crisp, white shirt now stained with crimson on the upper right shoulder. He wore black pants and brown boots. They were dressed in some of their finest attire, she realized. In the distance, Isabella could make out telltale sign of the Union soldiers riding off. She shuddered, shaken to her very core. *Oh my god, the tales are true!*

Isabella closed her eyes and prayed that it would all just go away. When they said the plantation was haunted, they weren't kidding. She didn't want to see anymore. She didn't want to feel anymore of Maggie's pain and unbearable grief. She didn't want to hear the heart-wrenching screams of a woman who had lost the man she had loved beyond all else. She just wanted to curl up on the ground with Maggie and disappear. The pain was so intense, it felt as if her soul had been ripped from her body. She had no

control over what sort of feelings these experiences made her have.

My god, it's almost as if I'm reliving this all over again. God, please don't let that be it. Maggie turned toward Isabella. Her grief-stricken face forever burned into Isabella's mind. Silently, the ghostly figure faded into the darkness almost as if it had never been. It took everything Isabella had to make it back into the house. She leaned against the door, breathing heavy, trying to calm her chaotic heartbeat. She collapsed into the nearest chair.

What in the world is happening to me? Why am I feeling Maggie's pain so intensely, almost as if it were my own? She had to know what that book from the cedar chest contained within its many pages. With her knees shaking, she made her way to the study. She crouched down in front of the cedar chest, throwing the lid back, not caring if she took it off its hinges or not, so great was her need—a need to read the story it had yet to tell anyone.

Isabella knew there was something more going on here. She knew the book contained the answers she sought so desperately with every fiber of her being.

Chapter Seven

Isabella curled up beneath the luxurious warmth of the blanket upon the loveseat. The soft glow of the chandelier lights filled the living room. Her fingers itched to start exploring the many yellowed pages of Maggie's journal. She leaned back into the cushion bringing her knees up, a perfect reading bench. Her mind swirled with thoughts of Elijah and Maggie. What drew her into the past? What caused her to yearn for an abundance of information?

24th April 1861

Dear Diary,

Our worst fears have been realized. President Abraham Lincoln declared war on the south. Civil war right in our own backyards because we refuse to give up a way of life that we've had for centuries. What gives them the right to take that away from us? What about us southern people who have never owned a slave in our entire lives?

Our wedding will have to wait. I wish Elijah would return home to me. What will we do? Every available man has been called to arms. Mother is just beside herself. Why must men settle everything with war?

It breaks my heart that this is happening, especially now. This is supposed to be a time of happiness for Elijah and me.

God, keep Elijah and his brother William safe. Please, return my love to me.

Maggie

She devoured the diary with a desperate need to know more about this woman called Maggie. *Don't you mean yourself?* whispered a small voice inside her head.

7th of July, 1861

Dear Diary,

Today was one of the saddest days of my life. It was heartbreaking for us to watch the men we love so dearly depart, knowing that it might very well be for the last time. I don't have any idea how we'll manage without father, but mother assures me we'll be just fine. I just wish I could believe her. My little sister Abby is going to be the one who will suffer the most from father's absence.

I know that father will only be in Washington for a short time discussing issues of importance with other politicians, but still I'm eager for his return. Every moment that he's gone could possibly be a sign of danger that he may never return.

Maggie

I can't even begin to imagine what that must have been like. Isabella laid the journal aside and tossed back the covers. Gracefully, she walked over to the window and looked out; sadness weighed heavy on her heart. Her soul ached, but why, she couldn't say. Tears stung her eyes. Grief crept its way inside her soul and made itself at home. Why is her journal getting to me like this? Why am I feeling as if I've felt this way before?

"I am not Maggie. I am not!" she screamed into the night. The

realization that there just might be some truth to it, terrified the hell out of her. Her heart raced and panic took over. Was it true, or was she merely trying to convince herself?

The earth was bathed in a glorious show of moonlight. Every star in the sky could be seen for miles. Ever since she had set foot inside this house, her life hadn't been the same. She looked for answers, but the night was giving nothing up. Defeated, she returned to the couch, curling up in a tight ball. Maybe all I need is a nap.

* * * * *

Daylight filled the meadow. A gentle breeze danced over the small pond. Birds flew here and there between branches. The wildflowers were in full bloom; the warmth of the sun felt wonderful on her skin, and best of all, Elijah was there to share it with her.

"Maggie, there is something very important that I must discuss with you, my beloved."

"Elijah, whatever are you talking about?"

He kneeled before her, taking her hands in his, and gazed up at her.

"Maggie, you know that I love you beyond all else."

"Yes, I love you too."

"Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Yes, oh yes, Elijah!" Tears of happiness filled her eyes.

He dug a small box out of his pocket and pulled a diamond ring from within it. Tenderly, he slid it on her finger. A perfect fit. He gathered her to him murmuring that he'd give her everything within his power. "You won't regret becoming my wife, Maggie."

"I know I won't."

His head bent toward her soft lips. His mouth captured hers, his tongue delving, seeking, exploring. She thought he wanted to take her right there in the meadow, and she would have given in. "Let's wait for our wedding night," she whispered, hoping he'd argue. His love enveloped her entire being. She was his and would remain so, no matter what.

* * * * *

Isabella woke in a fit of cold sweats, her breathing labored. She felt the dampness on her cheeks. Slowly, she sat up, trying to make sense of her thoughts. *It can't be!* A tightness circled her ring finger as she looked down. The band of gold materialized, fitting as perfectly as it had in the dream. The small diamond glittered, catching the light. *My wedding ring...* She no longer cared whether it was logical or not to long for his touch, or hear his words of declaration.

How can this be? I must be losing my mind. I wonder if insanity runs in our family. She gathered up her purse, jacket and put on her tennis shoes. She grabbed the keys off the table and headed for Nocona, the next town over. There was a reputable psychic who knew nothing of her past, and who could tell her the truth. She hoped the ad in the newspaper was still the correct address.

The morning air felt cool against her sweaty skin. She took several deep breaths. *I have to find out the truth once, and for all.* It was nearly ten a.m. when she arrived on the woman's doorstep. Before she even had the chance to knock, the woman answered her door. A red turban encircled her head. She wore a blue, loose-fitting dress that hung to the floor. A pair of small, gold hoop earrings adorned her ears. Her eyes were brown and filled with nothing but kindness.

"Do come in. I've been expecting you," the woman said, ushering her inside. They walked into a small parlor. She motioned for her to be seated in one of the dark wooden chairs.

"But how could you be expecting me?" Isabella blurted out.

"Don't say anything. Just give me your hand."

Reluctantly, she did as the woman requested. The moment their hands touched, a tingle ran up her arm, alarming her. She tried to pull her hand away, but the psychic held fast.

"You're torn between two worlds. One you believed you had left behind a long time ago, but it has found you again. I also see a man in your life. A man who loves you dearly, but this man was taken away from you and all he knew. This man...he was murdered. You must protect him. You mustn't allow history to repeat itself, or all will be lost."

"You've no idea what you're saying. It's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible, Maggie, if you believe love will find a way. You and this man are meant to be together."

"Why do you call me Maggie?"

"Because you are Maggie."

"No, I can't be, no!" screamed Isabella, running out of her house. She flung open the car door, jumped in, and started the engine. She drove away from the place as if the hounds of hell were upon her heels. *How can that woman possibly be right?* She drove on and on until she was numb to her core.

Early evening found her back at her own home. Silently, she climbed out of the car, and went inside. She kicked off her shoes, dropped her purse and keys on the table in the hallway. *I'm falling for a man who's nothing*

more than an apparition. Sighing heavily, she returned to the couch, and delved into the diary and its old, yellow pages to read more of Maggie's life.

3rd of June, 1862

Dear Diary,

My life has ended, and I'm truly all alone. Honestly, I don't know how I managed to survive. God, how I wish I hadn't. I feel ashamed for being the only one to make it out alive. It was so horrible! Elijah my love, I need you, where are you?

Our home is nothing but a pile of soot and ash. Both of my parent's are murdered as well as little Abigail. Some Union soldiers stopped by our home demanding supplies and fresh horses, and father told them we had none to spare. They went through our house, our things, not caring what they broke. The brutes. Then, when they found out Father spoke the truth, they set fire to our home.

Mother was beside herself and rushed back toward our burning home, and that's when the awful gunfire rang out. They shot her in the back as if she were nothing. Father went berserk and charged the soldiers. They shot him as well. If there is a god, why does such evil persist on this earth between men? My baby sister, oh god, my baby sister, she never made it out of the house before it went up like match sticks.

I ran and hid in the shadows. I've cried so much I feel numb now. Can they get away with this? Is there no justice to be had, even in times of war? How does one get past losing everything, and everyone they've ever loved, or cared about? Will I lose you as well my darling?

Maggie

She rubbed the corner of the tear-stained page between her thumb and finger; a chill slithered down her spine. A flash of brilliant white light filled the room. A white haze floated in the atmosphere. She caught sight of a woman who looked just like Maggie sitting at a writing desk, scribbling away, the woman's tears hitting the very letter she held now. Maggie turned away from the desk as if to rise, but instead, their eyes locked. Isabella cringed as Maggie's sorrow and heartache filled her soul. She blinked back the tears that threatened to fall. *Calm down, Isabella, it's just your overactive imagination.* Fearful that she really had stepped back in time, she closed her eyes, hoping to shut out the image. She slowly opened her eyes, and breathed a sigh of relief when she found herself still very much in her own time.

* * * * *

Elijah watched as the tears slid down Maggie's face. What brings her such sorrow? I know how losing her family must have felt. After all, I lost my only brother, William. I know she must miss little Abigail. She was such a sweet little angel. The regret I have is not being there for Maggie when she needed me the most. She has lost so much. I just hope that one day I can give her the happiness she so richly deserves.

"Isabella, my darling, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, don't worry about it."

She sounded so sad and desolate. It made his heart ache with bitterness.

"I know better than that. What's this? Where did you find this?"

He lounged beside her on the couch, fingering her old journal as she held it protectively against her bosom.

"I really don't want to discuss this right now."

"Isabella, don't shut me out. It's clear that you're upset. Let me help

you."

"There's nothing you can do. I don't even know if there's anything that I can do about it. I find myself falling in love with you against my will and good common sense." She cradled her face in the palm of her hand and bawled. Her body shook as the tidal wave of emotion broke loose and the journal fell to the floor.

"Did you say that you love me?"

She gave a quick nod of her head.

"Oh my darling, you don't know how thrilled I am to hear you say that. Please, tell me why you're crying."

"Maggie's journal entries—I went exploring the old wooden chest in your room, and—found her journal along with your love letters to her, to me."

"I'm sorry it caused you such pain. I never meant to cause you sorrow."

"You haven't hurt me, at least not in the way you think. My heart aches because of the pain I once lived through. Oh God, it's so complicated, I can't even begin to make sense of it."

"That was a long time ago, my beloved. You can't blame yourself."

"That's easy for you to say."

"It's the truth."

I wish I was where I truly belonged instead of being so lost.

He saddled close to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. Elijah realized there wasn't much else he could do to comfort her. He knew of the pain and sorrow hidden well within those pages. *It must be like her reliving*

her past. If I could take away her heartache, I would.

"I just need some time to be alone for a while."

"All right my beloved, but if you need me, just say my name, and I'll be here."

He disappeared just as quickly as he'd come. There was still one last journal entry to read. She retrieved the dairy and settled back against the soft cushions of the couch.

* * * * *

10th of August, 1862

Dear Diary,

I've thought of a delightful gift as a wedding present for Elijah. What better way to start off on the path of my new life as his wife to be than to plan for the future?

I've decided to have a self portrait done. Now, I must just think of a safe place to hide it, even from his servants. I don't want it to be given away before I've had the chance to surprise him.

I don't know what I would've done without of Lily and Albert. They've been a great comfort to me and helped me settle in best as I could.

I pray that soon, very soon, this godforsaken war will be over and he'll return to me. I just want him back; he's all that I have left. Don't you take him from me too, God.

Maggie

The journal fell to the floor with a heavy thump. For a moment, it was hard to catch her breath. A chill raced up her spine as the words sunk in. *Oh my God, there really is a portrait, but where?*

Chapter Eight

Isabella couldn't wait any longer after yearning for so many years to see the face of the woman who was her twin from days gone by. She threw back the cover and forced herself to her feet. She rushed out of the living room and into the entryway. She sprinted up the long, winding stair case. As she reached the landing, she took several deep breaths. She walked to the end of the hallway until she faced the door leading into the attic.

Tentatively, she reached out a shaky hand for the knob, and froze. Once she stepped through that door, there would be no turning back. Fear knotted in the pit of her stomach. *Get a grip on yourself, girl!* She entered the lower room of the attic. Each step creaked its protest at her added weight. Cobwebs hung everywhere. The air was stale and chaffed.

Boxes littered the floor blocking her path. Thick layers of dust covered the contents of the attic. She maneuvered around the crowded boxes, letting her eyes adjust to the dim lighting filtering through the window panes. *I'm* never going to be able to find it in here amongst all of this junk.

Taking a deep breath, Isabella summoned what courage she had in order to the face the unknown. As if in slow motion, she reached for the light, tugging its cord. Light spilled forth. She scanned the room searching for the portrait. The sharp end of brown paper caught her eye. A tall, thin square package stood over in the corner off to her left. Her breathing came in

shallow, short gasps.

Her mouth was dry and her feet felt as heavy as lead. This was it, the moment of truth. Do I really want to know the truth, or not? God, am I ready for this? She made her way toward it. Her throat felt tight, and she could hear her heartbeat racing loud in her ears, or was that her own imagination? She turned the brown, wrapped package toward her. She withdrew her hands, unable to tear the paper away.

She reached out to tear the covering off. The crackling, tearing of the startling rips rose to meet the tension within her. She felt a stinging sensation race through her fingertips as the wrapping fell away. Her blood raced through her veins so fast, it made her dizzy.

"Oh my God!" she gasped, falling to her knees as she stared at her own image. She felt light-headed and queasy. She fought to breathe. She shuddered. The only difference there was between Maggie and her, was the color of their eyes and hair.

"It's true, and we look exactly alike."

She bent closer, scrutinizing the picture. Maggie's eyes shone with happiness and a tender smile graced her lovely features. Her cinnamon brown hair was done up in a bun. She wore the same blue dress that Isabella had seen in her vision. Its deep, rich blue color was contrasted by white lace on the cuffs, and the bottom ruffle of the gown. Maggie sat tall with her back straight, with her hands crossed upon her lap.

It all makes sense. A strange feeling overcame Isabella. She desperately felt the need to get back home. She swallowed the lump in her throat, trying to clear her mind of such strange thoughts. How can I go back home? I'm already home. Wiping the sweat from her brow Isabella knew she needed to get out of the stifling heat of the attic, otherwise she'd passed out.

Struggling she shoved herself up, and wiped her hands upon her clothing.

"It's time to put you back where you belong, Maggie. Where you should've been from the start."

She made her way out of the attic with the portrait in tow, and headed for her bedroom. Once in her room, she hung the portrait across from her bed. *Perfect.* She had never truly believed the stories, but now that she was faced with the truth; she knew she had no other choice than to believe. Her stomach growled its protest of hunger. Numb and exhausted, she made her way to the kitchen for a quick bite. A tall glass of milk and a ham sandwich would do nicely. She eased into the kitchen chair, digging into her sandwich, enjoying each morsel she chewed. The cold milk tasted refreshing. Finally, full and sated, she stretched like a cat. Yawning, she pushed away from the kitchen table and headed for the stairs.

Isabella climbed the steps letting her hand caress the railing as she went. All she wanted to do now was sleep in the comfort of her bed. A strange glow filled the bottom of her doorway; cautiously, she opened the door peeking in. Upon the bed lay a pretty white silk nightgown with spaghetti straps decorated with tiny rose buds. She smiled as she entered her room.

"Thank you for the gift, Elijah," she whispered as she undressed and slipped into her new gown enjoying the luxurious feel of it upon her body. She crawled into bed, allowing the comfort and warmth to envelope her. With every move she made, the silk caressed her body causing the banked fire within her to burn. Her hands roamed at will. Closing her eyes, she thought of him, his hands upon her bare skin. Her fingers pinched and pulled her hard nipples. Her breathing became shallow as one hand sought the junction between her thighs.

"Mmm..." She let go of a ragged breath as her fingers separated the

wet folds of her sex. Seeking release, two of her fingers plunged deep within, making her quiver. Isabella thrust them in and out, struggling to contain herself against the steady rhythm. She paused, stifling a moan and freed her fingers to explore her clit, tormenting the aroused nub with harried, circular strokes. Within moments, she climaxed. Rolling onto her side, she hugged her pillow, riding the aftershocks of her orgasm and wishing Elijah was with her. Once she caught her breath, she left the warm rapture of the covers and headed for the bathroom one last time before finally retiring for the night.

Isabella stared at the painting above the bed, her eyelids heavy. She felt sleep tugging at her. The shadows seemed too colorful, a misty gray lingered in them that shifted to pale blue. Her body tingled, her mind lulled by the colors. Blue changed to green then red until all she saw was darkness.

A new day dawned. A light breeze filled her room, the curtains billowing in its wake. She awoke to the smell of honeysuckle and lavender. A new bouquet of flowers had been placed upon her bedside table.

Isabella peeked out from under the comforter, not sure she was even in her own room. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. A flurry of footsteps sounded down the hallway, then her bedroom door burst open, and in walked the man of her dreams.

"Ah, sleeping beauty has awakened at last. Good morning, my dear."

"Elijah?"

"And who else would you be expecting if not I, my beloved?" Elijah chuckled as he sat down on her bed. He leaned in close and kissed her forehead.

"Now out with you, don't you know it's bad luck to see the bride on the day you are to wed?" The maid rushed into her room, abolishing him with a wave of her hand.

"My wed...wedding day?" Once the words escaped, she looked at her hands only to find the ring now gone.

"Sometimes wishes really do come true, my beloved." He looked back at her, smiling before leaving her to the care of the maid.

Chapter Nine

"What time is it?" mumbled Isabella, trying to block out the bright rays of light that flooded her bedroom.

"It is just a few minutes before eight, Mistress Maggie. Aren't you the least excited today?

"Who are you?"

"Mistress, who else would I be but your housekeeper, Lily? Are you feeling all right?"

"Oh, dear God, no it can't be...."

"Do you need me to fetch Sienna, the healing woman, for you?" asked the concerned housekeeper.

Ignoring the woman's question, Isabella asked, "Lily, what is today's date?"

"It's October 30th, 1865 Maggie, why?"

What's going on, how did I end up back in time? Think Isabella; think. She paced back and forth in front of the bed, her brow furrowed with worry. She bit the bottom of her lip and knew what must be done. I'll worry about this later; I can't waste any more time if I plan to change the past. He needs my help. Oh God, I really do love him!

"Hurry, I need a pen and paper. I must send off an urgent message, hurry."

"Yes, right away."

Within moments, Lily stood before her with paper and pen in hand. Isabella scribbled an important message upon it, folded it, and handed it to the house keeper.

"Make sure this is delivered to Mr. Colonel Terry. No matter what, this letter must reach him today. Do you understand?" her voice screeched, barely able to contain her fear.

"Yes Mistress. I'll have Albert deliver it to him, personally."

She breathed a sigh of relief at the willingness of the maid. *God, please don't let it be too late!* Gazing back at her wasn't the same woman of only a few hours ago. Gone were her strawberry-blonde locks, and in their place were delicious layers of long, cinnamon hair that hung just below her hips. Tears of utter fear and frustration welled up, threatening to spill forth at any given moment. Her body shook in disbelief, and yet here she stood. She really had gone back in time.

"Oh Dear Lord, help me," she sobbed, throwing herself back upon the bed. Her face buried in the covers as the floodgates of overwhelming emotion burst free. Her feet kicked the bed. Several times she glanced up hoping that she was mistaken, that she really wasn't here. Somehow it all had to be just a dream and yet, no matter how she tried, she couldn't deny the fact. She cried until she couldn't cry any more. Her sensibility returned. Slowly, she gathered herself up from the bed.

A soothing bath was drawn for her pleasure. She sank into the warm depths, letting it ease all of her fears and the tension from every pore of her body. Clean and refreshed, she climbed out and got dressed. She donned a

blue and white gown with lace upon the cuffs and neckline as well as the ruffle on the bottom. Her hair was done up in a beautiful bun with small tendrils around her face. So far, everything was as she remembered it. She made her way downstairs.

It was still the same plantation home as the one she had moved into only months before. Only, everything was more vibrant, the colors and textures were richer. Her home had come to life. The house buzzed with the flurry of activity for the evening's event.

So, this is what it's like to go back in time. She knew she should be absolutely terrified, yet it felt so right to be here, knowing she would soon be wed to the man she loved above all else. That is, if Colonel Terry and his men arrived in time. She prayed that the events of the past could still be changed. She couldn't bear the thought of losing Elijah all over again.

Several blue and white flower vases lined the hallways and the main entrance, giving a delightful touch of beauty to their special occasion. A lot of the guests started arriving, making their appearance known to the mistress of the house, her. Lily and the rest of the servant girls did well in delegating the guests to where they were supposed to be. Happiness abounded from every corner of the household. A few hours later, the overseer returned. Maggie ran outside to greet him.

"Mistress Maggie, the Colonel told me to bring this back to you," replied Albert as he handed the small parchment of paper over to her.

Dear Maggie,

Don't fret yourself about this evening. My men and I shall be present for your wedding. I wouldn't miss such a happy occasion for one of the finest men to serve under me in both times of peace and war. He is an honorable man. He has served his country well, both as a soldier and as a Texas

Ranger.

Rest easy and know that your lives will be well protected. Congratulations to you both.

Sincerely,

Mr. Colonel Terry

Texas Ranger

"Thank you, Albert."

"You're most welcome, Mistress."

Guests milled about the grounds admiring the beautiful garden area. Small groups gathered throughout discussing everything from the mundane running of a household to the end of the war. It was a country lost in itself, now forced to rebuild from within.

There was a live band in the ballroom, playing every lively tune that they knew. It was a colorful display of the latest fashions, as couples danced and drank. By late afternoon, Mr. Colonel Terry and his fellow Texas Rangers had arrived at the plantation. Elijah and Maggie rested on the front porch when the horsemen drew up. Elijah raced down the steps to greet his fellow officers.

"I can hardly believe you made it, Colonel. What changed your mind?"

The men shook hands. Maggie glanced over at the Colonel and nodded her head at him. The Colonel grinned as he slapped Elijah on the back.

"I couldn't let one of my best officers in the Army and Texas Rangers get hitched without a proper send off from his comrades in arms, could I?"

"Just the same, Sir, I'm happy to have you here to share in the bliss."

Maggie relaxed as the conversation turned toward greetings and best

wishes. The other Rangers made their way around, talking with other guests, sampling food from the tables outside. They always made sure to keep Elijah and Maggie within their sight.

"Please, may I have everyone's attention," Elijah announced.

All eyes turned to their host and hostess as the guest listened intently.

"We've asked all of you here to take part in our joyous day and to witness our marriage. I'm the luckiest man alive to have such a woman as Maggie. She's the kind of woman that makes a man stand tall, and proud to have her on his arm. If it wasn't for her love, I most likely wouldn't be standing here today. Even though I truly don't deserve her, I'm so happy she's agreed to be my wife. Maggie, my beloved, there aren't enough words in the universe to tell you of my love for you. Let's all retire to the backyard for the ceremony, then there'll be plenty of time to eat, drink and dance the night away."

The loud cheers and congratulations filled the air. Gunshots rang out to signify the beginning of their lives together. No one, except Maggie, paid much attention to the new group of riders arriving. Everyone else milled toward the back side of the house. Maggie watched, heart racing, her voice gone from the terror that seized hold of her as the five horsemen charged into the backyard.

The leader jumped from his horse running full tilt toward Elijah. He pulled the colt free of its holster as he came face to face with Maggie's fiancé.

"Tonight, you'll pay for the crimes you committed against my family," threatened the man dressed in a Union Soldier's uniform.

"Look, I don't want any trouble here. I've no idea what you're talking about. I don't even know you."

"That's just like you, Confederate scum, to kill and have no remorse

for the lives you've stolen from their loving families."

"Who are you men? Why do you come here and threaten us?" demanded Maggie as she stood by Elijah's side.

The other Union soldiers took up their positions, each one aiming their rifles at the various guests. Their uniforms were tattered, unclean; the beards upon their faces were wooly and untidy. The smell of death clung to these men.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Mister. This is between them two and unless you want to hang beside him, I suggest you put the notion of being a hero out of your mind," spoke one of the other Union Soldiers, pulling his pistol free of its holster. He pointed it at a guest, and the startled man froze. His attempt to protect Elijah had failed. The guest dropped his rifle and hung his head, moving back as the pistol remained aimed straight at his heart.

"It's all right, my beloved. They aren't going to harm anyone."

She felt Elijah's hand tighten about her slender fingers, trying to reassure her.

Several gunshots rang out. The Union soldiers cried out, blood staining their uniforms. A few fell off their horses while others merely slumped in their saddles, dead. Everyone glanced around seeking the source of the gunfire. Colonel Terry approached the last man from behind, jabbing him with his Colt pistol in the middle of his back.

"Oh, thank God, Colonel, for a moment I thought it was all over," sobbed Maggie as she grabbed hold of Elijah for support.

"I suggest, my friend, that unless you want to end up dead like your men, you hand over your pistol to Elijah there. There'll be no more death to mar this evening. You will accompany me, and my fellow Texas Rangers to the nearest jailhouse," ordered Colonel Terry. "I'm sorry for your families' deaths, but we were a country at war. People were lost on both sides. Just be glad you returned home and are still alive." Elijah took the pistol, and turned it over to his overseer, Albert.

"Elijah, my friend, I do believe you have a marriage to complete," the overseer said.

"Yes. Maggie, will you marry me?" he turned on her, his eyes glistening with emotion.

"Yes," she sobbed, wiping her heated tears away. She searched the crowd for the priest. Finally, she caught his gaze as he walked toward them. A hushed silence fell over the crowd, as the priest joined Elijah and Maggie on the back steps.

"Do you, Elijah Whick, take this woman to be your wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Maggie, do you take this man to be your wedded husband, to love, cherish, honor and obey for the rest of your lives?"

"I do."

"Please place the ring upon her finger."

Elijah slid the diamond ring upon her finger sealing their love, their lives together, forever.

"You may kiss the bride. I pronounce you man and wife."

Elijah drew Maggie close, their bodies melding together in perfection. She could feel his rising fervor as he pressed further into her. Passion filled his eyes. Reluctantly, he broke their kiss.

"Some dreams are meant to come true, my beloved."

"For now, and for always, my darling," Maggie vowed.

Epilogue

28th December, 1865

Dear Diary,

This will be the last entry for the year. As a matter of fact, this'll be my last entry ever. Life couldn't be any better than what it is at this very moment in time. I can happily claim the title of a loving wife to a man I never dreamed I would ever have the chance to call my own. I'm so very thankful for Elijah, every day of our lives.

We owe Colonel Terry and the Texas Rangers a great deal of gratitude for saving Elijah's life the night of our wedding. My husband has rejoined the Texas Rangers and serves to protect not only our lives, but those of our countrymen as well.

The only regret we have is the fact that three days after our wedding, we had to bury Elijah's brother William in the family cemetery here on the estate. Elijah was given the Medal of Honor his brother earned while in the service of the Confederate Army. No one knew, except for the highest-ranked officers, that William was also undercover for the Texas Rangers. He died with honor serving his country, and we'll miss him dearly.

The day after our wedding, the priest came back to perform the burial service for William and the Union Soldiers who died at the party. The courage and forgiveness shown for the fallen men amazed me. Even though some of

the men had been their enemies, they were still buried respectfully as any soldier should be.

The south shall rise again. Its people have great determination to make the state of Texas great once more. Together, we'll be stronger than ever.

As for me, I finally know where I belong. I finally know who I am and who I was meant to be. I've finally come home.

Maggie Isabella Whick

* * * * *

The flickering glow of candlelight filled the bedroom. A soft, evening breeze billowed through the sheer white curtains. Elijah paced the wooden floor. His stomach tied in knots. Now that this night was finally here, he could hardly contain himself. All day long he had been primed and ready. The anticipation of making love to her at last kept him in a state of constant arousal. His breath caught in his throat as she entered the room. He felt himself harden with urgent need. Every muscle in his body tensed.

"My God, you're beautiful."

"Thank you."

The pink silk clung to her luscious curves. The swell of her breasts enticed his hunger. He closed the distance between them, crushing her to his chest. He scooped her up in his arms, carrying her toward the bed.

"Mmm, that lavender perfume I brought suits you well, my darling." He nuzzled her neck, raining soft kisses along her skin. His tongue glided along the outer ridge of her earlobe. He felt her quiver in response.

"I know it's your favorite. That's why I wore it." She ran her fingers through his hair, pausing at the nape of his neck.

"Hmm... Woman, you're going to make me lose my mind if you don't stop," he warned playfully. He grabbed her buttocks, giving them a firm squeeze before pushing her to the mattress. He lay next to her, wrapping her in his embrace. His hand cupped her rounded butt cheek, squeezing, kneading her tender flesh. His mouth sought her lips, gently at first before devouring her in an earth shattering kiss. His tongue roamed the depths of her sweet mouth, exploring, enticing. Their tongues wrapped together in a lover's duel.

"Love me, Elijah," she whispered as she pulled free of his kiss. Her hands roamed his chest, fingers trailing in the salt and pepper hair there. She quested lower, palms caressing his tight abs.

Maggie's tongue sought out the small nubs of his nipples, teasing, tasting. Her hands glided upwards, over his broad shoulders to tangle in his hair, playing with the strands at the nape of his neck. She arched into him, offering herself. Her hands trailed back down the length of his stomach exploring every ripple of muscle until she reached the object of her wanton lust.

She scooted away from him, offering her backside, laying her head upon his thigh as her warm breath tickled his flesh. Her fingers playfully tugged the small hairs at the top of his groin before trailing over the full length of his hardened shaft. Her mouth descended, her lips wrapping around the head of his penis.

"Oh Maggie, that feels so good." His hand squeezed her rear, his other hand bunching the sheet.

She held him at the base of his cock squeezing as her wet tongue played over the length of his cock. His hips jerked in response. Her mouth ravaged the tip of his penis. She suckled him, whimpering when he pulled away.

Darkness shrouded their bodies. "Enough woman." He grabbed hold of her bringing her up against his body. A low growl sounded in his throat as he rolled her body beneath him. Raised upon his elbows, he twirled a small strand of her cinnamon hair about his finger, tugging lightly. Maggie's small squeal delighted him. He knew she was teetering on the edge. Her voice was a raspy purr. His lips found the hollow of her neck nibbling, licking, tasting. She melted into him, withering in delicious torment. Her heated scent filled the room, enticing him. His fingers curled in the soft hairs at the core of her being, her sex hot and slick, and ready for him. His finger plunged into her wet folds. Her moans were music to his ears. He drove another finger deep inside, seeking, exploring, making her ride his fingers as if it were his ridged cock.

"Open your legs for me, baby." He moved away from her only to place himself in between her legs. His hands glided over her silken smooth inner thighs making her twist and turn upon the mattress.

"Elijah—"

He delved into her wet folds, pulling them apart, opening her even further to his hunger filled gaze. He knelt. The tip of his tongue teased her clit. His teeth nibbled one lip and then the next. His tongue thrust in and out of her pussy as her nectar covered his tongue and lips. Unable to wait any longer, he repositioned himself. He rubbed the head of his cock against her and she withered beneath him. He intended to make this a night of exquisite pleasure.

"I...need...you," she whimpered, biting his shoulder.

"Your wish is my command, love."

Slowly, Elijah entered her, sliding further in with each thrust of his hips until he was completely buried in her wetness. He felt her muscles grip him, rendering him mindless. He silenced her scream of momentary pain as he took her virginity with a kiss. Again and again, he thrust into her, making her cry out in pleasure. She wrapped her legs around him raising her hips up to meet each of his thrusts. They rode wave after wave of desire until he took them both over the edge. That night they slept peacefully in one another's arms.

 \sim END \sim

About Terra Kent

Terra Kent is 39 years old and happily married. She lives on a small ranch in Texas with her husband and three sons

Visit Terra at http://hometown.aol.com/ladytj5ranch5/page2.html and she can be reached at ladytj5ranch5/page2.html and she can be reached at ladytj5ranch5/page2.html and

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The Immortal Ones: Death Takes A Holiday

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Thantos, King of the Ghost Realm, is known for his formable temper and deadly deeds, and thus, is feared by both mortals and gods. Angels of Death are his only companions, and demons quiver at his feet. Giving immortality by the Fates of Mount Olympus, he is resigned to a lonely existence—until he rescues a gorgeous woman from the pits of hell.

Rianna is instantly taken with the suave good looks and haunting blue-grey eyes of the man who saved her from a fate worse than death. But even as her desire for him grows, she's haunted by a past of tragic events that nearly pushes her to the brink of insanity. Besieged by a secret of his own, Thantos must help Rianna forget about the past and come to grips with her destiny, where she must leave her world behind to have a future with him.

But before Thantos can convince Rianna that her place is beside him, he must protect her from a powerful demonic entity that has set his sights on ravishing her, ridding her of her humanity and making her his bride. Rianna finds herself caught in the middle of a testosterone war between two larger than life immortals where it's good versus evil and light against dark. Can she decide between one male who she knows isn't good for her, but who knows what turns her on, or the other who offers her a world of unlimited carnal delights?

Enjoy the following excerpt:

"Of all the times to have to use the bathroom," Rianna murmured to herself. She and Andrew were right in the middle of some serious foreplay when the urge arose. She made quick use of the facilities, washed and dried her hands and headed back to the bedroom.

As she reached the door, she heard a muffled sound. She hoped he wasn't finishing up without her. She turned the knob slowly, trying not to

make a noise, and walked in with hopes of finding him stroking himself to keep it hard just for her. Just the thought made her giddy.

She stepped inside the room and stopped dead in her tracks. There were two men standing over Andrew's prone, naked body. One of them was speaking in some sort of gibberish. He held both of his hands over Andrew. He was dressed entirely in black, which made him blend in with of the room. The other man stood by looking, not at Andrew, but towards the ceiling above the bed. He was completely dressed in white. She recognized him. It is the man from Mr. Jacobson's room! She looked up to see what held his gaze. She gasped. Something black and filmy floated over Andrew.

Both men turned toward her. They appeared to be as bewildered to see her as she was to see them. She froze in the doorway. "What are you doing to him, and how did you get in here?" She covered her breasts with her arms.

The man over the bed scowled at her. He was tall, dark and bald. "You can see us?"

Rianna put her hands indignantly on her hips. "Of course. What are you doing to him?"

The dark one turned to the other one. "This is not good. Atropos is going to be pissed, Thantos."

The man called Thantos did not move, except to nod.

Rianna turned her attention from the men. She raised her eyes and whimpered. The black film was lowering itself to the floor. She looked over at Andrew. He hadn't uttered a sound since she returned to the room. He just lay there with his hand clutched at his chest like he'd just had a heart attack. There was a look of serenity on his face as if he were dead. Rianna focused on his chest. It was still. Tears welled in her eyes as realization sunk in. Andrew wasn't breathing. She bolted over to him.

The fair-haired one caught her and hugged her to his muscular chest.

He was so tall and strong that her feet never touched the floor. "There is nothing you can do," he whispered in her ear.

Sobs racked her body. "Why did you have to kill him?"

"It was his time," the dark one replied.

Rianna struggled to free herself from the one in white. He looked down on her with eyes as luminous as his skin and hair. He released his grasp and she slowly slid down his god-like body. Her hand made contact with a mammoth erection as she passed his waist. Rianna quickly removed her hand and stepped away from him. She headed toward the door.

"We cannot let her leave," the dark one said. "She has seen too much."

Rianna made a dash for the door. "I won't tell anyone. I swear." Of course she was lying. She'd call 9-1-1 as soon as she made it outside of the apartment building.

The gorgeous one in white reached for her, but she escaped his grasp. She stumbled slightly and then ran toward the living room with both men hot on her heels. In her mind she kept repeating that she had to make it to the door. Then there was the matter of getting off the eighth floor where Andrew's apartment was located. Waiting for the elevator was out, so she knew she had only two other alternatives. The first choice was to take the stairs, but the two men blocked her access to the stairs as if they had read her mind. That left her with one other option—the window. It was a seriously big drop. She shrugged her shoulders. What did it matter to her? They were going to kill her anyway.

Rianna ran toward the open window.

"Don't," Thantos screamed.

"It's a sin," the dark one said.

"So is murder," she replied sarcastically. "It's better than dying by your

hands." She hurled herself toward the window. Pain ricocheted through her entire body as she made contact with the glass. The cold air hit her body as she soared through space.