



# *Ghost Seeker*

By

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# *Dedication*

*To my editor, Jessica. I couldn't have done it without you.*

# Chapter One

*“Heeeeeeeeeelp!”*

Nolan Frey’s eyes flew open, her sleep disrupted. Glancing at the illuminated dial of the clock on her bedside table, she squinted at the glowing numbers.

Two a.m.

Doors slammed. The patter of feet and frightened voices came from the rooms down the hall.

She flipped the switch on her bedside lamp and the soft light spilled onto the walls. Rising from the bed, she took a step toward the door, but stopped when she saw a dark mist creep under the doorway. Her body shook as the mist tweaked her bare toes, its icy fingers touching her feet.

She moved away, the backs of her knees bumping the side of the mattress. As the dark mist crept around her head, she heard a low, deep voice in her ear.

*I am here Nolan; you won’t get rid of me.*

*Jack!* It sounded just like... Jack.

A lone tear slipped down her face. Then another.

*Feel it, Nolaaaaaaaaaaaaan, feel my power.*

Afraid Jack would materialize any second, she tore out of the room, running toward the sound of another panicked cry. Nolan stopped when she saw a shimmery, translucent figure dressed in white cross her path. Chills shot through her body as she watched the woman walk directly through a wall!

*Who was that strange woman?*

In the next instant, something hard slammed into Nolan, followed by a loud ‘Oooooooooomph!’

She turned, and gazed up into the golden face of Jake Hunter, the general manager of Bride’s Inn.

He grabbed her shoulders. “Are you all right?” His sherry-colored eyes locked with hers. She could only manage a nod.

“Jake, come on!” A tall man with long, jet-black hair approached. “We’ve got to—” The man narrowed his eyes. “Nolan, what are you doing out of bed?”

Nolan blew out a shaky breath and stared into the gray eyes of another one of Bride’s Inn owners, Anthony Zodan.

“I heard a woman scream, then I—” she shook her head. “Never mind.” *How could she explain that black mist she saw? Or the strange woman in white who had walked through the wall?*

Nolan peeked over Jake and Anthony’s shoulders to see Seth Masters, the third owner, standing behind them.

Nolan turned, her eyes locking with Anthony’s, then her gaze settled on his brow chakra—the space between his eyes. After a few seconds, she saw his bright, powerful orange aura surround him, suffused with a murky, mustard colored aura of anger and unease.

Her eyes traveled to Jake and Seth, where mustard tones mingled with their bodies’ bright colored auras—Jake’s a dynamic turquoise and Seth’s a powerful survivor’s blue.

Jake gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze then took off in the direction of the rooms where the woman’s scream echoed once more. Anthony followed behind.

Seth looked at Nolan, his dark eyes pleading. “Will you stay with Serena, Miranda, Crystal and the kids?”

Nolan held up a hand. “Of course. Go help Jake and Anthony.”

“Thanks.” He gave her a nod then tore off down the hall.

Nolan marched down the hallway, her determined steps reverberating down the corridor.

She ran a weary hand over her eyes, blinking back sleep, her mind filled with the haunting images of that black mist and the strange apparition.

Glancing behind her, she saw only an empty hallway...

*Or was it?*

Bitter cold seeped into her bones, even though the thermostat she passed on the wall read a balmy seventy degrees. She opened the door to the nursery. Seth and Serena’s three-year-old toddler, Gregory, ran to her, his eyes filled with tears.

Nolan gathered him close. “It’s okay,” she crooned. He rested his head against her chest, his thumb finding its way into his tiny mouth.

Gregory gazed at Nolan. “My friend came to play with me, today.”

She smiled. “That’s nice. What’s his name?”

Gregory shrugged. “Dunno his name. He plays ball with me.”

Nolan kissed the top of his head. “Is he your age?”

“Uh-huh.”

Nolan gazed at a very pregnant Serena sitting in a chair, her freckles more prominent than ever as her pale face tightened into pinched lines.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she whispered, placing a hand on her swollen belly.

Miranda, Jake’s wife, stroked the pale hair on the head of her oldest, David, a stocky one-year-old. He huddled against her chest. His loud, fitful cry made Gregory cry harder. Nolan rubbed his back as she gazed at Crystal, Anthony’s wife, cuddling Miranda’s baby girl, Michaela.

Serena ran a hand through her long, red curly hair. “I just can’t believe this is happening again—this is the third time this month that we’ve had guests screaming in the middle of the night.”

Miranda’s large purple eyes grew round. She bit her lower lip. “Jake said we couldn’t afford to return any more money. We’ve already lost so much.”

Nolan sat down next to Crystal.

“We’ve just got to do something about the lady in white.” Crystal shook her head of long, pale blonde hair.

Nolan angled her head. “Who is the lady in white?”

Crystal replied. “She’s the ghost that haunts this inn. Usually, she doesn’t bother anyone.”

*Maybe that’s who I saw!*

Miranda nodded. “She’s helped all three of us at one time or another.”

Serena let go of a sigh. “Except now, she’s scaring our guests in the middle of the night, and I just don’t understand why.” She glanced at Nolan. The minute she put her arms out toward Gregory, he took his thumb from his mouth and grabbed hold of her. “Thank you, Nolan. You seem to have a way with children.”

Nolan gave him to Serena, instantly missing the feel of his small, warm body.

Miranda shook her head. “What *are* we going to do about the lady in white? We’ve all invested so much time and money in Bride’s Inn.” She chewed her lower lip as she rocked her baby girl in her arms.

Serena eased her body into a chair. “I-I don’t know, but there has to be something we can do.”

“I think I know how to solve this.”

All three women turned to face Nolan. “How?” they asked in unison.

Nolan winked. “You’ll see.”

\* \* \* \*

“Look, Mrs. Abrams, if you’ll just let us explain...”

Lois Abrams tossed her clothing into a suitcase. She slammed the valise closed and gazed at Anthony, her face drawn into tight, angry lines. “I don’t know what you think you’re running here, but I won’t stand for strangers entering my room in the dead of night, scaring me half to death.” She glanced at her husband. “Let’s go Phil. I’ve had enough.”

He nodded. “And we’re telling our daughter to cancel her wedding, too.”

The color drained from Jake’s bronzed features. “Please don’t,” he implored. “We can explain.”

“Go ahead.” Lois crossed her arms across her ample bosom.

Seth and Anthony glanced at Jake.

“Bride’s Inn is well, it’s—” he ran a hand through his tawny golden hair.

“I’ll not allow my wife to be frightened like this. We’re leaving.” Phil Abrams grabbed his wife’s suitcase off the bed and plunked it on the floor. “Get our bags to the lobby and call us a taxi—now.”

Jake’s shoulders slumped. He didn’t know what to do. Glancing at his partners and friends, he realized, neither did they. He had no choice but to refund these people’s money—and fork over the ten thousand dollar deposit they had put down for their daughter’s wedding next March.

*Shit.*

He ran a hand through his hair again.



“Well? What are you waiting for?” Abrams raised a brow. “We want to leave now, we won’t—”

“Stay and hear about how you’re going to be on television?”

All eyes turned to Nolan.

\* \* \* \*

Nolan walked in, shutting the door behind her. “What happened tonight is going to be on an episode of *Ghost Seeker*, the popular television show about paranormal investigations.”

Lois Abrams angled her head. “Do you mean to say that this inn is haunted?”

Nolan blew out a breath and raised her chin. “That woman you saw tonight—she’s the lady in white and she haunts Bride’s Inn. Recently, she’s been more active, so we called the *Ghost Seeker* team and begged them to come here and film an episode. They’re going to bring an entire team of psychic researchers.”

“Well I’ll be.” Phil Abrams scratched at what gray hair he had left on his balding head. “I had no idea.” He turned to face his wife. “You hear that, Lois? We’ll be on TV!”

Lois Abrams shook her head. Then she raised a hand to her head full of blue-rinsed, white hair and replied, “Why, we’ll be sort of like—”

“Celebrities.” Nolan finished.

Lois Abrams’ face lit with a smile. “Did you hear that Phil? We’ll be celebrities.”

Phil Abrams face relaxed. “Why, that’s terrific.”

“They’ll interview you, I’m sure. The producers of *Ghost Seeker* always do that. They want a first-hand account of someone who’s actually seen a ghost, and since you’ve seen our famous specter, they will want to talk to you.”

From the corner of her eye, Nolan watched as Jake’s brows rose in surprise. Anthony looked like he wanted to hit something — she dearly hoped it wasn’t her, and Seth narrowed his black brows into an angry frown.

“So, you see, if you leave, your chances of ever seeing the lady in white again are, well, let’s just say you wouldn’t *ever* see her again and your daughter will miss out on having her wedding at a premier catering establishment that will soon be on national television.” She glanced at Jake, Anthony, and Seth. “Or do I have that wrong?”

“Huh?” Jake blinked once, a bewildered look on his face.

She elbowed him in the ribs. “I believe *Ghost Seeker* is aired world-wide, isn’t it?”

Jake shook his head. “I, uh, I...”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure it is.” Nolan finished with much more bravado in her voice than she felt.

Phil Abrams glanced at his wife. “Well, we can’t say we weren’t scared.”

“I was terrified.” Lois moved closer to Phil’s large frame, her elbow against his rotund belly. “That ghost scared the heck out of me.”

“You have to admit, Lois, she didn’t hurt us.” Phil glanced at his wife.

Lois shook her head. “No, she didn’t.”

“And maybe we’re being a bit too hasty. After all, Jennifer has her heart set on having her wedding here at Bride’s Inn.” Phil placed his arm around Lois’ shoulders.

“Phil”, she waved a hand toward the suitcases. “Put those back. We’re staying.”

Nolan breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad. And we’ll let you know about the show.”

“Thank you”, Lois grabbed Nolan’s hands. Nolan gently pulled out of her grasp when she noticed Lois Abrams’ aura. Red: the color of materialistic thoughts. Jack always had that aura around him, along with a deep brown color signifying a negation of all spirituality...

As though he were dead inside.

Nolan made a quick exit, feeling Jake, Anthony, and Seth’s eyes on her back.

She didn’t stop until she got back to her room.

Nolan closed the door behind her, but from the corner of her eye, she thought she saw the black mist in the hallway...

It was time she got some sleep and put her over-active imagination to rest.

## Chapter Two

“Nolan, what in hell—” Jake drew his brows together, a scowl lining his face. “I mean, *heck*, possessed you to feed such a line of crap to the Abrams’?”

Nolan swallowed, her throat constricting as she sat in the banquet office across from Jake, Seth and Anthony the following morning.

“She saved our collective hides is what she did.” Crystal laid a hand on Nolan’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “I should think you would be grateful.” She raised a pale brow in her husband’s direction.

Anthony folded his arms across his chest and frowned. “Nolan may have saved our *hides*, but at what cost?”

“I think she did a very smart thing.” Serena said from doorway. The tall redhead walked in and stood on the other side of Nolan.

Seth shook his head. “She lied to the Abrams’, Serena. We can’t have—”

“What can’t we have?”

All eyes turned toward the sound of Miranda’s voice.

Jake sat back in his chair and eyed his wife. “We can’t have our employees spinning ridiculous stories.” He looked down his nose at Nolan. “And lying to guests.”

Miranda’s eyes grew wide. She walked over to the desk and laid her palms down on the polished wood top. “Why Jake Hunter, I’m ashamed of you. How can you sit there and belittle—”

He held up a hand. “I’m not belittling anyone, Miranda.”

She sighed. “You’re not giving Nolan’s idea a chance. I’m sure we could...”

“Perhaps I could help.”

Nolan’s head swiveled in the direction of the new voice that joined the heated discussion. Clarice Masters stood in the doorway, a shawl wrapped around her frail shoulders, her hand resting on a cane by her side.

Seth hurried to her side. “Aunt Clarice, what are you doing out of bed?” Nolan saw the concern on his face as he helped Clarice into a chair next to Nolan’s. Clarice reached over and patted Nolan’s hand. “I hear our Nolan saved the day. She let the cat out of the bag, though.” She paused, as if for emphasis. “I know the producer of ‘Ghost Seeker.’”

Nolan could have kissed Clarice Masters. Nevertheless, she also wondered how Clarice could possibly help her with her lie. Nolan slumped back in the chair. She owed Clarice so much—not just for giving her a housekeeping job, but for providing a safe harbor from Jack.

She couldn’t let Clarice perpetuate her lie, even if it did mean losing her job.

“Miss Masters, you don’t...”

Clarice raised a brow in her direction. “Don’t what? Have to thank you for telling everyone about our plan? It is I who should be thanking you, my darling girl.” Clarice reached over and patted her hand.

“And this plan involves, what, exactly?” Jake asked from behind the desk.

Clarice rose from her chair and walked over to the window. She raised the curtain and glanced outside, a wistful look on her face. Finally, she spoke. “As I said, I know the producer of Ghost Seeker. His name is John Wesley Sinclair.”

“How do you know him?” Crystal asked, angling her head in Clarice’s direction.

“We’re old friends.” Clarice dropped the end of the lace curtain. She turned to face Crystal. “Very old friends.”

Seth shook his head. “I never heard you mention him before, Aunt Clarice.”

Clarice straightened her thin shoulders and moved the cane in front of her. Resting both hands on top of it, she replied. “I don’t tell you everything, my dear.” Clarice lifted her chin. “I must perpetuate my mysterious, eccentric character at all times.”

That made Seth laugh, and everyone else smile, including Nolan.

“I’ll call Mr. Sinclair immediately. He won’t refuse my request.” Clarice told them, her voice firm.

Nolan almost choked on her tears.

She rose to her feet, fearing that if she didn’t leave the small office in the next second, she’d start bawling right there. “I-if you’re all finished, I’d like to get back to work.”

Clarice nodded.

Nolan flew out of the small office, her feet barely touching the floor.

She didn't stop, but continued toward the grand staircase, her feet carrying her up the steps until she got to the third level.

She slowed her pace, but her heart still raced as she approached her cart filled with cleaning supplies.

Grabbing a rag and a bottle of spray cleaner, she opened the door to one of the rooms and entered.

That's when her legs gave out.

She slid down against the wall, tears pouring down her face.

They weren't going to ask her to leave. Jack wouldn't find her here. She could stay at Bride's Inn...

And continue her masquerade.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, Nolan stopped at the front desk to find Serena behind the counter in her usual spot, ready to greet guests and visitors.

"Good morning!" Serena's cheery voice greeted Nolan. "Where are you off to?"

Nolan managed a smile. "I thought I'd go for a swim."

Serena raised a brow. "Are you going to use the pool?"

Nolan's face grew warm. "N-no, of course not, I..."

Serena grinned. "Well, why ever not?"

Oh, how Nolan wished she and Serena could be friends, but getting too attached to anything or anyone wasn't good—not while Jack remained in the background.

Only Clarice knew about her painful past with Jack. If it hadn't been for Clarice's close relationship with Nolan's Aunt Jane, Nolan would have been on the streets, begging.

She looked up to see Serena staring at her. "Nolan, are you all right?" She grabbed Nolan's hand, but Nolan pulled out of her grasp.

"I'm sorry, y-yes, I'm fine."

Serena smiled. "I think you should spend a day by the pool. Take in some sun, relax."

"I was thinking of taking a swim down by the beach."

Serena nodded. "I wish I could join you."

"I'm sure you've got better things to do." *Damn, Nolan! What's wrong with you? She was only being nice.*

Serena reached under the counter and withdrew a notebook. She shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, I've got lots to do, but I would have made time for you."

Nolan bit down on her lower lip. "Serena, look, I didn't mean—" Serena's attention was suddenly riveted to something just beyond the front entrance to Bride's Inn. Nolan followed her gaze to see a man exiting a long, black limousine near the curb. As he stepped onto the sidewalk, Nolan saw a shock of silver-white hair. The cut of his dark, pin-striped suit outlined his tall, sinewy frame. The man sailed through the doors of Bride's Inn, his long legs eating up the floor beneath him. When he neared the front counter, Nolan's skin prickled with goose bumps as she gazed at his handsome, angular face. Small crinkles lined the outer corners of his eyes, deep ridges filled the space around his mouth, but they didn't detract from his sharp, raw-boned chin. Nolan was sure she'd never seen a more handsome, older man.

Serena smiled. "Perhaps it's our long-awaited guest."

Nolan frowned. "Who?"

Serena's smile reached from ear-to-ear. "John Wesley Sinclair."

"Welcome to Bride's Inn." Serena held out her hand.

He grabbed hers and shook it. "John Wesley Sinclair," he said.

Serena nodded. "Clarice said you'd be coming. We're glad you're here."

"I'd like to see her, if I may," he asked quietly.

"Of course!" Serena came around from behind the counter. She glanced at Nolan.

"Before you leave, do you think you could show Mr. Sinclair to the south veranda?" She turned to face John. "Clarice is having her morning tea there."

He nodded, his blue eyes intense. Nolan swore she could see into them, to their very center. Like a low, blue flame they burned bright, just like the aura of vitality swirling around him.

Serena glanced at Nolan. "Will you show our guest to the south veranda?"

"Of course. Come with me, Mr. Sinclair."

They arrived at the entrance to the sunny south veranda. Nolan opened the doors. John stepped out onto the deck, the sun glinting off his white hair.

"Clarice," he said softly.

Nolan watched as Clarice turned her head. Regal as always, she placed her china teacup on the saucer beneath it, but Nolan could have sworn she saw Clarice's hand tremble.

"John," Clarice nodded in his direction. "I didn't expect you so soon."

John remained where he was.

"Well," Nolan said brightly, her voice cutting through the tension that permeated the air. "I'll just leave you two alone."

Clarice smiled, but it didn't quite reach the corners of her mouth. Her chin wobbled. "Thank you, Nolan."

Nolan walked out, giving the older couple their privacy, but at the last moment she turned and stole a glance in their direction.

John moved toward Clarice's chair. Nolan saw him say something, but couldn't make out his words.

Her eyes widened when she saw him lean down and kiss Clarice Masters full on the mouth.

## *Chapter Three*

Clarice's lips tingled the minute John's mouth met hers. He cupped her face between his large, warm palms, trailing his lips across hers. She grabbed hold of the lapels of his suit jacket to steady her body then she leaned into him, sighing with pleasure as she returned his kiss. She closed her eyes, reveling in the buzzing sensation that radiated from the middle of her lips to the corners of her mouth.

"Clarice," he whispered in her ear, moving his mouth so that he trailed a fiery, sensual path along her jaw line. "How I've missed you."

The sound of his deep voice broke Clarice's reverie. She pulled away, instantly missing the feel of his hard body pressed against hers.

She had been a fool once, but no more.

"Don't do that again," she commanded. Even though her voice sounded steady and firm, her body felt like liquid Jell-O.

He smiled, brushing a stray, silvery-white curl from the corner of her eye. "You still taste the same. Sweet."

She tugged the colorful, paisley patterned shawl across her shoulders.

His eyes twinkled. "And I see you are still the bohemian at heart."

Clarice gave John a level look. "I didn't ask you here for a stroll down memory lane."

John eased his tall frame into a chair next to hers.

She reached for her teacup and took a sip. John leaned over, inhaling deeply. "You still like chamomile tea." He moved closer, his long, aquiline nose brushing the lobe of her ear. "You smell the same. Like citrus... lemons."

Clarice plunked her teacup down on the saucer. Looking him square in the eye, she replied. "And you're married."

He leaned back in his chair. Settling one long leg across the other, he met her gaze.



For just a second, she felt dizzy as she gazed into his brilliant, blue eyes. She grabbed hold of her cane, leaning on the top.

John looked away, picking at a loose thread on his elegantly cut trousers. He sat forward, resting his hands on his thighs, balling them into fists. “I should have never married Anna. It was wrong, it was...”

“She had a lot of money. Something you wanted very badly at the time.”

John sighed, meeting her gaze. “I was a fool, Clarice. Only one good thing came of our marriage.” He avoided her eyes, then asked. “Why did you ask me here?”

“I need you and your team to help us put the lady in white to rest.”

John frowned, drawing his brows together. “And who, pray tell, is this ‘lady in white?’

“She haunts Bride’s Inn. Recently, she’s been acting up, scaring our guests late at night. It’s time she was put to rest, for good—hers, as well as ours. Something is troubling our lady in white.” Clarice gripped the top of her cane. John’s presence evoked the same jittery feelings she used to get as a young girl; a foolish young girl who thought that love would conquer all. “I’d like to have that medium you use on *Ghost Seeker*, Susan Stalzer, to help us speak with our restless spirit and find out what’s troubling her.”

John ran a hand across his chin. “We’d have to place the filming of this episode into an already packed schedule, but I think we can do this for you.”

She rose from her chair. For just a second, she swayed. John shot to his feet, steadying her by placing his hands on her shoulders. “Easy.” He crooned. Then he smiled. “We’re not young anymore, Clarice. You have to be careful.”

She shrugged out of his hold. “There’s no ‘we’.”

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly. “You’re still stubborn.”

“And you’re still married.” Her voice trembled with anger.

He angled his head. “Anna passed away last year, Clarice.”

She felt the blood drain from her face.

“She had cancer.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, her emotions at war.

All this time, she’d spun a fantasy of the wealthy Anna Whitson dying... and John running back to her. The reality of the situation made her feel guilty. He was free, yet...

“So, you think I want you now?” Clarice chose to use anger as her shield against her guilty conscience.

“You always were a bad liar,” he replied, reaching out to trail his fingers near her right temple, where Clarice felt a throbbing sensation. “I’d always see your right temple twitch—just like it does now.”

She slapped his hand away.

His face darkened. “And you still have quite a temper.”

“Only for fools who fancy themselves in love with me.”

He stepped closer, placing his hands around her waist. Clarice didn’t stop him, even though she knew she should. She reveled in the feel of his fingers as he gave her waist a gentle squeeze. “I’ve always loved you. I would have come to you, I would have...”

She raised a brow. “Seems as though your wife stood in the way.”

“Yes, she and—” He shook his head.

“What?” Her pulse raced as she waited for him to finish.

He dropped his hands and changed the subject. “You have my word that the *Ghost Seeker* team will help you rid Bride’s Inn of its unruly spirit.” John gave her a long look. “But I’ll tell you now, you won’t rid yourself of me.”

He turned on his heel and walked away.

Clarice watched until he was out of sight then she slumped into her chair, wondering if she just made the second biggest mistake of her life.

The first had been falling in love with John Wesley Sinclair all those years ago.

The second was telling herself that she wasn’t still in love with him.

## Chapter Four

Bride's Inn buzzed with excitement as camera crews and the staff of *Ghost Seeker* descended upon the old inn. Nolan remained in the background, intent on performing her ritual of housekeeping tasks.

"At least come and meet the director," Serena told her the following morning after the cast and crew settled in. "We're having breakfast with him and Mr. Sinclair and—oh, please put that down, Nolan."

Serena removed the rag from Nolan's hand, dumping the damp cloth into a nearby bucket. Folding her arms across her breasts, she gave Nolan a measured look. "If it wasn't for you, we'd all be packing our bags and finding another place to live, and another means of employment." Serena stated, her voice firm.

Nolan reached over, grabbed another cloth from her cart and a bottle full of lemony-scented cleaning fluid, spritzed some on the mirror and wiped the glass until it shone. "It was your Aunt Clarice's idea, not mine." Nolan took a dry cloth and wiped the frame of the mirror. The reflection of Serena's striking green eyes held Nolan's captive.

Serena shook her head and sighed. "This isn't right, Nolan."

"It's fine," Nolan snapped. She winced when she heard the curt tone in her voice.

Serena's face fell but she stiffened her shoulders. "You reject every attempt that I or Miranda or Crystal make to befriend you. We care about everyone who works here, we care about *you*."

Nolan turned and faced Serena. "I'll meet the director of the show some other time."

Serena gave her a long look. "I don't get it. You're not... well, this work isn't for you."

Nolan raised a brow, her heart racing. Had Clarice mentioned something to Serena, to any of them, about her past life?

“It’s just that, well, the way you carry yourself,” Serena continued. “And I saw you helping Lupe the other day when she couldn’t read the instructions on that bottle. You have such patience, such...”

Nolan shrugged, but inside, she felt like crying.

Serena blew out a breath. “If you change your mind, meet us all on the veranda in an hour. We’d love for you to join us and meet Mr. McIntyre.”

Nolan watched Serena walk away, her stomach churning with fear. That fear permeated every part of her life, including her ability to make and have friends. No matter what, Jack Denning still held her in his grasp.

Well, there was no use crying over spilt milk, as her Aunt Jane used to say. Sometimes, you just had to buck up and face what life doles out, even if it gives you a bastard like Jack.

Nolan placed her rag and cleaning fluid back on the cart then moved down the hall to the next group of rooms. Reaching into the pocket of her uniform, she withdrew her pass key and opened the first room. The usual sight of an unmade bed and clothing strewn about the room greeted her. From the corner of her eye, she noticed a gold watch sitting on the desk, next to an open laptop computer.

Nolan moved toward the bed and stripped the linens from the mattress. For just a second, she breathed deep of a scent of citrus and musk and some other scent. Earthy. Woodsy...

*Wonderful.*

Nolan made quick work of the bed then heard the sound of running water.

Her eyes widened as the door to the bathroom opened. She dropped down and squatted next to the bed as a tall man strolled out, followed by a cloud of steam. She raised her head just a bit, and caught sight of a white towel wrapped around lean hips. Her eyes continued their journey upward, coming to rest on a naked chest and wide shoulders.

How could she be so stupid as to walk into a guest’s occupied room?

The man hummed a tune. Nolan shut her eyes and listened. It sounded familiar, like a song she heard in her childhood, a song her father used to sing to her—something about Kearney.

The words to an Irish lullaby caressed her ears.

Nolan’s eyes stung with tears. She swiped them away then looked over at the man. Tall as a tree, his lean, muscled body made Nolan’s heart beat like a runaway train. A smattering of

fine dark hair covered his chest and arms. He reached for the watch lying on the desk and strapped it to his wrist, the white and gold face in stark contrast to his tanned skin. Her breath caught as she gazed at his face; long and narrow, his high cheekbones stood out prominently.

Her eyes widened when he loosened the knot on the side of the towel.

“No!” she shouted, jumping to her feet.

He swiveled his head in her direction, his eyes widening.

“What the hell?” The towel inched down his hips.

“Oh my God,” Nolan covered her face with shaking hands.

“Son of a bitch,” he growled.

She heard the rustle of the towel, heard him tug on the knot.

“For God’s sake, open your eyes, girl.” He drew his dark brows together and crossed his arms across an impressive chest. “And tell me how the hell you got in here.”

“I, uh...um...” She couldn’t stop staring at his chest... and his obvious arousal poking against the towel.

He followed her gaze, his face flushed crimson. Then he reached for the phone. “I’m calling security.”

Nolan flew across the room. “Please”, she implored. “Don’t call security. I came in to clean your room. I-I thought it was unoccupied.” Her knees knocked against one and other.

He raised one dark brow. “Didn’t you notice the ‘do not disturb’ sign on the doorknob?”

Nolan frowned. “Isn’t that it over there?” She pointed at the night table next to the bed.

He stalked over to the small table on the other side of the bed and grabbed the small plastic sign. “What’d you do, little bird, remove it from the door?”

She heard just a hint of a brogue in his voice.

“Bird?” she squeaked.

“It means, ‘girl’,” he replied, moving toward her.

Nolan backed up against the wall.

“I didn’t take it off the door.” She shot back, wondering where her courage came from. “It wasn’t there to begin with.”

He stood before her, in all his Celtic glory. Nolan saw his aura. A deep maroon color surrounded him. Tiny balls of dark red, like dust motes, drifted around his head and chest.

This man had drive, determination...

She saw the holes, too, indicating pain and suffering. Her breath caught and held in her chest when she saw the holes widen. *How deep was this man's emotional pain?*

He studied her face. "Maybe I didn't put it on the door last night." He frowned, his face darkening. "Or maybe you're just a damned little thief, looking to steal what you can from my room."

"It was an honest mistake." Her voice vibrated with anger. "I always look for that 'do not disturb' sign before I enter any guest's room at Bride's Inn."

He folded his arms across his chest. "And why should I believe you?"

She sighed. "Go on, call security if you want. But my employers know I'm honest. And you didn't put that sign on the door."

"Stay where you are," he told her. "Don't move."

He stalked into the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

Nolan sank into a chair, her legs giving out just as her bottom connected with the seat.

Moments later, he returned dressed in jeans and t-shirt that stretched across his wide chest.

No man had a right to look that good in jeans and a t-shirt.

She looked up to see him scowling. Deep blue eyes met hers. A shock of dark, black hair touched his forehead, softening his features. Nolan's fingers itched to touch it, to smooth it away, along with the scowl on his face.

"Nolan," he said, glancing down at her name badge. The corners of his mouth lifted. "I like it."

Nolan blew out a pent-up breath then rose to her feet, her wobbly knees, and his nearness, making it difficult. "I'm glad. Now, I'll just leave so you can..."

He took a step closer. Nolan's heart thudded painfully in her chest, her mouth growing dry as his large frame caged her in. She tried to swallow her fear, but her throat muscles constricted. Backed against the wall like a terrified animal, Nolan reached out and pushed him away. He tumbled backward onto the bed.

Nolan raced out of the room, the door slamming behind her, but not before she heard his deep, robust laugh.

A tiny part of her fear melted at the sound.

\* \* \* \*

That evening, Nolan stood by the grand staircase near the lobby of Bride's Inn. From the corner of her eye, she saw a flash of white on the steps. The room swirled and she had to concentrate on maintaining her balance. In her mind's eye, she saw a body dressed in a long white gown fall headfirst down the long line of steps. She grabbed hold of the banister for support, jumping when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

Nolan turned to see Miranda standing there.

"I didn't mean to startle you." Miranda gave Nolan a searching look. "Are you okay?"

Nolan shrugged. "I'm fine, thank you." Her heart raced when she thought of the strange vision she witnessed in her mind.

"Serena asked me to find you. The dining room is packed tonight. The entire cast and crew is finally here from *Ghost Seeker*. Do you think you could help us? Just for tonight. We'd—"

"Of course," Nolan squared her shoulders. "I can wait on tables."

Miranda frowned. "You misunderstood, we don't need you to waitress, we need—"

Nolan raised a hand. "I'll bus the tables, then, that's no problem." Her hand shook so she lowered it to her side, her dignity trampled.

"Would you let me finish?" Miranda's deep purple eyes danced. "Nolan, we need you to hostess and run the dining room tonight, not waitress or bus tables. We've got that covered."

"You... what? Run the dining room?" Nolan blinked, not quite believing her ears.

Miranda took her by the arm and turned her toward the staircase. "Go up and change."

"Into what?" Nolan turned to face her.

"A pair of slacks or skirt and a blouse would be fine. We really need you." Miranda gave her a searching look. "Unless you don't want to. We'd understand, it's just that, well..." She angled her head. "You just seem capable of so much more than cleaning rooms." Miranda angled her head. "Clarice said that you used to have a management job."

Nolan froze mid-stride. "Sh-she did?"

"Yes, she said you're capable of doing so much more. Serena, Crystal and I wish we knew that when we hired you." Miranda glanced at her watch. "Come to the dining room when you're ready."

Nolan managed a nod.

She'd have a nice, long talk with Clarice later.

*We need you...*

Those words echoed through her head as her feet flew up the steps.



## Chapter Five

That evening, Ian McIntyre stood by the bar in the dining room, sipping a glass of wine. He gazed outside to where the moon hung full and golden in the night sky, the stars twinkling over water that seemed to stretch for miles beyond the cliffs. A perfect night to be outside, walking on the beach, listening to the sound of the water as it lapped on the shore...

"...and John said I'd have top billing. You were there, Ian, that day he said it."

The sound of Susan Stalzer's voice cut through Ian's musings of the magnificent setting. He turned his eyes reluctantly toward her and took a fortifying sip of his wine.

Ian scowled, feeling his temper ignite as he placed his wine glass on the polished mahogany bar. Folding his arms across his chest, he replied. "Your name, in relation to the rest of the cast, is helpful, but you're not the star of *Ghost Seeker*."

Lifting her nose in the air, Susan replied. "Then why have all these people gathered here this evening, if not to see me?"

"How about to meet Mike Chalmers and the rest of the team?"

Susan's nostrils flared. "Mike is an idiot. He's an electrician, and his 'team' is a bunch of construction guys. What do they know about paranormal investigations?"

"Plenty. Their experience with old homes and construction helps to debunk a lot of so-called paranormal phenomena, and makes it easier to determine if a house is really haunted."

"He's a fraud," Susan huffed.

Ian grabbed her by the upper arm and pulled her forward.

"Let go of me." She struggled in Ian's grip.

"If anyone's a fraud, it's you." He leaned down until they were nose-to-nose. "I could tell everyone how you really got your start in television."

She paled.

"How your first experience with film was getting caught by security cameras on the roof of your hometown's fire department building during a fundraising party. I'll tell them how you

were caught fucking one of your husband's fire department buddies up on that roof. After that, you were run out of town by a jealous wife."

"You wouldn't dare," she replied through clenched teeth.

"Try me." He ground out, releasing her so he didn't haul off and smack her. "The truth about you is better than any tale I could spin."

"Well!" She straightened, regaining her composure. "*Your* ex didn't hide her affairs. Don't take your lousy love life out on me."

"We're not talking about me; we're talking about your goddamned inflated ego."

She poked him in the chest with one long, red nail. "Talk about ego. As long as everyone does what King McIntyre says." She sneered. "Your crown is slipping, sire."

"Do things my way, we get along just fine."

"You're an ass," she hissed. "And I'll get my name listed first on the damned credits if it's the last thing I do." She turned when there was a commotion at the entrance to the dining room. "Look", she pointed to the crowd. "Anthony Zodan just walked in. He's that famous magician."

Ian glanced at Anthony. "He's happily married, leave him alone."

Susan gave him a cold, snide laugh. "I never met a man who wasn't just a teensy bit unhappy with his wife." She pinched her thumb and forefinger together. "And it usually works to my advantage."

"I'll have John fire your ass so quick, you won't know what hit you."

Susan pasted a bright smile on her face. "Really? I don't think so."

He glared, his heart racing with temper. "You stepped in shit the day you convinced that rich lady you could talk to her dead son from beyond the grave." He snorted. "She's the one who bankrolled you."

"Do you always do what John tells you?" she asked, her voice dripping with malice. "I could tell everyone about *that*. About you and John and—"

"Shut up," he replied, feeling his pulse beat at the base of his neck. He gripped his wineglass, his fingers digging into the small crystal knobs lining the stem. "Don't you dare say anything about John."

She grinned, then turned and sauntered off, but not before replying, "It's my turn to say, 'try me'."

Ian gripped his glass so tight, it shattered into a thousand little pieces.

“Are you all right, sir?” The startled bartender wiped away the broken glass. “Did you get cut?”

Ian looked down at his hand and the broken stem on his wine glass, then shook his head.

*Goddamned Susan Stalzer and all women.*

Thoughts of a short, pixie-haired waif intruded. Instead of a housekeeping uniform, she wore nothing but a pair of wings. Her petite body held him captive, his member springing to life as he recalled his encounter with the little maid he’d found in his room that morning.

He ordered another glass of wine and gazed at the entranceway to the dining room.

As if by magic, his pixie appeared. She wore a sleeveless black dress that outlined her curvy frame, ending just above what had to be the sexiest knees he’d ever seen.

Ian shook his head. Since when did a woman’s knees turn him on?

He glanced at her again, noticing the large silver hoops in her ears; they stood out beneath the darker brown strands of hair peeking between the blonde ones. She couldn’t be more than twenty-five or twenty-seven or...

*Christ almighty, he was thirty-seven fucking years old!*

As he gazed at the vision of loveliness, he suddenly felt twice his age.

Ian took a healthy sip of wine, then felt a push on his shoulder. He glanced back, but no one stood behind him.

*Strange...*

He took a deep breath and strode over to his pixie, wondering from where in hell these absurd thoughts sprang. His stride widened when he saw Mike Chalmers say something to her. She grinned, bestowing a lovely smile on Mike, her dimples showing. Ian had the most unholy urge to punch Mike.

Confidence and an air of sensuality exuded from her as she directed the flow of traffic in the busy dining room.

Ian’s cock stirred, straining against his pant leg.

*Damn!*

When Ian managed to speak, he felt tongue-tied.

“Well, well, from maid to hostess all in one day.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he wished he could take them back, along with his brusque tone.

Her eyes widened in recognition, the corners of her mouth drooping.

*Damn! He wanted her to smile the way she had for Mike.*

Ian noted the slight tremor in her hands as she grabbed her pen and scanned the reservation book in front of her.

Smiling, hoping she would, too, he said, “We meet again, pixie.” He pointed to her book of reservations. “It’s under Sinclair.”

She squared her shoulders. “Your table will be ready momentarily.”

Ian nodded, afraid that if he did much more, he’d grab her and kiss her lush little mouth. His lips tingled at the thought.

“Are you waiting for Mr. Sinclair to join you or—?”

“Just show me to my table. I’ll wait for him there.”

Ian hoped it was a long time before John showed up. He followed behind her, admiring the sweet rounded curves of her bottom, squelching the urge to reach out and touch. He slid into a chair at a table in a secluded corner of the dining room.

“Nolan, right?” he asked.

She blew out a breath. “Yes.”

“Well, Nolan, would you care to join me this evening?” He grabbed a menu and raised a brow as he scanned the contents.

Nolan reached over, taking the menu from his hands, turning it right side up. “That’s better, don’t you think?” She gave him a smile. “Try the veal,” she pointed to his menu. “It’s delicious.”

His heart beat wildly. “You didn’t answer my question.”

She frowned.

“I asked if you’d like to join me.”

“You mean you’d want to dine with a thief?” She raised a brow, but the corner of her mouth trembled.

He shook his head. “That was my mistake. I’ve apologized and—”

“No you didn’t.”

He nodded. “Then I’m apologizing now.” A waiter came over and took his drink order.

Nolan waited until the waiter was out of earshot. “Are you always so... annoying?” She shook her head, placing one hand on her curvy little hip.

“I only annoy people I really like.”

Nolan rolled her eyes. “God help the ones you don’t.”

*That* made him chuckle. He found that he was enjoying himself immensely. Warning bells went off in his head. The last time he got involved with a woman, she’d trampled his heart and his pride.

“So you’ve been promoted? From maid to dinner hostess? You’re moving up in the world.” He raised his glass in salute, his tone biting.

She folded her arms beneath her breasts.

Lovely breasts, he thought. Just perfect. They’d fill his hands nicely.

*Damn!*

He crossed his legs, hoping to tamp down his arousal.

“I’m just returning a favor.”

Ian looked up. “What favor?”

“None of your business.”

She started to walk away, but Ian snagged her hand. A tingle raced up his arm, then down his spine, when his skin made contact with Nolan’s.

Nolan shrugged away, turning to face him. “I have to be nice to the guests, no matter how *they* treat *me*.”

Ian’s blood heated at her challenging tone. He shot forward in his chair, spanning her waist with his hands, pulling her until she stood between his legs. Nolan leaned down, placing her hands on his shoulders. Ian’s pulse beat rapidly, blood pooling in his groin.

“Nolan,” he whispered, his mouth colliding with hers.

She skimmed her lips across his, the tip of her tongue tracing his lower lip.

He felt lost on a swirling sea of sexual bliss, the slight contact of their lips arousing him to a fever pitch.

Then that sea turned cold and unforgiving.

Ian jumped from his seat, nearly knocking over Nolan in the process. She moved away, a tiny smile making her pixie face glow.

“Damn it!” Ian shouted. A few diners looked their way as he wiped a red wine stain that rapidly seeped through his trousers.

“Have a pleasant evening, sir.”

He watched Nolan stroll away, her fanny swishing

“Ah hell,” he grabbed a napkin, blotting the red wine stain.

“I see you’ve made an impression already.”

John stood there, grinning.

“Very funny,” Ian replied, then he laughed.

He realized that lately, he’d been laughing quite a bit ...

Ever since he’d come to Bride’s Inn and found a pixie in his room.

## Chapter Six

Later that same evening, Nolan tossed and turned in her bed, her dreams scattered with strange images. Ian McIntyre stood on the beach below the cliffs outside Bride's Inn, his magnificent deep red aura swirling around him, like he was encased in a ring of fire. She felt that heat pour into her, into the core of her body where a deep pulsing, sweet ache, traveled down between her legs.

Nolan moaned in her sleep, tossing fitfully on the bed, her hand traveling to the little nub of flesh hidden between the folds of her labia. In her dream, Ian came to her bed, taking over when her fingers no longer provided the sensual relief she sought...

Then her dream changed. A dark, lurking shadow clouded Ian's image. It blotted everything else from her mind, leaving behind an overwhelming feeling of dread. When she opened her eyes, she saw a woman in a long white dress standing at the foot of her bed, a veil covering her face. Nolan blinked, her gaze settling on the chair directly behind the shrouded figure.

*I can see right through her.*

Nolan raised a shaking hand to her lips as voices rose outside her door. She glanced at the illuminated dial on the clock sitting on her bedside table.

Two a.m.

*I woke at two a.m. the last time I saw the lady in white!*

When she glanced at the foot of her bed, the lady in white disappeared, vanishing before Nolan's eyes, leaving nothing but a frigid breeze in her wake.

Nolan flipped on the light and shrugged into her robe, shoving her feet into a pair of slippers. Rising from the bed, she glanced toward the door, where she could still hear the voices coming from the other side. The patter of footsteps echoed down the hallway. As Nolan neared the door to her room, she swore she saw the trail of a black mist slide beneath the small opening

between the bottom of the door and the carpet. Cold permeated her body, as well as a strange feeling of sadness.

Opening the door, she peeked outside. In the hallway, Mike Chalmers, several members of GSI, Mike's paranormal investigative team, and Susan Stalzer, their medium, strolled down the long corridor. Two cameramen followed closely behind.

As they neared the end of the corridor, Ian McIntyre's tall form and broad back came into view. Nolan played their heated kiss in her mind, like a rerun of a movie. That tall man made her body hum from just one kiss. What had emboldened her to kiss him back? Big, tall men like Jack scared her. Jack had large hands, too, but he used his for a different reason. She shuddered at the memory, pulling her robe tightly around her body to ward off the chill.

Nolan turned to go back inside her room, but Ian's eyes caught and held hers. He said something to one of his camera crew then strode toward her, his steps wide and purposeful. Soon, he stood before her, his chiseled, beard-shadowed chin a hair's breadth away from her. For one crazy second, Nolan wanted to stand on tiptoes and trail her lips across his jaw to the small indent at the base of his chin. She stuffed her hand in the pocket of her robe, lest she reach out and dip her finger in that little cleft.

"Did we wake you?" Ian's voice held soft, deep notes.

"I-I was awake." Nolan tucked a few wayward strands of hair behind her ear, hoping he didn't catch the tremor in her voice. His nearness caused a fluttering in her belly.

He raised a brow. "I'm still trying to get the wine stain out of my trousers."

She raised her chin. "Send them to the dry cleaners."

He smiled, the grin softening his features. "I deserved a dousing."

Nolan returned his grin, eased by their easy banter. "You certainly did."

He folded his arms across his chest. "Well, I'm glad we didn't wake you, but it's late, you should be asleep."

Nolan glanced down the hallway. . "What is everyone doing?"

"We started filming *Ghost Seeker* tonight."

Her eyes grew wide.

"We're hoping to catch something of the lady in white on GSI's equipment and our cameras." Ian gave her a searching look. "Would you care to join us?"



Her heart pounded in her chest then she managed a nod. She wanted to join him more than she cared to admit.

She placed her hand in his, and Ian's smile widened as he led her down the hallway.

\* \* \* \*

"This was her room." Susan Stalzer shut her eyes and spoke as a camera zoomed in. "The lady in white used this room to change into her wedding gown on that fateful day. She's in there now; I feel her presence."

Nolan frowned as Susan placed her hand on the doorknob. As Nolan's eyes adjusted to the darkened hallway, she could make out the shape of a woman dressed in a long white gown — the same woman she'd seen standing at the foot of her bed.

*The same woman she saw the night the Abrams' threatened to leave.*

"She's behind you," Nolan's voice rang out.

Ian turned to face Nolan. "Who?"

"The lady in white. She's standing here in the hallway—with us—and behind Ms. Stalzer."

Susan's body stiffened, her face drawn in tight lines. "Who the hell are you?"

Nolan stepped back. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interfere."

"Ian, who is this person?" Susan pointed a long red nail at Nolan.

From the corner of her eye, Nolan saw Mike roll his eyes and shake his head.

"Cut!" Ian shouted, his voice laced with anger.

Nolan sighed. "I didn't mean—"

Her skin prickled as the eerie vision moved. Nolan pushed past Ian and GSI to catch up with the apparition.

"Nolan, wait!" She heard Ian shout.

She continued down the corridor, her eyes never leaving the strange vision of the lady in white.

Mike caught up with Nolan. "What do you see?"

Nolan glanced at the lady in white again. "It's a woman wearing a long white dress, but her aura is very strong."

Mike frowned as they continued to walk. "You see auras?"

"Yes, since I was a child. Hers is violet, that of a seeker."

“A what?” He lifted the brim of his baseball cap, scratching his head

They stopped walking. Nolan turned to face him. “She’s seeking something. Could be answers, I-I’m not sure, but that’s what her violet aura indicates.” Nolan glanced to where the lady in white stood. “She’s leaving.” Nolan pointed at a wall. “She’s walking through that wall, like she did the first time I saw her.”

Mike’s eyes widened. He glanced at Ian, then back at Nolan.

It got very quiet in the hallway.

Nolan’s eyes met Susan Stalzer’s haughty stare. “This is the first time I’ve seen the lady in white’s aura. There’s some black mixed in with the indigo that surrounds her, as though she’s not balanced, not…” Nolan gazed at everyone, realizing that she heard the whirl of the cameras.

“Go on,” Ian nodded. “Tell us more.”

“It’s as though something negative is interfering with her quest.”

“The quest for what?” Mike asked.

Nolan shrugged. “I-I’m not sure,” she replied, feeling more self-conscious with each passing second.

*If she told them about that black mist she’d seen, they’d really think she was bonkers.*

“This is preposterous!” Susan’s shrill voice cut through Nolan’s thoughts.

“Be quiet,” Ian growled. “Let her talk.”

Susan threw her hands up in the air.

“What’s an aura?” One of the GSI members, Joe, asked.

“It’s an electrical energy that surrounds each of us,” Nolan replied. “It’s a natural phenomenon. Everybody has an aura.”

“And you see them?” Joe shook his head, a look of wonder on his young face.

Nolan managed a nod.

“Cut tape,” Ian told his camera crew.

Nolan’s eyes grew wide.

He smiled. “This is one helluva way to kick off a new season!”

\* \* \* \*

Later that morning, Nolan heard a knock on her door. She opened it to see Serena, Crystal and Miranda standing there.

“We’ve got a surprise for you.” Crystal grabbed her hand and pulled her into the hallway.

Nolan's heart raced.

*Jack.* Had he found her?

Miranda placed an arm around Nolan's shoulders. "Stop looking so frightened."

Nolan relaxed a little as they led her down the hallway.

"I-I've got rooms to clean."

Crystal waved a hand through the air. "Forget about that today. In fact, forget about it forever."

Nolan stopped walking. "Please tell me what's going on."

Miranda grabbed her hand and tugged her along. "You'll see."

A few minutes later, they arrived at the banquet office. Serena opened the door and led them all inside.

"Here she is." She grabbed Nolan by the shoulders and led her to a table lined with laptop computers. Three young faces greeted her from behind the monitors.

Nolan glanced around the room. Anthony, Jake, Seth, Clarice, John, and Ian all sat on the couches and chairs lining the walls of the room. Ian rose to his feet as Nolan walked toward the long table in front of her. Serena stepped away to join Crystal and Miranda, who took the seats their husbands offered.

Nolan's body trembled, but stopped when Ian stood next to her. She gazed up into his face. "Mike will explain everything," he told her, his handsome, angular face softening. "It's fantastic."

Nolan glanced at Mike. He was smiling, giving her a thumbs-up, then he bent his head and told the young woman sitting in front of one of the laptops: "Okay, bring it back to the beginning."

The video on the computer screen flashed before Nolan's eyes.

Mike spoke again. "Joe, get ready with that audio and Ted, I want you to give us that EMF reading, too."

"I-I don't understand", Nolan shifted from one foot to the other. "What are you doing?"

Mike grinned. "This is called our 'unveiling', where we tell the owners of an allegedly haunted establishment what paranormal evidence we've found to substantiate, or disprove, the existence of a ghost."

She walked around the other side of the table, to where Mike and the GSI members sat. He rose from his chair. "Have a seat."

Nolan plunked into the chair in front of the laptop. The words GSI swirled before her on the blue screen.

"Now, watch this." Mike's voice brimmed with excitement.

The room became quiet. Mike tapped the keyboard with his finger.

Nolan's eyes settled on the screen, watching as her image, and that of GSI came into view. They stood in the dim light of a hallway—the same one they were in earlier that morning. As they walked and chatted, Nolan saw the hazy outline of a woman dressed in a long white gown appear on the computer screen.

She sucked in a breath, touching the screen in response to the image.

"Yeah, I know, pretty fu—" Mike glanced at Ian and everyone else. "Sorry, I meant, pretty fantastic, isn't it?" He smiled at Nolan.

The apparition's violet-colored aura surrounded her body.

Mike's smile widened. "And the readings from Joe's EMF meter were off the chart last night. Take a peek at his computer screen over there."

Nolan saw a series lines move up and down quickly across the other computer screen.

Ian moved next to her. She felt the heat from his body as he bent to examine the images on the computer screen in front of her. Or maybe she felt the heat from the laptop...

She couldn't be sure.

It seemed that whenever Ian McIntyre was near, she lost all reason.

"Welcome to *Ghost Seeker*," he told her.

She frowned. "I-I don't understand."

He pushed away from the table, grinning like a lunatic.

John rose to his feet and approached the long table, his smile as wide as Ian's. "What Ian is trying to say, is that it looks like we've found our new medium."

Mike stuck out his hand. Nolan lifted hers, as if on reflex. "Welcome to the GSI team," he shook hers. "And to *Ghost Seeker*. Nice to have you on board."

## Chapter Seven

“I can’t possibly do this.” Nolan shook her head; she couldn’t seem to stop. She heard excited chatter from the assembled group—words like ‘goldmine’ and ‘ratings will soar’ emerged from the din. She rose shakily to her feet.

“Will someone please listen to me?”

Ian turned to face her.

She took a deep breath. “I can’t be on *Ghost Seeker*.”

He folded his arms across his chest and scowled. “Why not?”

It became quiet again—Nolan swore she could hear a pin drop.

“Because I, well...” Nolan looked to Clarice for help, but she stood off to the side, involved in a discussion with John Wesley Sinclair. Then they both left the room.

*Damn!*

“Nolan, you’re a natural medium. Someone with your level of skill is unique. GSI could use your help and I’m sure,” Mike glanced at the owners of Bride’s Inn, “that your presence will help put the lady in white’s restless spirit to rest.”

Ian walked over to her. He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. A tiny thrill of excitement shot down her spine. “Will you do it?” he asked.

She continued to hold his hand, reveling in the gentle strength she felt as his fingers caressed hers. Nolan glanced around the room. “Where’s Ms. Stalzer?”

Ian released her hand. She felt bereft for a few seconds at the loss of contact. “*Miss Stalzer*,” he shook his head, a look of disgust crossing his handsome face, “has decided to work elsewhere.”

“What?” Nolan shook her head. “Why?”

“Last night, when Susan said the ghost was in that room off the hallway, there was no disruption in the natural magnetic energy anywhere near that room,” Mike piped up. “But when

we started to follow you—when you led us down the hallway, the readings jumped off the scale. When Mike revealed his findings to Miss Stalzer, she made the decision to work elsewhere.”

Nolan’s shoulders slumped. *Great!* Now, she alienated the show’s obvious star. “That was my fault, I’ll go find her and apologize—”

Ian laid a hand on her shoulder, turning her to face him. “You will do no such thing,” he commanded.

“Susan’s a pain in the—” Mike glanced at Ian.

Ian glanced at Mike and smiled. “Ass.”

Everyone else in the room laughed.

Except for Nolan.

“Will you help us? Please?” Ian asked her.

Her pulse quickened.

“Please, Nolan. We need you.” Mike said, his voice pleading.

“So does *Ghost Seeker*.” Ian’s voice rang out. “We could use a talented medium like you.” He leaned down and said for her ears only. “Whatever you want, Nolan, it’s yours.”

Nolan felt all eyes on her. “Will you help Bride’s Inn?” Serena’s face, usually calm, seemed pinched and tense.

*We need you...*

Nolan felt just the slightest nudge on her shoulder. She glanced back, thinking that Mike or someone else would be standing behind her.

No one stood there.

“Yes,” she blurted, wondering if she hadn’t completely lost her mind.

\* \* \* \*

“Clarice, stop!” John hurried down the hallway to catch up with Clarice.

He halted her movements. Gently, he turned her to face him, his chest growing tight at the sight of the tears in her eyes.

“You can’t turn back the clock,” her voice shook. Her body trembled, too.

The last thing he wanted was for her to be upset, but damn it, he couldn’t let this second chance he’d been given slip through his fingers.

“I want to move forward, I-I know I can’t go back.”

She tried to shrug out of his hold, but he gave no quarter. He glanced around, seeing the door to a small veranda outside. John led her in that direction.

Once outside, he shut the door and led her to a secluded spot on the small deck. A warm wind blew softly, the tangy smell of sea water tickling his nose. He remembered it all too well—what it felt like to be a part of Bride’s Inn—and Clarice. How stupid he’d been to walk away.

“You can’t play with my emotions, John, I’m too old.” A lone tear slipped from Clarice’s eyes.

“I didn’t come back to Bride’s Inn to play,” he replied softly, wiping the tear away with the pad of his thumb. She shook her head.

“Let me back in, Clarice. Don’t make me beg. But I will if it’s what you want.” He lifted her hand, curling her fingers around hers. “Please,” he uttered, his voice laced with desperation. “I need to tell you so much.”

“I need the truth from you.” She gave him a searching look, and stepped closer. “I want to know about Ian. He looks”, she raised a hand to her throat. “Like you,” she whispered. “So much like you when you were his age.”

John nodded, his heart racing like a runaway train. “That’s because he’s my son.”

\* \* \* \*

That same morning, Nolan went into town to pick up her mail, arriving at the Gray’s Point Post Office just as it opened.

“Well, good morning,” the postmistress, Peggy, called out in greeting. “You’re my first customer, as usual.” She smiled at Nolan, handing her a letter.

Nolan scanned it, her mouth growing dry when she saw the return address.

She walked away from the counter and strode through the door, the bright sunshine blinding. Entering the coffee shop across the street, she took a seat in one of the back booths, ordered coffee and tore open one of the letters...

*Dear Miss Frey:*

*The results of our investigation are as follows -*

*Jack Denning’s last known address was Vista, California, however...*

Her heart started to pound.

*He was arrested in Beaute, Montana a few months ago on charges of being drunk and disorderly. Denning spent a few months in jail and was released.*

*His current address is unknown.*

*Our bill for services is enclosed. Should you need any further help...*

Nolan crumpled the letter in her hand.

She tossed some money on the table and left the coffee shop.

Her body trembled, her mind raced. If Jack were out of jail, he'd need money.

And he'd try to get it from her.

Nolan glanced at the sign on the shop next door: BARTER'S BOOKS. Nolan entered the bookstore. She wandered around, glancing at the beautifully bound tomes lining the shelves. If she could, she'd buy every single one of them...

Her thoughts drifted. In her mind's eye, she sat in a white rocking chair, a book spread on her lap, a group of eager little faces gazing up at her as she read:

*Hello moon — your glow is bright. It blots out the glow of stars on this winter night...*

"I see you still like to read."

Nolan froze, the book slipping through her hands, as her deepest, darkest fear came to life, giving it voice...

*Jack Denning.*

Nolan looked up into his bloodshot eyes. "Get away from me." Her voice shook, so did her body.

He gave her a bleary-eyed stare. "Not until you give me what's mine."

Jack grabbed her arm, his grip painful. Nolan looked around the small shop, but no one was there. She tried to scream, but her throat constricted when his grip tightened. His dark aura swirled around him, filling her with dread. Jack leaned down, his foul breath making her stomach roll. "You stole that money from me. I want it back."

She tried to shrug out of his hold, panic clogging her throat, when she felt his grip ease. Another set of fingers peeled away the hand holding her upper arm.

Her eyes caught sight of a tall frame with a bright, deep-red aura—like fire.

*Ian!*

His blue eyes held hers, their deep azure color transferring to his highly charged electric energy field. For just a second, Nolan thought she saw the intense, blue center of a flame surround his body.

"Wait for me outside." Ian commanded.



She opened her mouth to protest, feeling the start of tears.

“Do as I tell you, pixie,” his voice softened just a bit.

Nolan flew out of the small bookstore, glancing back to see Ian smash Jack Denning’s nose.

She didn’t stop running until she was down the street, away from the main drag.

Nolan hailed a taxi and got in, huddling in the corner of the backseat as the cabbie drove her back to Bride’s Inn.

## *Chapter Eight*

“Nolan, please.” Serena glanced at Miranda and Crystal. “Just tell us what happened.”

Nolan grabbed her suitcase off the bed and raced toward the door.

“I-I have to, I—” She choked back her tears, glancing at the three women she knew she’d miss.

But if she didn’t leave Bride’s Inn right away, they’d all be in danger. Jack had found her, and she would not put these people at risk.

“Did something happen? I’ll tell Seth, he’ll handle it.” Serena laid a hand on Nolan’s arm.

“And I’ll tell Jake.” Miranda nodded, her face set in determined lines.

“Anthony will take care of it, don’t you worry.” Crystal placed an arm around Nolan’s shoulders.

Tears, unbidden and unwelcome, fell down Nolan’s face.

“Nolan,” Serena whispered. “What’s wrong?”

Clarice appeared at the doorway. “What is going on here, Nolan?” She reached out, leaning heavily on her cane. “Where are you going?”

Nolan ran past Clarice, her feet barely skimming the treads on the grand staircase as she made her way downstairs.

Once outside, she spotted a waiting taxi and ran to it. She’d just laid her hand on the passenger side door when she felt a tug on her waist. Nolan kicked her legs backwards as a strong arm lifted her body, pulling her away from the waiting taxi.

“I can’t wait here all day.” The cabbie shouted out the front passenger side window.

“Get the hell out of here.”

The fight nearly drained out of Nolan when she heard Ian’s voice, his brogue more pronounced than she’d ever heard it.

“Here”, Ian tossed a fifty dollar bill through the open window of the cab. It landed on the front passenger seat. “Now go.”

Nolan reared back against Ian. “Put me down!”

“I’ll do that if you stop acting like a child,” Ian told her.

She reared back again, her heel connecting with his shin.

He shifted the arm around her waist, holding her tighter.

Her bottom cheeks connected with something stiff and—hard. Nolan’s face flamed in response to the feel of Ian’s arousal.

“I’m going to put you down, and we’re going to walk back inside Bride’s Inn—calmly.” Ian released his hold on her waist, sliding her down onto the sidewalk.

She picked up her suitcase and ran, wondering how she could see anything through the hot, stinging tears that streamed from her eyes.

“What in hell do you think you’re doing?” Ian’s deep brogue assaulted her ears. “Come back here!”

He caught up with her just as she stepped off the curb and grabbed her arm. She resisted, digging her heels into the grass lining the curb. Dropping the suitcase, she lashed out at him, her hand connecting with his left cheek. A few seconds went by; Ian didn’t say a word, just fingered his cheek where she’d slapped him.

Tears spilled from her eyes. She had never hit anyone in her life. Covering her mouth to stifle a sob, Ian’s face swam before her.

In the next instant, she felt her body fly through the air.

When she came to her senses, she had an upside down view of the world around her—the sidewalk, the grass...

Ian’s feet.

She wanted to die as Ian carried her back inside Bride’s Inn. Like a sack of flour, she dangled from his broad shoulder. When they got to her room, he kicked open the door. It crashed against the frame, slamming shut behind them.

He eased her down onto the mattress, his big body covering hers. Ian kissed her, robbing the breath from her body. He gave no quarter as his mouth slid across hers, his warm, silky lips pressing against hers.

Ian stopped kissing her long enough to run the backs of his fingers across her cheeks. He traced her cheekbone with the tip of his tongue. “Salty,” he stated, giving her a searching look. “If I let you up, my little pixie faery, are you going to hit me again?”

She shook her head, embarrassed. Her face and body heated when she gazed at the bright red mark on his cheek.

“You pack quite a wallop.”

Nolan wanted to cry all over again, this time, at his gentle, soft tone.

He eased his body from hers, sitting up to gaze into her face, then he extended his hand. Nolan placed her fingers in his, allowing him to draw her up into a sitting position next to him.

Ian pushed a few wayward strands of hair behind her ear. He angled his head. “Who was that guy back in the book store? Your boyfriend?”

She aimed her chin at Ian, knowing she couldn’t tell the whole truth. “Y-yes. My boyfriend.”

Ian raised one dark brow and gazed at her upper arm. “Do you like it when your boyfriend hurts you?”

Nolan followed his gaze, her eyes landing on the large, purple bruise forming on the skin of her upper right arm.

She swallowed, panic filling her.

“I want an answer, Nolan.”

She shook her head, violently, her heart beating like a drum.

“Why would you stay with a man who treated you like that?”

She didn’t answer.

He narrowed his eyes. “Nolan, I want the truth. If I have the truth, I can help you, I’ll—”

She felt panic claw at her insides. Now that Ian had initiated a confrontation, Jack would surely seek revenge.

Nolan scooted off the bed, but Ian’s hands spanned her waist, pulling her onto his lap. “Don’t run away, Nolan. I’ve got the feeling you’ve been running for a long time.”

She slid her bottom along his thighs, reveling in the muscled feel. They flexed beneath her. His arms came around her, holding her close against his chest, his chin resting on the top of her head.

Hot tears scalded her cheeks.

She felt his lips graze the top of her head. “It will be all right, little one.” Ian whispered in her ear, his brogue thick.

Looking up into his face, she wanted to trust him—more than anything she wanted to believe he could help her. “Jack Denning isn’t my boyfriend”.

In scowled. “Then who the hell is he?”

“He’s my cousin.”

\* \* \* \*

Clarice sat at a small table on the balcony of her room, sipping a cup of tea. She glanced through the French doors to see Miranda nod in her direction.

Clarice’s body trembled as she watched John approach.

“Ian’s with Nolan.”

She sighed, placing her teacup on its saucer. “I’m glad.”

John reached over and patted her hand. “He won’t allow her to leave, and we’ll all work to keep her safe.”

She could only manage a nod. A bird flew by. The seagull stretched its wings, it’s shrill ‘caw’ cutting the absolutely silence that stretched between her and John.

“I didn’t know you had a son.” Her hands shook, so she laid them in her lap.

John moved his chair closer to hers. He reached down into her lap, and took her hand in his.

She didn’t resist.

“Ian wasn’t planned. Anna had a difficult birth and, well, to be honest, she didn’t want him. I took care of Ian, but I didn’t mind. He filled a void that my marriage to Anna created.” He looked away then his eyes sought Clarice’s. “When things got rocky between us, we thought maybe a change of scenery would help. I agreed to go back to Ireland with Anna. We stayed there for a few years, but it didn’t help. When I started *Ghost Seeker* I wanted Ian to direct it. He had lots of experience with small budget films that garnered a lot of attention—in this country, as well as Ireland and England. He’s a talented director. Knows how to get the best from everyone.” John grinned. “A little rough around the edges.”

“Like his father,” Clarice replied softly. “When he was younger.” She angled her head. “I see he uses your mother’s maiden name.”

“He didn’t want to ride on my coattails. Ian wanted to earn his success on his own.”

John reached for a handkerchief in the breast pocket of his suit jacket. He leaned into Clarice, wiping the lone tear that trickled down her face. "I won't upset you anymore. Ian can handle things from here, so I'm leaving."

Clarice's stomach did a little flip.

"Y-you're leaving?"

He pressed the handkerchief into her hand and rose to his feet. "I brought you *Ghost Seeker*. That's what you wanted."

She shook her head. "Not entirely."

There was a minute of silence. John eased his tall frame into the chair once more. "What do you want me to say, Clarice? That I screwed up? I did. I married for money, not love, and found that Anna's wealth didn't open every door. But most of all, it shut the one you opened for me."

John reached over and grabbed the handkerchief from her hands. He wiped her face gently.

"I have a son that should have been our son, if I hadn't been so foolish." He gave her a small smile as he continued to stroke the piece of linen across her face. "This reminds me of when *you* were younger. You'd cry, but you'd never have a handkerchief."

"It's b-because I always knew *you'd* have one," she whispered.

He reached for both of her hands. "Let me back in."

She shook her head. "You'll only break my heart again."

"Let me prove to you that I won't."

Miranda appeared on the small balcony. "Harlan is here, Aunt Clarice. He's waiting downstairs."

John frowned. "Who is Harlan?"

Clarice squared her shoulders. "The chief of police here in Gray's Point. We have a date tonight, like we've had every Tuesday night for the past twenty years." A little piece of her died inside when she saw John's face fall.

It shouldn't bother her.

But it did.

More than she cared to admit.

## *Chapter Nine*

Nolan walked over to the wall of windows lining her bedroom. She loved the view of the cliffs and sound. It usually calmed her, but not this time. This time, Ian's presence made her jittery, as though a hundred little moths beat their wings in her belly.

"Jack Denning was my Aunt Jane's son. When my parents died, my Aunt Jane took me in." Nolan pulled back the curtain to look outside, avoiding Ian's eyes. "Jack was my age, and he resented my presence in his mother's home. I always thought he was jealous of me." Nolan wrapped her arms around her waist as a small tremor shot through her. "I used to hate the way he looked at me, particularly as we became teenagers. Then one day, he," she sucked in a breath. "He forced himself on me," she whispered. "My Aunt Jane caught him and ordered him out of the house."

"As she damned well should have," Ian growled from the other side of the room.

She shook her head. "I always thought, I-I mean, I got the feeling that Jack blamed me. He told my aunt that I made advances toward him, but it wasn't true. I always felt that some of it was my fault, that if my aunt hadn't taken me in, none of it would have happened."

"That's bullshit." Ian waved a hand in the air.

Nolan flopped down into a chair. "I didn't see Jack again until a few years later—he came to my aunt's funeral and caused such a commotion, he had to be escorted out. He never came to the cemetery."

Ian walked over to her, his hands in his pockets. "So, this morning in the bookstore was the first time you've seen him since?"

"No, over these last couple of years, he's turned to drinking and drugs and well. A few times, he came to me for money. I-I gave him some. The thing is," she blew out a breath and looked down at the floor. Then she looked back up into Ian's face. "Jack thinks I stole his inheritance."

Ian lifted a brow.

“My aunt didn’t have much money, but what she did save over the years, she left me in her will. It paid for my college tuition.”

Ian nodded. “Clarice said you had some kind of management job. What company did you work for before coming to Bride’s Inn?”

She shook her head and sighed. “Clarice was telling tales. I-I didn’t have a management job.”

He angled his head.

“I had—I mean, I went to college and, well, I was a teacher. I specialized in teaching children with autism—five year-olds.”

Ian gave her a small smile. “Well, you did manage *something*.”

Nolan took a deep breath. “I had a good job in a private school.”

He shook his head. “Then why did you leave it?”

“Jack started sending me threatening letters. I couldn’t sleep, eat—soon, my job was affected and…” Her breath caught on a sob. She beat it back. “I was fired.”

Ian wrapped his arms around her, pulling Nolan close.

She snuggled against his chest, inhaling his musky, citrus-y smell. “Now, Jack thinks I have all this money and he won’t leave me alone until he gets it.” Nolan looked up into Ian’s face. “I’m so tired of running. I-I lost my job, my home—and now I’ll put everyone in danger if I stay here.”

Ian held her away from him, his hands on her shoulders. “I’ll handle your cousin. You’ve got a show to do, pixie, and I’m not letting you out of your agreement.”

It was Nolan’s turn to frown.

“You said you would do it. Does your word mean nothing?” His voice held challenge.

She shook her head. “That’s all you want? For me to do the show?”

His eyes turned hot, bright, as the blue flame entwined with his brilliant scarlet aura.

“That’s not all I want.”

She tried to keep her voice even. “What else?”

“I want you.”

He reached out to trail a finger across her cheek.

Then his mouth came down on hers.

\* \* \* \*



Ian trailed his lips across Nolan's, his mouth igniting a sensual path across her cheek. She closed her eyes, savoring the feel of his lips as they traveled across her face, delighting in the sensation he created as he kissed her eyelids.

When his hand cupped her breast, she stiffened.

"What's wrong?" he whispered near her ear. He nipped her lobe, sending a hot shiver of pleasure cascading down her spine.

She leaned into him. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at this."

He chuckled low. "You mean this?" Ian moved closer.

She felt the force of his desire through his denim jeans. His stiff member nudged her feminine mound.

Nolan sighed. "Yes, that," she whispered back. She moved away from him. "Things were never the same for me after—that is..." Nolan wrapped her arms around her waist. Hot tears pricked her eyes. "The day Jack tried to force himself on me, a little piece of me died."

Ian walked over to Nolan, cupping her shoulders between his hands. He leaned down and kissed the base of her neck, his lips sliding across her shoulder.

"You please me. More than you can imagine. Ever since that day I discovered you in my room, I haven't been able to think about much else."

She melted at his words, wishing she could believe him. "Thanks to Jack, I've screwed up every intimate relationship I've ever had." Nolan plunked down into a chair. "I'll screw this up, too."

Ian squatted down by her chair and took her hand in his own. "What if I said tonight is all yours?"

She frowned. "I don't understand."

Ian rose to his feet, extending his hand. "I'll make you forget Jack, and any other man you've ever known."

His voice held gentle challenge.

Nolan drew her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them.

Ian extended his hand. "Come to bed, Nolan. I promise you won't regret it."

Ian's hands shook as he slid them beneath Nolan's slender shoulders. He pulled her close, making sure that he took extra care with her slender little body. Willing his heart and mind to

slow, he hoped she didn't detect the tremor that shot through him when she snuggled against him.

It felt right. Like he'd always lain on this bed, with her.

His body vibrated with need, his senses heightened when Nolan's breasts brushed his chest. The more he kissed her, the closer she got, inching her body toward his. It was what he wanted—yet, her nearness, the curve of her hip as it slid across his, made him mindless with desire and need.

He'd be damned if he broke his promise to her. This was all for her...

*Since when did a woman's needs outweigh his?*

The answer was simple: Since he met Nolan.

Ian traced the fullness of her lips with the tip of his tongue. His cock responded to her breathy gasp of pleasure; his jeans grew uncomfortably tight. Trailing his index finger along her jaw, then down her collarbone, she trembled when he unfastened the top two buttons on her blouse.

"We won't do anything you don't like."

She nuzzled her face into his shoulder. "I like."

He continued, taking his time as he loosened each button, savoring the feel of her skin as the back of his knuckles brushed her chest. When he completed the first part of his sensual journey, he pushed aside her silky blouse, revealing the lacy cups of her bra.

Blood pooled in his groin and he shifted on the bed. He rested his forehead against hers for a few seconds.

"What's wrong?" Nolan gazed at his face.

He chuckled. "Not a damn thing."

"Oh."

He couldn't resist the little bow she made with her lips, so he leaned down and kissed them again, loosening the front catch of her bra, glad that his kiss distracted her. She sucked in a breath as he pushed aside the lacy confection, bending his head to plant a soft kiss on each of her breasts.

Nolan clutched his shoulders, her fingers digging deep.

"Easy, pixie," he crooned in her ear. "Do you like that?"

She nodded against his shoulder, bunching the front of his shirt in one of her hands.

Ian took his time, savoring the salty-sweet taste of her skin, enjoying her sweet scent. He kissed her breasts again, avoiding her nipples, wanting to drive her wild with need before he took each brown-crested tip into his mouth. When he could hold out no more, he lifted one breast in his hand, enjoying how it fit in his palm, then eased the tip of his tongue across the delicate bud.

Nolan arched her back, pushing her breast further into his mouth. She moaned when he released her nipple, blowing on it gently. It swelled and peaked, causing Ian's member to do the same. He kissed her other nipple and blew gently on that one, too.

Nolan's feet and legs stirred restlessly, her body stretched tight, like a bow.

Ian unzipped her pants; Nolan's eyes flew open.

He pulled his hand away. "I'll stop, I won't do anything else." A minute of silence went by. Ian ran his fingers over her silk, hip-hugging panties. "Very nice, pixie." He grinned. "But we're going to take them off."

She blew out a breath.

He brought his head back just a bit, and stared down into her face. Lifting her chin with the tip of his index finger, he said, "We'll stop if you want."

She shook her head, but didn't reply.

"I'll bring you such pleasure... such release."

Nolan raised a brow. "Release?"

A light dawned in Ian's mind. He grasped her around the waist and kissed her, his heart racing. "Nolan, have you ever had an orgasm?"

"I-I think so, I—" She shrugged, pushing some hair behind one ear. "I don't know, Ian."

He felt like doing a jig right there.

"Well, then." He grinned, watching her eyes widen. "You're in for quite a treat."

Ian pulled down the zipper of her jeans.

In one swift movement, he tugged them, along with her panties, down her legs, sliding them over her ankles and feet. He tossed them on the chair next to the bed then settled his big body next to hers. Nolan's body heated when his eyes feasted on the lower half of her semi-nude form.

"Ah, we have to get rid of this, too." He said softly, leaning over to remove her shirt and bra.

The strangest feeling came over her as she lay next to him, her nude body in stark contrast to his clothed one. She felt vulnerable, yet... powerful. A shudder tore through her.

Ian moved closer, taking her in his arms. "I'll keep you warm," he murmured.

Nolan turned in his arms, laying one hand on his chest. Lifting her head, she replied. "I'm not cold, I'm... hot." The last word came out on a rush of air as heat continued to build inside her body. At the same time, a delicious, pulsing ache settled between her legs. "What are you going to do?" she asked, half dreading the answer.

Ian's deep voice held a playful note. He trailed a finger over her breast. "What would you like me to do, Nolan? Ask and it's yours."

She shrugged.

"That's not an answer, pixie. I want you to say it. Don't be afraid to tell me what you want."

Seconds went by. To Nolan, they felt like hours. When her mouth didn't feel so bone dry, she replied. "I need you to stop the ache."

He frowned. "You hurt? Where?"

She shoved some longer pieces of hair behind one of her ears. "It's not exactly that I hurt, it's just that--" Nolan grabbed his hand, wondering where her boldness came from, but she was tired of wanting, of needing something she could never give voice to. She placed his hand between her legs, in the small nest of curls hiding the folds of her labia.

"It aches there," she whispered.

Ian ran his fingers through her curls. Her legs opened, allowing him access.

"I'll make the ache stop, Nolan. I promise." Ian's smile widened; he looked positively wicked.

His hot, penetrating stare, coupled with the movement of his fingers against the curls at her entrance, intensified the throbbing, pulsing feeling between Nolan's legs.

When his finger stroked her clit, Nolan almost flew off the bed.

"Oh my, do it again." She stretched out on the mattress.

Ian chuckled, the sound warm and rich. "My pleasure."

The tip of his finger circled her sensitive core. The more his finger played at her entrance, the hotter Nolan became.

“Ah, my pixie, you’re wet. So wet.” Ian showed her his finger, the tip shiny with her essence. He breathed deep, shutting his eyes as he inhaled.

Ian caressed her woman’s center, eliciting another cry from deep within her.

When her orgasm hit, Ian held her close, allowing her body release as she bent like a bow, her legs jutting out, stiffening as the pulsing pleasure tore through her, followed by a deep, languid feeling.

Nolan snuggled against Ian’s hard body, enjoying the warmth and closeness. Soon, her breathing became deep and even.

Nolan fell asleep to the sound of his heartbeat; it’s soft thud echoing in her ears.

## *Chapter Ten*

The following day, Jake shined a flashlight into the utility closet in the basement of Bride's Inn.

"Damn, it smells musty in here!" Jake's nose twitched. "And I think I see where that mouse got in."

"Wonderful," Seth muttered as he stood behind Jake. "Now what do we do?"

Jake turned and faced Seth. "Seal up the crack. Mice have no spine, so they can slip through some real tight spots."

Seth gave Jake a sour look. "Thanks for the mouse facts. Can we get out of here now?"

Jake laughed. "What's the matter? Is the big, tough DEA agent scared of a little old mouse?"

Seth scowled. "I'm not afraid of anything." His eyes grew wide when he saw a gray streak race by. "Except for those goddamned things!" He jumped out of the path of the scurrying mouse, knocking into Jake.

Jake chuckled. "Coward."

Seth shuddered again. "I hate mice."

Jake raised a brow. "I wonder what gave it away? The fact that you almost jumped into my arms or the girly squeal?"

Seth leaned against a wall, folding his arms across his chest. "Very funny."

Jake's golden eyes settled on the wall behind Seth. "Move away from there."

Seth's eyes grew wide. "Oh don't tell me there's—"

"Calm down," Jake moved him away from the wall. "It's not a mouse, but look at your shirtsleeve. It's wet."

Seth fingered the sleeve of his shirt, near his elbow. "Shit, you're right."

Jake placed his hands on the wall. "The entire wall is damp. Looks like it rotted."

Seth shook his head and frowned. “Great. Mice and rotted wood. What more could we ask for?”

“Stop complaining and help me tear this paneling away.” Jake peeled away a piece of rotting wood.

Seth reached for another slat. When he tugged, the piece of paneling crumbled in his hand.

They both looked down and stared at a pile of twenty-dollar bills.

“Holy shit, what the—” Jake reached inside the wall, withdrawing a musty-smelling, damp stack of twenty-dollar bills, followed by another, and another.

By the time they finished, they had twenty stacks of money piled on a small table.

“You think there’s more?” Seth asked Jake.

“Beats me. We’d have to tear down all the walls in that closet.”

Just then, a gray, furry streak raced by.

Seth grabbed Jake’s arm. “But first we’re gonna seal up that crack and get rid of those damned rodents.”

Jake chuckled and shook his head. “We just found a small fortune hidden in a closet and all you can think about is mice.”

\* \* \* \*

Ian couldn’t sleep. He glanced at the illuminated dial of his watch.

*Two a.m.*

Leaning over, he planted a soft kiss on Nolan’s lips.

“Ian,” she whispered his name.

The sound of his own name, uttered softly in the dark, made his body burn with need. Nolan snuggled against him, her toe skimming his calf. When she didn’t open her eyes, Ian cupped her breast in the palm of his hand, running his thumb across the little peak.

“Come on, pixie, wake up. We’ve got another episode of *Ghost Seeker* to film.”

No response.

Ian chuckled. “I’ll just have to use some other method to wake you.”

He reached under the covers and cupped her bottom, drawing Nolan closer to his stiff cock. Her sweet mound kissed his member. She inched closer, her eyes closed, a tiny smile on her lips.

“Minx,” he whispered, leaning down to kiss her nose. “You know just what you’re doing to me, don’t you?”

She giggled, opening her eyes, batting them playfully. “Who? Me? Why, I’m just a pixie faery.”

Ian gave her bottom a playful tap then nudged her opening with the head of his shaft.

Nolan sucked in a breath.

“I’ll stop,” Ian told her, gritting his teeth against the exquisite torture. “I’ll—” He shut his eyes, trying to settle his body as lust tore through him, swift and hot.

“Don’t stop,” She whispered, smiling when he nudged her opening again. She sighed.

Her breathy voice shred the last ounce of control he possessed.

In one swift stroke, he entered her. Nolan clutched his shoulders, rotating her hips, matching his movements.

“God you’re exquisite.” Ian brushed his lips across hers. He gave her a searching look. “You’re okay?”

She smiled. “More than ‘okay’.”

He felt his heart soar, his chest swell with pride. Deep satisfaction settled over him, knowing that he pleased her. He eased in and out of her with slow, even strokes, making their union last, wishing it would never end.

He took great care to bring Nolan to passion first. He felt her body spasm, shuddering as he let go of his own pent-up seed. When his body and mind settled, Ian remained fused with Nolan, placing tender kisses on her face, enjoying the heady fragrance of their mating.

She stirred restlessly beneath him. “Let’s do it again,” she whispered, kissing his jaw.

Ian laughed. “My, aren’t you the insatiable one?”

Nolan peeked up at him. “Only since I met you. I-I never knew it could be this way.”

Ian pulled her close, hugging her tightly against his chest. “I want nothing more than to please you.” He leaned down and kissed her lips one more time. “For once, I wish we didn’t have to film an episode of *Ghost Seeker*. I’d much rather stay here with you.”

She chewed her lower lip. “Mike said we’re going to do a séance.”

A feeling of unease mushroomed inside Ian. He rose from the bed. When he looked back at Nolan, her eyes lit up.



“My handsome Druid prince,” she crooned, gazing at the lower half of his body. “He sat down on the bed. Ian took her hand and kissed the backs of her fingers, his face drawn in tight lines.

“Ian, why do you look so troubled?”

He managed a smile then stood and extended his hand toward her. “Come on, let’s get dressed. We’ve got a show to film.”

As they strode down the hallway toward the grand staircase, Ian’s anxiety grew. He glanced outside at the dark night sky and the myriad of stars over the water. His gaze settled on the full moon, where a dark cloud passed across the glowing surface. He shuddered, not sure why. For some reason, he glanced behind Nolan.

A dark, swirling mist float across the stair treads. It hovered for a minute then it disappeared.

*Damn!* Bride’s Inn had settled under his skin.

He glanced at Nolan’s happy, contented face... and realized that she had managed to do the same.

\* \* \* \*

Soft candlelight illuminated the faces of everyone seated around the table. They were in the back of the dining room at Bride’s Inn, finally ready to begin the séance.

Anthony Zodan’s voice broke the heavy silence. “Harry Houdini held regular séances, debunking the spiritualist mediums of his day. Although I do believe he had a sincere wish to communicate with his dead wife, and devised a code word that only they would know. If he heard a medium utter that word, he would know that his wife, Bess, had indeed contacted him from beyond the grave.”

Anthony grabbed Crystal’s hand, nodding toward the assembled group at the table. “Now, everyone else, join hands.”

When Nolan reached for Serena’s hand, a chill breeze swirled beneath the table and across her legs. The candles flickered for just a second. Mike gave her a thumbs-up, but Nolan didn’t share his confidence. The thought of the lady in white inhabiting her body made Nolan’s mouth bone-dry and her skin prickly with nerves.

*What if the restless spirit didn’t want to leave?*

“To validate this séance here in Bride’s Inn tonight, I am asking the lady in white to communicate through Nolan Frey, our designated medium, and allow Nolan to tell me the code word that only Crystal and I know.”

Nolan took a deep breath, her heart racing. She glanced at Ian, but the frown on his face didn’t quell her apprehension.

“Everyone close your eyes and clear your minds. Breathe deep, and open your thoughts to the lady in white.”

Minutes went by, but they felt like hours to Nolan.

Anthony spoke. “If the lady in white is here tonight, please give us a sign.”

Nothing.

Nolan concentrated. As her mind focused on the mysterious apparition, a sharp pain pierced Nolan’s skull.

“Oh!” She let go of Serena’s hand, grabbing the side of her head as dizziness washed over her.

She felt as though she tumbled headlong into a swirling void of darkness. When she opened her eyes, she gazed at everyone around her, but through someone else’s eyes. Her breath caught and held as the lady in white’s spirit filled her. She looked down at her arms and hands where a strange, mustard-colored aura surrounded her limbs. Nolan flopped back in the chair, unable to resist the pull of the restless spirit inside her.

“I seek the light of peace, but I need your help.” Nolan told the assembled group, her voice flat.

“What do you need us to do?” Miranda asked from across the table, squeezing Jake’s hand, her voice shaky.

“You must find the one who killed me, the one who loosened that stair tread all those years ago on my wedding day. He walks among you.”

The assembled group glanced at each other.

“Who is it?” Seth asked, seated on the other side of Nolan.

“His name is...is...”

Another wave of dizziness washed over Nolan, her body resisting the energy inside. She felt it slip away, bit by bit.

“No! Don’t go,” she cried out.

Again the sad spirit poured through Nolan. “Two of you, seated here tonight, know Larena.”

Anthony raised one dark brow. He squeezed Crystal’s hand.

“And one of you knows my killer—intimately.”

A shudder tore through Nolan. Glancing at her legs, she watched the strange, mustard-colored aura fade.

Nolan felt the restless spirit move in her body. She whispered. “Don’t leave. Come back.”

“He is evil.” The words slipped from Nolan’s lips, then she slumped back in the chair as the lady in white retreated.

The candles flickered, their flame dousing as a chill breeze swept the room.

“Cut! That’s a wrap,” Nolan heard Ian shout. Her eyes opened.

In the next instant, the electric lights flickered in the chandelier above the table, then all the lights blazed, illuminating the small room.

Mike glanced at Ian. “I didn’t put those lights on, did you?”

Ian shook his head.

No one said a word.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Dawn's light moved across the horizon, the sun's rays dancing across the water.

In the banquet office, Mike and GSI sat in front of their computer screens as Ian, John and the owners of Bride's Inn looked on.

Mike glanced at Anthony. "You're positive that no one else but you and your wife knew about Larena?"

Anthony nodded.

Mike shook his head, sitting back in his chair, his arms folded across his chest. "Again our EMF readings were off the chart, and look at this." He moved the computer mouse, the tiny cursor zipping across the screen. It settled on Nolan's image. "Check out the weird aura around Nolan. It's unbelievable."

Ian leaned in closer, his eyes centering on Nolan. He shook his head, murmuring. "I'm glad we caught it all on film."

Mike grinned, looking at his team. "So are we! I have never met anyone with abilities like Nolan's. Did you ask her about the aura? Why it's that odd mustard color?"

Ian shook his head. "She's resting."

Mike held up a hand. "Good. She needs it. Looks like this séance took a lot out of her."

The feeling of unease bloomed within Ian once more. He frowned, pushing away from the table. Walking over to the windows he glanced outside at the sound and the cliffs beyond. Such a soothing scene, yet he felt deeply disturbed.

"What's wrong?" Anthony laid a hand on his shoulder.

Ian turned to face the assembled group. "Right before we filmed this séance, Nolan and I were coming down the grand staircase together. I saw this... well, this black shadowy mist behind us."

The room grew quiet.

"Go on," Anthony urged.

“As fast as it came on, it seemed to disappear. But after the séance, when the lights came back on...”

Jake shook his head. “Utterly fantastic. I’m still trying to figure that out.”

Seth joined in. “We checked the wiring. No power surges last night. Nothing that would explain what happened.”

Seth and Jake exchanged a look.

Clarice frowned and tapped her cane on the floor. “What’s with you two? Why do you keep looking at each other like that?”

“Well, we’ve got our own news.”

Clarice sighed. “Fine. But for now, I’d like to hear what Ian has to say.”

He waved a hand through the air. “I-it’s nothing. Maybe I was imagining things.”

John rose from his chair. “Say it.”

Ian sighed. “I saw that black mist float under the doorway last night, after the lights came back on.” He glanced at Mike. “Any idea what it could be?”

Mike shook his head. “Beats me. But we’ll check it out.” He gave Ian a searching look. “Have you seen it before?”

Ian ran a hand through his hair then dropped it to his side. “No.” He glanced at the assembled group. “Maybe Bride’s Inn is simply getting to me.”

Clarice gave him a small smile. “It usually does.” She turned to face Seth and Jake. “Now, what *is* up with you two?”

Jake answered. “We were in the basement yesterday, sealing up the small cracks the mice have been using to get inside Bride’s Inn, when we found a stash of money. I think it’s the money the groom paid to the lady in white’s killer all those years ago. Remember? It was that employee who supposedly worked at the inn. Jake and I tore away some rotted paneling, and found wads of twenty dollar bills.”

“So the rumors are true,” Clarice replied, a thoughtful look on her face.

Seth nodded. “We’ll contact Harlan. Maybe he can have the serial numbers on the bills traced. See if we can’t pin down if it is indeed blood money.”

Mike glanced at his watch. “I’d like Nolan to see all this.” He shot Ian a look. “Think she’d come down and take a look?”

“I’ll get her,” Ian replied.

When he got to the door, Seth grabbed him, drawing Ian to the side. “I want to speak to you about Nolan.”

Ian nodded.

“I talked to Harlan about Nolan’s cousin. It’s like he’s fallen off the face of the earth after you knocked the shit out of him.”

Ian’s heart raced.

“When I speak to Harlan today, I’ll see if he’s got any news.” Seth shoved a piece of paper in Ian’s hand. “Did Nolan ever mention that to you?”

Ian scanned the contents of the email. He looked up at Seth. “How did you find out about this?”

“I’ve got my ways,” Seth answered.

Ian handed Seth the email. “She never said a word about it. Maybe she doesn’t know.”

Seth nodded, folding the paper, placing it in the pocket of his jeans. “And maybe she does, and Jack knows, too. It’s quite a chunk of change she’s entitled to.”

Ian walked out of the banquet office that morning in search of Nolan, feeling nervous and jittery, his patience stretched thin. *Why hadn’t she said anything about that money he read about in the email? Why withhold information from the police?*

In the lobby, he stopped mid-stride. Susan sat there, thumbing through a magazine. She looked up just as he entered.

“Well, you’re just the person I wanted to see.”

Ian glanced around. The lobby was deserted, except for Susan and him.

“I’m busy, Susan.”

Susan squared her chin. “I want my job back.”

Ian shook his head. “John paid you what was left on your contract. You’re free to look elsewhere for a job.”

She raised one brow. “It’s because of her, isn’t it? You replaced me with that little blonde bitch, didn’t you?”

Blood pounded through Ian’s veins. He rubbed his temple as the throbbing sensation intensified. “Don’t refer to Nolan like that,” he replied. “Ever.”

He started to walk away.

“Do you always do what daddy says?”

Ian walked back. "I told you once before," he growled. "Shut up about my father."

She gave him a snide smile then tapped the tip of her index finger against her chin, assuming a thoughtful pose. "Maybe the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

He scowled. "What in hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means," she laughed, the sound grating, "that your last movie bombed at the box office. I heard John say he's not going to back your next one."

Ian balled his hands into fists against his sides. "Get out of here; get out of here before I—"

From the corner of his eye, he saw Nolan. He moved toward her, but Susan snagged his arm, pulling him back. "I found out John married your mother for money." Susan glanced back at Nolan. In a loud voice, she said, "You told everyone that Nolan's got quite a large inheritance coming to her. I heard you before, talking to Seth about it." Susan poked him in the chest. "Money is the only reason you sleep with any woman." She shook her head then turned and gave Nolan another nasty grin. "It's the only reason you're sleeping with *her*. Maybe Nolan will bankroll you this time, Ian." Her eyes traveled to Nolan's. "Get your money's worth, sweetheart, because in the end, he's just not worth it."

Ian glanced at Nolan.

But she was gone.

\* \* \* \*

"Nolan! Wait." Ian raced after her, his heart pounding.

He caught up with her at the entrance to the old mudroom, in the back of Bride's Inn. He reached out a hand to her, but she didn't take it.

She turned and faced him. "I think things are happening too fast between us."

He grabbed her shoulders. "Don't do this, Nolan. We're fine, we're..." Ian shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "My last movie did bomb, but my father doesn't fund my projects, I have other backers, I don't depend on him for that." Ian took a step toward her. "And I would never depend on you for that."

She shook her head, confusion clouding her mind. "Depend on me? I don't understand."

He took a step toward her. "Why didn't you tell anyone, Nolan?"

"A-about what?"

He was so close she could smell his lemony cologne...and Susan's perfume on his shirt. The combined odor made Nolan's stomach churn.

"About your inheritance."

Her eyes widened. "I told you, I told Seth and that police chief, that my aunt left me barely enough money for college, that—"

"A million dollars is a lot of money, Nolan."

She slumped into a chair. "I-I don't know what you're talking about."

He lifted her chin with the tip of his index finger then dropped his hand. "I don't care about any of it. Except for Jack. If he knows you're coming into money, if he knows he's entitled—"

Nolan frowned. "Coming into money?" She shook her head. "He's entitled? To what?"

"You get a million dollars when you turn twenty-five."

Nolan's lower lip trembled. *Why hadn't her aunt ever said anything before?*

*Jack.* Jack was always the answer. If he got his hands on it, he'd squander every penny of it.

"When do you turn twenty-five?"

She shook her head. "Next month."

Ian gripped her shoulders. "I told you once before, if you tell me the truth, I can help you."

She blinked, not quite registering his words. "I told you the truth, I—"

Ian sighed. "Seth seems to think you knew about the million, and the uh...money you're supposed to dole out to Jack."

Her eyes flew to Ian's. *Her aunt had made her Jack's caretaker!* Nolan's heart raced. "You said that Seth seems to think I knew about the money."

He nodded.

"Do you think that way, too?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "I-I don't know what to think. It just seems—"

"What?" Her voice shook.

"You withheld information from the police. You didn't tell them that Jack's entitled to that money come next month." He stepped away from her. "You can't keep his money, Nolan, I



know what you told me about him, I saw how he treated you, but you're only buying yourself trouble. Don't take revenge that way."

Her voice wobbled, her heart breaking. "You think I'd steal his money?"

"I'm just saying, I know how you feel."

"You know nothing," he voice came out flat, and hollow.

Nolan walked away, her face awash with tears, her heart heavy.

She ran out the mudroom door, glancing back only once.

For just a second, she thought she saw a woman dressed in a long white gown. She stood on the small porch that lined the back of Bride's Inn.

When Nolan looked back, the woman had vanished.

Nolan wished she could do the same.

Seth didn't believe her...the police didn't, either.

But what hurt most was that Ian didn't.

## *Chapter Twelve*

She didn't know how long she walked, or where she intended to go. As long as she was away from Ian, she didn't care. The breeze kicked up, ruffling Nolan's hair as she trekked aimlessly down the beach. Overhead a seagull released a shrill caw, then swooped down near her feet to claim something buried in the sand. Soon, other seagulls joined him, searching for food.

She assumed her walk, rubbing her hands across her upper arms. Goosebumps rose on her skin as a breeze danced across her body. Nolan glanced upward, noticing how the clouds covered the sun.

She turned around, intent on walking back to Bride's Inn, when she came face-to-face with Jack Denning.

Nolan attempted to run, but Jack kicked out a foot, tripping her. She landed on her back in the sand. Flipping onto her belly, she tried to rise, but he pinned her down.

"You fucking bitch! Where's my money?" His gravelly voice filled her ears and her stomach clenched.

"I don't have your money!" she cried, trying to wrench away from him.

He lifted her by the hair. Nolan cried out from the pain, tears filling her eyes.

His hand balled into a fist.

Then she saw nothing but an empty, black void.

\* \* \* \*

Ian trudged along the sand, his mind and heart heavy, his guts clenching.

*He should have never let her leave Bride's Inn.*

"Where in hell is she?" he said to no one but the seagulls on the beach.

He stopped when his foot connected with something hard, buried in the sand. Reaching down, he retrieved a cell phone.

Ian ran a hand through his hair. Was this Nolan's cell phone? He looked around, his eyes darting wildly toward the water, then back to the shore. Glancing upward toward the cliffs, he shielded his eyes from the sun, hoping to see some sign of Nolan...

Nothing.

He trudged along when he spotted another item blowing across the sand.

His eyes widened. *Nolan's headband!*

He ran to it, snatching it up from the sand, placing it near his nose. It smelled like her; sweet, pretty... full of life.

Ian swallowed back as a lump of fear lodged in his throat.

\* \* \* \*

Nolan felt as though a marching band paraded through her head. She cracked one eye open, trying to focus on her unfamiliar surroundings.

Voices penetrated her fuzzy mind.

"I said you'd have more money than you ever dreamed of, but you couldn't wait, could you?"

The deep voice sounded far away. As her eyes focused, Nolan could make out the shape of a man. She thought he wore boots. They were tall, like fishing boots. He seemed... familiar. Like someone she had seen at Bride's Inn...

"I want what's rightfully mine," she heard another familiar voice reply. *Jack!*

She remained perfectly still, watching the two men from her position on what seemed to be an ancient couch. It smelled musty and fishy. The tangy odor of salty sea air permeated her nose.

She choked back a sob, willing her body to remain still.

Again, that other man spoke, his voice oddly familiar. "Forget her!" The man said to Jack. "You'll have plenty of money."

She saw the man with the fishing boots walk away, then he stopped. Nolan wished she could see his face better, but she remained motionless.

"Yeah, when? I've heard a lot of promises from you, but I ain't seen any money yet," Jack replied.

From the corner of one eye, Nolan watched the man move toward Jack.

"You're one big pain in the ass, you know that?"

Nolan's breath caught and held when the man in the fishing boots raised a gun toward Jack, then she heard a clicking sound.

A deafening explosion followed.

She sucked in a breath when Jack's heavy body landed on her ribcage.

Pain tore through her, but she lay perfectly still, watching as the man in the fishing boots shoved the gun in the pocket of his jacket.

He walked out the door.

Then her mind slipped back into the black void.

\* \* \* \*

Minutes later, Ian ran a hand through his hair as he paced in the banquet office.

Seth entered and closed the door behind him. "The police will find her, Ian. She couldn't have gone too far."

Ian shook his head. "I should have never let her leave."

There was a knock on the door. Seth opened it, allowing Serena to enter.

"I brought you some coffee." She placed a tray on the desk, passing a mug full of steaming coffee to Ian.

He shook his head. "I don't want coffee. And I can't just stay here! Nolan could be in trouble." Ian glanced at Serena's pale face. "I-I'm sorry, I..."

She laid a hand on his arm. "I understand," she replied, her voice soft. She lifted the cup again, passing it in his direction. "It's got sugar in it. You've had a bad shock. Just drink a little."

He found himself taking a sip, the taste of the sweet coffee reviving his weary body—and mind.

Seth glanced at Serena. "How is my aunt?"

"Her blood pressure spiked when she heard about Nolan's disappearance, but she's okay now. John is with her." Serena gave Seth a small smile.

Ian ran a hand through his hair again. "I can't stay here. I'm going back to the beach."

Seth grabbed Serena's hand. "Will you stay with my aunt?"

Serena squeezed his hand, nodding. "John and I will look after her." She patted Seth's shoulder. "Help Ian."

Seth nodded, glancing at Ian. "Let's get going."

\* \* \* \*

Nolan didn't know how long she lay with Jack's body sprawled across hers. Blood oozed from a wound to his chest. His mouth was open. So were his eyes; they were as cold and vacant in death as they had been in life.

Nolan managed to push Jack's body away. He fell in a heap, landing on the floor. She rose to her feet, pain slicing through her chest, her breath leaving her body in short, shallow pants. Slowly, she crept toward the door.

Nolan wrenched it open, and ran outside. The chilled salty air, as well as the stabbing pain in her chest, made her gasp. She ran down the beach, tumbling to the ground when the pain sliced through her chest cavity again.

She tried to rise to her feet again, her body falling in the sand as sharp, hot pain coursed underneath her left breast.

She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

The only sound she heard was the gulls crying overhead.

Nolan glanced at her unfamiliar surroundings.

Bride's Inn seemed miles away...

And no one knew where she was.

\* \* \* \*

Ian entered the lobby of Bride's Inn with Seth hot on his heels.

Seth laid a hand on Ian's shoulder. "Calm down, Ian. You won't be of help to Nolan or anyone else if you go off half-cocked."

Ian's nostrils flared, his mind filled with thoughts of Nolan alone, frightened, possibly hurt. What if her bastard cousin had found her?

Fury and fear swirled inside Ian. "Don't tell me to calm down!"

Seth took a step toward him and Ian caught sight of the gun Seth wore strapped to his shoulder. It peeked out from beneath his jacket. Ian's heart pounded violently.

"You either calm down," Seth ordered. "Or Jake and Anthony can come with me while you stay here. It's your choice."

Ian's chest heaved with fury, but he reigned in his temper. "I'm calm."

Seth nodded. "All right then."

Ian walked through the lobby, heading toward the back of Bride's Inn, when a flash of white caught his eyes.

Standing dead center in the middle of the lobby was the lady in white.

Ian's breath caught in his chest. He grabbed Seth's arm.

Her face lay hidden by a tattered veil but he could see her eyes. Sadness washed over him at her vacant look. He followed her trail, his eyes intent on her shimmery, pale form. She stopped in front of a painting in the lobby.

Ian approached, his heart pounding when she lifted her finger and pointed to a spot on the shoreline. He inched toward the painting, a chill breeze snaking up his spine the closer he got to the lady in white.

He narrowed his eyes and gazed at what appeared to be a shack on the beach.

Seth came up behind him. "There's a bunch of old fishing shacks about three miles down the beach."

"Shit." Ian ran a hand through his hair. A light dawned in his brain. "Do you think she's trying to tell us that's where Nolan is?"

Seth shrugged. "She's been right about these things before. Once, she directed Jake to the cliffs and he found Serena and Miranda struggling on the slippery ground. It was wintertime, and even though we'd had a warm spell, they were trapped on the cliffs when the air temperature dropped and the cliffs got icy."

Seth nodded. "Somehow, some way, she knows."

Ian watched her finger trace the outline of the old shack. He swore he could see through her pale translucent skin.

In the next instant, she disappeared, the train of her gown swirling behind her.

"Let's go," Seth laid a hand on his shoulder. "If she's right, we'll have to take the Jeep."

Minutes later, Ian and Seth climbed into the Jeep.

Ian noticed the sun setting as they drove. If they didn't get to those shacks soon, they'd be hunting for Nolan in the dark.

## Chapter Thirteen

Nolan tried to rise to her feet, but hot pain seared her ribcage, just below her breasts. She managed to crawl through the sand, fear permeating every part of her body.

*Would the man who shot Jack come looking for her?*

She crawled faster, but the pain knifed through her chest once more. Collapsing in the sand, she thought she saw the headlights of a car...

The two bright, white lights came closer.

She screamed as loud as she could, then collapsed onto the sand.

\* \* \* \*

Ian heard Nolan's scream. He leaped from the Jeep before Seth brought it to a full stop.

He could see Nolan's prone form in the sand.

His heart raced, his pulse beating rapidly in the base of his neck as he ran toward her.

"Nolan!" he shouted. "Nolan!"

He watched as she lifted her head.

*Thank God!*

Ian sunk to his knees in the soft sand next to Nolan. Lifting her in his arms, he cradled her against his chest.

"I thought we'd never find you." His voice cracked. He felt tears well in his eyes.

"Ian," she whispered.

"Are you hurt?" he asked. His eyes roamed over her face and body.

"My...chest...I-I...oh!" she cried. "It's so hard to breathe."

Ian ran his hands over her chest. She winced when his fingers skimmed under her breasts.

Seth walked over to them. "She may have broken ribs."

Ian could only manage a nod.

Seth squatted near Nolan. "What happened?"

She shook her head, burying it in Ian's chest.

“Nolan,” Ian said gently, trying to pry her from his chest. “You have to tell us what happened.”

“Jack is dead.”

Seth shot Ian a look.

“He’s in th-that shack over there.” She lifted a hand, and pointed behind her. Then she dropped her hand in her lap.

Seth glanced at her eyes. “She’s in shock. Get her into the Jeep and keep her warm.” He rose to his feet. “I’m calling an ambulance.” Seth grabbed a cell phone from his pocket and began to dial.

Ian rose to his feet with Nolan cradled in his arms.

When Seth finished the call, he flipped the cell phone closed. Removing his gun from its holster, his look turned hard and unyielding.

“What are you doing?” Ian asked.

“I’m going to check out that shack.”

\* \* \* \*

Seth came back to the Jeep a few minutes later. By that time, the ambulance had come for Nolan. Two paramedics lifted her onto a stretcher and slid it into the back of the ambulance.

“Well?” Ian asked Seth. “What did you find?”

Seth drew him off to the side. “I’ve called the police, they’re on their way. Denning is dead. Someone shot him.”

Ian glanced at Nolan. “You think...” he swallowed, hard. “You think she did it?”

Seth shook his head. “I don’t know what to think. I’ll stay here and wait for the police.”

Ian managed a nod.

“Take care of her, Ian.”

Ian climbed into the Jeep and followed the ambulance down the beach.

If Nolan had shot Jack Denning... the thought filled him with dread and guilt.

He gripped the steering wheel, his mind racing.

Ian didn’t realize he was sweating until he pulled the Jeep behind the ambulance by the emergency room at Gray’s Point Hospital.

One thought permeated his mind...

His pixie had murdered Jack Denning.



\* \* \* \*

Sometime later, Seth walked into the waiting area of the emergency room at Gray's Point Hospital. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Harlan Traynor.

Seth strode over to him and shook his hand. "I'm glad you're here."

Harlan shook his head and sighed. "I take a day off and look what happens in this town. I read the manifest this morning and I plain couldn't believe it." Harlan motioned toward some chairs. "Let's talk."

Seth eased his tall frame into one of the chairs off to the side of the waiting area.

Harlan did the same. "The detectives and forensic teams are still going over that shack, but they've got enough evidence to convict Nolan of murder. There's no sign of a struggle and..."

"No sign of a murder weapon." Seth's voice grew hard. His guts clenched in response to the news Harlan just lay at his feet.

*Nolan a murderer? Impossible!*

"She obviously had to defend herself."

Harlan sighed. "The detectives who questioned Nolan this morning said she told them that she left Bride's Inn of her own accord."

Seth felt sweat pop out on his forehead.

"They think she contacted Denning. Lured him to that shack. There's a number in her cell phone that matched Denning's. When the detectives called it, they got his voice mail."

Seth's eyes grew wide. "Maybe Denning called her."

"Maybe. Maybe not. And they're wondering about that whole incident she claims happened in the bookstore. The only witness is McIntyre."

Seth's voice grew hard. "Ian said Denning was hurting her."

Harlan shrugged. "He's the only witness." He sighed. "And he seems... pretty fond of Nolan, to say the least. I don't know how reliable a witness he would be."

Seth rose to his feet and started to pace. He glanced at Harlan. "But where's the murder weapon, Harlan? Where's the gun she would have used to shoot Denning? Did you check her hands for gunshot residue?"

Harlan rose to his feet, too. "We did, but, Nolan could have wiped it from her hands. She could have tossed the gun in the water, too."

“Shit.” Seth ran a hand through his hair.

“We’re checking out her story about another man being in that shack with her and Denning—some guy she said wore fishing boots, but I don’t need to tell you how many of these old timers here in Gray’s Point still use those fishing shacks. There’s dozens of footprints, and boot prints all over the floor in that shack.” He scratched the tip of his nose. “Look on the bright side: without the murder weapon, the detectives don’t have much of a case.”

Seth snorted. “I didn’t know there was a *bright side* to all of this.

“The police divers are in the sound right now, searching for the gun.” Harlan reached out and placed a hand on Seth’s shoulder. “I’ll do all I can, Seth, but I can’t promise you anything. With Denning’s track record, they may not arrest her for murder. It might be manslaughter, instead.”

“Manslaughter?” Seth’s voice shook. “That doesn’t make me feel a whole hell of a lot better, Harlan.”

Harlan nodded then straightened the hat on his head. “I’ll see what I can do. I’m going back to the office now, I’ll call you later.” He started to walk away, then stopped. “I think she should get a lawyer.”

Seth watched Harlan walk away, feeling that when he got Harlan’s call, it wouldn’t be good news.

\* \* \* \*

The following day, Nolan opened her eyes to bright sunshine streaming in through her bedroom window. She took a breath, surprised that it didn’t hurt so much.

“Taping your ribs helped. And you should stay in bed.”

Nolan turned her head toward the sound of Serena’s soothing voice.

Serena rose from the chair, her tall frame heavy with the child she carried.

“H-how long have you been sitting there?” Nolan asked.

Serena gave her a smile. “For a couple of hours now. Ian was here keeping watch over you, but he looked so tired that I sent him off to bed.”

At the mention of Ian’s name, Nolan’s stomach clenched.

Serena leaned over and brushed some stray tendrils of hair from Nolan’s cheek. “You look better. Ian kept watch over you most of the night, he woke you a few times.” Serena frowned as she examined the bruise on Nolan’s cheek. “The doctor released you from the

hospital only when Ian promised to look after you here at Bride's Inn." She angled her head.

"You must have gotten that bruise on your face when you fell..."

"Jack hit me," the words slipped from Nolan's mouth. Her voice sounded flat and hollow.

Serena shook her head. "Bastard."

Nolan's stomach flipped. "You believe me? I-I mean about what happened in that fishing shack?"

Serena gave her a small smile. "Of course I do."

Nolan sighed. "The police don't."

Serena shrugged. "Harlan's doing all he can in your favor, but..." Serena sat back down in the chair. She grabbed hold of Nolan's hand. "Ian's hired a lawyer."

Nolan's lower lip trembled. Ian didn't believe her...

She gave Nolan's hand a squeeze. "He's doing it to protect you, Nolan."

Serena rose to her feet. "I'm going to check on my little guy now. You rest. Miranda will bring you some breakfast, and Crystal will be in to check on you later, too."

Nolan managed a nod.

She watched Serena walk out.

Tears leaked from Nolan's eyes.

There was a knock on the door. Thinking it was Miranda, Nolan said, "Come in."

The door opened; Ian's tall form filled the doorway.

Nolan sucked in a breath at the sight of him, of his deep, maroon aura swirling around him, changing to purple then back to deep red.

It seemed as though what he sought he'd found, for the holes she witnessed days before in his magnificent, brightly colored aura had disappeared.

Her heart beat wildly, filled with hope.

## Chapter Fourteen

Ian walked into the room and shut the door, never taking his eyes from Nolan.

“You look better.” *Christ, was that his voice?*

She nodded.

Her eyes appeared large and round in her small pixie face. A face, Ian suddenly thought, that he wouldn’t mind looking at every morning...

*Shit!*

This was no good. *He* was no good. He hadn’t protected her from Jack, and now, he had to protect her, from his wants, his desires, his...

She shifted on the bed, her nightgown rising up past her knees.

He had to protect her from his lust, but the sight of her bare legs made his cock spring to life.

Ian swore she could be dressed in a burlap sack right now, and she’d still be as appealing...

*Always.*

She grabbed his hand. Rubbing her cheek against the back of it, she closed her eyes and sighed.

Ian’s groin pooled with blood, and his desire heightened, when her face made contact with his hand. Blood beat through his veins, making his pulse and heart race.

She lifted her face and gazed directly into his eyes. “I need you to believe in me.”

He sighed. “You know I do.”

“Then make love to me.”

He pulled his hand away and rose from the bed.

He swallowed, hard. His body burned with need, his cock so stiff he thought it would break in two. If he didn’t get inside her right now...

*No!*

“I need to feel that I’m really and truly alive. I want to forget what happened in that shack, I want...you.” She gazed up at him, her eyes round as saucers, her lush mouth opened slightly, beckoning him.

Ian walked away, fearing that if he didn’t, he’d pounce on her.

“You told me once that you thought I spent most of my life running away. You were right. And now, I fear you’ll run from me.”

He turned to face her, shoving his hands in his pockets, fearing if she saw how his hands trembled, he’d scare her. She had enough danger and fright in her life already.

“If I am running from you, it’s because I’m afraid of myself, Nolan. Of...what I need from you.”

She reached out her arms.

It was Ian’s undoing.

He strode over to the bed and sat down on the mattress. Curbing his lust, he eased Nolan against his chest, and simply held her, enjoying the feel of her slender body against his.

She moved, her thigh skimming his already stiff, hard cock.

Ian captured her face in his hands and tipped her head back, his mouth closing hungrily over hers. She moaned into his mouth, the sound like the sweetest aphrodisiac, inflaming his desire for her.

He tore his mouth from hers.

“We can’t.” His chest heaved. His voice broke. “I’ll hurt you.”

She sat back against the pillows. “You don’t want me.” Tears filled her eyes.

“Oh God, Nolan... you have no idea how much I want you.”

His eyes widened when he began to unbutton her nightgown.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

In the next instant, she slipped the gown over her shoulders and down her waist. She kicked it aside.

Naked except for her bandages across her chest, her tight, petite body appeared flush. Ripe. Ready for him.

Nolan inched closer. “Feel how wet I am. I want you. Now.”

Nolan placed a hand against Ian's chest. His heart beat rapidly, his body filled with tremors.

"You do want me," she whispered. "I can feel it."

He raised her hand from his chest and kissed her wrist. Nolan shut her eyes as he made love to her hand with his mouth. He slid his warm, silky lips across the sensitive skin of her wrist, traveling a sensual, hot path to her palm. Her clit throbbed so hard she'd thought she'd burst.

"Ian," she breathed. "Please, y-you have to make love to me."

Taking her in his arms, he picked her up, then laid her gently back against the pillow.

He rose to his full height and stripped the clothes from his body. Nolan swallowed, for in the light of day, his huge member stood out stiff, straight and proud.

Ian positioned his body at the base of her feet. He lifted one foot, kissing each little digit, then the other, treating the toes of that foot to the same loving attention he gave the first. Then he kissed her ankles, her shins, her knees. His mouth made love to her legs, where he placed small nipping kisses on the inside of her upper thigh. She quivered at his touch, her heart racing.

"I-Ian... Ian," she breathed.

"Ah, love... my pixie." He paused to look at her face. "You're beautiful in your passion." His brogue was thick, sensual, his deep voice washing over her like the headiest sexual elixir. "Open for me," he commanded.

Her mouth hung open. "What are you going to do?" The words came out in a rush.

"Just lie back, and feel it."

The back of Nolan's head sunk down on the pillow.

Ian grabbed hold of her legs, raising them up, until her feet lay flat on the bed.

Delicious anticipation built inside her body.

"Ian!" she cried, when she felt his warm breath caress her sensual core.

He blew gently against her labia, the warm, moist air swirling around her clit. Nolan gripped the bedcovers, her fingers digging into the mattress. Her body arched when she felt the tip of his tongue swirl across her sensitive pearl of flesh.

"Oh!" she gasped.

He stopped long enough to crawl up the bed. Placing his hands on either side of her shoulders, he rose up next to her. She could taste her essence on his tongue when he leaned down and swirled it inside her mouth.

“Are you all right?” he whispered, a look of worry passing over his handsome face.

She smiled, stroking his chin with the tip of her finger. “Better than all right.” She pouted. “Is that all you’re going to do?”

He laughed, the sound rich and warm. “No, my lovely pixie faery. That’s not all.”

He slid back down and took her on a sensual climb up a mountain of desire, sucking on her clit, pulling the little nubbin inside his mouth then releasing it. The more he suckled, the higher she climbed, gripping the top of his head, digging her fingers into his hair.

“Ohhhhh!” she cried when the final pass of his tongue and lips sent her over the top of that mountain of need. She tumbled downward as her clit throbbed wildly.

She let go of a sigh as her essence trickled onto her thighs.

Ian positioned his body next to her, sliding an arm beneath her shoulders, gently pulling her to him. Raining kisses across her face, he finished by fusing his mouth with hers, kissing her full on the mouth.

Nolan gazed into his eyes. How beautiful he seemed.

Then she reached down to stroke his member, reveling at the smooth, yet bumpy, surface. The pad of her thumb came away wet with his essence when she skimmed it across the head of his penis.

“More,” she whispered. “Ian... I need more from you.”

He chuckled. “My greedy little pixie.”

Ian rose from the bed then helped her do the same. Leading her over to an armless chair on the other side of the room, he sat down and patted his thighs. “Now, spread your legs and position your thighs across my lap.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Y-you mean, we’re going to make love in this chair?”

He grinned.

“Oh my, how lovely,” she breathed, fascinated at what it would feel like, longing to know.

Ian threw back his head and laughed.

She reached over and clutched his shoulders for support, rising up to spread her legs over his muscled thighs. Her clit throbbed again at the feel of his hair-roughened skin against her legs and thighs.

Wiggling her bottom against his member, she wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned her head on his shoulders.

“Are you ready?” he whispered in her ear, his tongue snaking out to tickle her lobe.

She shuddered pleurably. “Ready.”

Ian placed his hands on her hips, lifting her gently. In one swift stroke, he impaled her on his shaft. She slid over it easily, the moist tip of his penis acting as a lubricant to ease her journey down his erect member.

“I’m going to do the work,” he told her.

She frowned.

He smiled, patting her bottom again. “Lean back a little.”

Nolan did what he asked.

“Keep your hands on my shoulders.”

Nolan placed her hands on his powerfully built shoulders, her palms flat against their outline.

Ian grasped her hips then lifted her, sliding her body up, then down his swollen shaft.

She gripped his shoulders tighter as he repeated the motion several more times. Nolan’s held fell back as that delicious pulsing sensation built between her legs. With each pass against his penis, he made sure to make contact with her clit.

In the next instant, Nolan exploded into sensual bliss, collapsing against Ian as he let out a roar of his own.

His member pulsed inside her, the feel of his throbbing shaft soothing. They stayed like that for quite some time, their foreheads resting against one and other. Ian helped her from his lap, steadying her against his side when her legs threatened to buckle.

Scooping her up in his arms, he strode over to the bed and laid her gently on the mattress. He got in beside her, and eased his arm beneath her shoulders, pulling her close. Ian’s lips grazed her forehead.

“Sleep, little one,” he crooned in her ear.

Nolan snuggled against him and shut her eyes.



On the brink of slumber, she thought she heard Ian's voice, his brogue thick, as he whispered near her ear...

"I love you."

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Harlan Traynor sat across from Seth in the small banquet office of Bride's Inn. He sipped from a mug full of steaming coffee and helped himself to a cookie from the plate sitting on the edge of the desk.

"Well?" Seth raised a brow, drumming his fingers on the desk. "What did you decide?"

Harlan wiped his lips with a napkin, tossing the square of linen aside. "We couldn't find the murder weapon, and we discovered that Nolan was corresponding with a private investigator regarding Jack Denning. The investigator had copies of all her police reports. She was on the verge of getting a restraining order from Denning." Harlan took another sip of coffee. "If she killed him, then it was self-defense."

Seth breathed a sigh of relief. He rose to his feet and stuck out his hand. "Thanks, Harlan."

Harlan rose to his feet, too, adjusting the brim of his hat. He stuck out his hand and shook Seth's. "I'm always glad to help you... and Clarice." Harlan's face softened when he mentioned Clarice. "Now, I'll be able to turn my attention back to tracing the serial numbers on that money you found."

Seth nodded, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Thanks again."

Harlan made his way to the door. "Is your aunt home?"

"She's in her study, upstairs."

Harlan shifted from one foot to the other. "Is she... alone?"

Seth grinned. "Yes, Harlan. Go on up and see her."

\* \* \* \*

"Have dinner with me, Clarice, I've missed you."

Harlan sat across from Clarice on the small terrace of her bedroom.

The warm breeze ruffled Clarice's white curls. She sipped her tea and replied, "I can't."

He raised a brow. "Can't or won't?"

She placed her teacup on a saucer, wrapping her paisley shawl across her shoulders.

“Maybe it’s a little of both. I’m a bit confused right now.”

“It’s him, isn’t it? It’s that John Scarpes fellow...”

Clarice shook her head. “It’s ‘Sinclair’ and, yes, maybe it is.”

His face darkened. “But you’ll continue to see him?”

Clarice sighed. “He was here on business. The business of helping us rid Bride’s Inn of the restless spirit of the lady in white.”

Harlan rose from the table. “You expect me to believe that?”

She frowned, reaching for her cane. Rising to her feet, too, she replied. “I need to take some time and think this through.”

Harlan walked away then turned to face her.

“The time for thinking is over, Clarice.”

She gasped, releasing the cane. It tumbled to the floor.

Gripping the back of her chair, she gazed into the barrel of Harlan’s pistol.

\* \* \* \*

Nolan’s eyes fluttered open. She gazed at Ian, slumbering peacefully next to her. In sleep, he seemed younger, boyish, as a shock of jet-black hair fell across his eyebrow. She smoothed it away and tenderly kissed his brow.

For the first time since her arrival at Bride’s Inn, she felt truly at home. As long as Ian was beside her, she felt as though she could conquer the world...

Thoughts of Jack intruded. The sight of his dead body sent a shudder through her. *Would they convict her of murder? Had Seth done what he promised, and spoken to Harlan?*

She had to know.

Rising from the bed, careful lest she disturb Ian, she dressed and left the bedroom, determined to speak to Seth...

Determined to seek answers.

\* \* \* \*

Nolan reached the top of the grand staircase when she saw Clarice and Harlan descending the stairs.

“Clarice!” Nolan called out, smiling.

Her smile disappeared when Clarice glanced back, her face pale and pinched. She walked close to Harlan's side.

"Clarice?" Nolan frowned, taking a few steps down to meet them. "What's wrong? Did...?"

Clarice gave a barely discernible shake of her head.

Nolan's eyes widened when she saw Harlan jab something into Clarice's side. For just a second, she thought she saw the barrel of a gun...

"Don't turn around, Ms. Frey." Harlan gripped Clarice's arm, aiming the point of his pistol at Nolan. "Walk back up those stairs, facing me."

Nolan opened her mouth to scream.

"Scream and I'll kill her right now." Harlan jabbed the gun into Clarice's side again.

"What do you want?" Nolan whispered, shock filling her mind.

At the same time, recognition dawned.

*Harlan's voice was the same one she heard in that fishing shack!*

"You killed Jack," Nolan's voice trembled.

Harlan laughed. "Damned straight. He was supposed to break in here and steal the money hidden in the basement. I would've given him his cut, but all he could talk about was getting revenge on you, so he had to go. That day at the shack, I thought he killed you. When I found out you were alive, I thought you would tell everyone it was me who killed Denning. I figured I could put *you* away for murdering Denning, but the detectives forced my hand—said without a weapon, we had no case." He waved the gun at Nolan. "Now, I just have to get that money myself. It's all I've got to get me the hell out of Gray's Point. I'll rid myself of this damned town." He glanced at Clarice, then at Nolan. "And all of you."

He pushed the gun in Clarice's side. She cried out in pain.

"With all that money, I'll go somewhere where they'll never find me." Harlan finished, his voice filled with menace.

Nolan shook her head. "Let Clarice go. I-I'll take you to the money."

His eyes lit from within, but his gun remained on Clarice.

"Please." Nolan implored.

He shoved Clarice away from him. Nolan reached out to help the older woman up the stairs. Wrapping an arm around the older woman, Nolan asked, “Are you all right?” She could feel Clarice shake.

Clarice nodded, her eyes filled with tears. “How could you, Harlan? How can you do this? After all these years!”

Nolan gave her shoulders a squeeze, her mind a jumble of wild thoughts. They had to get away from this lunatic, but how?

“Shut up,” he ground out, waving his gun at them. “I need that goddamned money. You think that paltry pension I get when I retire is going to be enough? Bah! You’re all a bunch of idiots!” His eyes blazed with anger. “And me, the worst fool of all, for thinking that I meant something to you.”

“You do, Harlan,” Clarice’s voice wobbled. “You’re a good friend, you’re...”

He pointed the gun at her. “It’s over, Clarice. Now, I want that money.”

“Don’t do it, Traynor.”

Nolan froze at the sound of John’s voice.

“You son of a bitch,” Harlan ground out. “I’ll kill them both!” He raised his pistol and aimed it at Clarice.

Quick as lighting, John flew past Nolan, knocking her aside.

She saw John and Harlan struggle on the steps.

A loud bang echoed through the air.

Nolan smelled the acrid odor of smoke, her eyes widening in fear as John slumped on the stairs.

Ian’s eyes flew open when he heard a sharp report—like the crack of a whip through the air. His heart raced when he saw no sign of Nolan.

He shoved his legs into his pants, hastily zipping them as he flew out the bedroom door, halting at the top of the stairs, his eyes focused on the grisly scene before him.

John sat on the steps of the grand staircase, blood oozing from a wound on his shoulder. Clarice huddled against his side, tears streaming from her face as she removed the paisley shawl from her shoulders, tying it around his father’s injured arm.

His heart skipped several beats when Harlan Traynor aimed the barrel of his pistol at Nolan.

“You make one move, McIntyre, and she’s dead,” Harlan growled, wrapping an arm around Nolan’s throat, pressing the gun into the side of her head.

Every protective instinct Ian possessed rose up within him. He longed to charge headlong at Harlan, but feared that if he did, he’d endanger Nolan. From the corner of his eye, Ian saw a crowd gathering at the bottom of the grand staircase. Jake, Anthony, Serena, Crystal and Miranda, as well as the crew of *Ghost Seeker*, stood together.

Ian’s eyes flew to Seth, hoping Traynor didn’t see.

Seth crept up the stairs, his gun drawn.

“Harlan!” Seth shouted. “Put the gown down. Now.”

Harlan shoved Nolan so hard she bumped into the railing, grabbing hold of the wood banister to steady her body. Pain knifed through her ribs.

Ian flew past Nolan, his face a mask of fury. He grabbed Harlan’s arm, the one that held the gun, wrenching it up in the air. Harlan fired once, the bullet landing in the ceiling. Dust and bits of plaster littered the stairs.

Nolan watched, fear clouding her mind as Seth aimed his pistol, trying to follow Harlan as Ian struggled to grab hold of Harlan’s gun. She heard Clarice scream, heard John moan in pain as he struggled to rise to his feet.

“I’ve got to help him,” John’s voice filled with pain, his eyes bright with terror as he watched Ian knock Harlan into the wall lining the grand staircase. John collapsed, grabbing hold of his injured arm.

In the next instant, a strange sensation filled Nolan. From the corner of her eye, she noticed a flash of white. Slowly, the lady in white walked down the grand staircase.

Ian’s eyes widened in shock as he followed her shimmery shape. In the next instant, Harlan’s eyes grew wide, too.

“Arghhhh!” Harlan shouted. He shoved Ian away and backed down the staircase, his gun trained on her translucent shape.

Ian turned and grabbed hold of Nolan. She fell into his arms. “Are you all right?” he buried his nose in her hair, holding her tight. He took her hand, pulling her toward John and Clarice. The four of them huddled on the steps as they watched the lady in white descend.

Nolan’s head swam, a dizzy feeling engulfed her brain. She gazed at the scene unfolding before her, as though she saw it through the lady in white’s eyes. Then she spoke:

“You did it, Harlan, you did this to me.”

Harlan’s panicked scream echoed throughout the staircase as the lady in white continued her descent.

The words slipped from Nolan’s lips, but she knew they belonged to the lady in white. “Harlan, you were the one who loosened the stair tread all those years ago. My fiancée paid you to do it. He hid the money here, at Bride’s Inn, but its location remained a secret. Until now.”

“Get away from me!” he shouted aiming the gun at the lady in white’s corporeal body.

“You’ll never get my blood money.” Nolan’s voice shook with fury.

“Harlan, this is your last warning,” Seth shouted. “Throw the gun away. Now!”

Nolan heard police sirens in the distance. The crowd gathered at the bottom of the steps gave a collective gasp as Seth raised his gun, aiming it at Harlan’s chest.

“You did this, Harlan,” Nolan’s voice echoed throughout the staircase. “And now, you’ll pay.”

Harlan took one more step back, then his foot slipped as a stair tread loosened.

He tumbled backward, a look of terror on his face.

Harlan rolled down the steps, the sound of his large frame bouncing against each tread echoing down the stairway. Seth jumped aside as Harlan tumbled down, landing at the bottom of the stairs on his back, his neck twisted.

The lady in white stopped her descent and looked out over the assembled crowd.

Nolan rose to her feet, watching as a ray of light streamed in through the tall windows lining the grand staircase. It shone like the brightest sunlight she ever saw, its warmth filling the stairwell.

The lady in white reached out, her hand floating through the bright, white luminescence. It shimmered and sparkled, as though hundreds of tiny stars played in the light.

As the light danced and shimmered, a darker, more sinister entity took shape. Nolan saw it first in her mind, then it materialized, floating down the steps. It crept around her legs, its black, icy fingers creeping around her shins.

At the bottom of the steps, it stopped near Harlan's prone form. Then it took the shape of hundreds of hands. They pulled and clawed at Harlan. Nolan gasped when she saw an eerie shadow that looked like Harlan rise from his body. His eyes widened in horror as the hands grabbed hold of him, pulling him up and away from his dead body.

"Arghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" his fright-filled wail pierced the air.

The more Harlan struggled, the more hands formed in the black mist, clawing at his spirit form. Soon the vision of the hands disappeared... and so did Harlan.

All that remained was his dead body at the bottom of the steps.

A hush fell over the assembled crowd. Ian moved to join Nolan.

The lady in white reached out a hand toward them.

In her mind, Nolan heard the lady in white's soft voice...

*Thank you.*

Tears welled in Nolan's eyes as she watched the lady in white walk into the light.

Then she was gone.



## Chapter Sixteen

The following day, Nolan walked into Ian's room.

She shut the door behind her. It closed with a loud click. Ian's eyes traveled to hers.

"John told me you're leaving." Nolan walked toward him, her heart racing. "I just don't understand why."

Ian turned his attention back to packing. "I've got an offer to direct a documentary about Ireland."

She raised a brow. "You're going to Ireland?"

"Tonight," he replied, his tone curt.

She laid a hand on his arm. He pulled it away.

Ian turned to face her. "John gave you the contract?"

The hurt Nolan felt was replaced by anger. *Why was he doing this?*

"Yes, John gave me the contract."

Ian raised one dark brow. "And?"

She angled her chin. "I tore it up."

"Good, I..." His eyes widened. "You tore it up? Why in hell did you do that?"

She inched closer, standing toe-to-toe with him. Gazing up into his face she replied.

"Because I got a teaching job right here at Gray's Point Middle School. I'll be teaching special education."

Ian ran a hand through his hair. "Are you crazy? John's offering you fifty thousand dollars an episode!" He scowled. "I guess you're counting on that inheritance you get next year, but you could make a hell of a lot more money by working on *Ghost Seeker*."

She angled her chin. "I don't care about the money." Nolan's throat felt tight. "I care about you," she said softly.

Ian shoved a pair of pants into his suitcase. "The media attention *Bride's Inn* and *Ghost Seeker* received in the last twenty-four hours is phenomenal."

“I already have ‘phenomenal’. I have you,” she replied, reaching up to trace the small cleft in his chin with the tip of her finger. She dropped her hand when he pulled away.

She stepped back, her chest heaving. It hurt like the very devil, but Nolan wasn’t sure if the pain came from her healing ribs or her heart.

“What’s going on here, Ian? What’s the real reason you’re leaving?”

He shrugged, turning his attention to packing.

Nolan ripped the shirt from his hands, tossing it on the floor. “Tell me the truth. *Why are you leaving?*”

Tears stung her eyes, but she held them back.

His dark blue eyes bored into hers. “It won’t work. I-I’m too old for you, Nolan.”

She blinked, not quite registering his words. Then anger simmered inside her once more.

“I see. Now you’re going to throw age into the mix, like a roadblock. You want to end this relationship, Ian? Then think of something better than your *advanced* age of thirty-seven.”

He scowled. “You’re ten years younger than me. You’re a baby.”

Her eyes widened then she frowned. “You didn’t think me a baby when you made love to me.”

His face softened. Reaching out, he ran a finger down her nose. She shuddered pleasurably at the contact then her sense returned. Nolan reared back.

Ian sighed. “Look, let’s just part as friends.

Her mouth dropped open. “Friends?”

He nodded. “It will be better this way.”

“Friends,” she murmured.

He continued to pack.

An idea formed in Nolan’s mind.

She stuck out her hand. “So long... *friend*.”

Ian turned, and reached for her hand. He gave it a gentle squeeze.

Nolan aimed her chin at him. “You’re going to miss me, Ian. More than you’ll ever know.” Her voice almost cracked, but she pressed on. “You’re a fool.”

She turned on her heel and sailed out the door but not before she heard Ian’s soft deep voice...

“Goodbye, Pixie.”

\* \* \* \*

That evening, Ian wandered into the crowded cigar lounge. He spotted Seth, Anthony and Jake seated in the back of the bustling room.

“Have a seat.” Seth pulled out a chair as Ian approached their table.

“What time’s your flight?” Jake asked as he puffed on a cigar. The smoke rose and swirled around him.

“Eleven.” Ian answered, his heart heavy.

“You’re going to miss the party?” Anthony raised a brow.

“What party?” Ian scowled.

“We’re celebrating tonight. It’s our way of thanking everyone from *Ghost Seeker*.”

Seth took a sip of his drink. “I hear Nolan and Mike Chalmers have already started their own private celebration.”

Jake and Anthony grinned.

Ian met their cocky smiles with a scowl. His heart raced at the mention of Nolan... and Mike Chalmers.

“Not that it makes a difference to *you*,” Seth continued. “Seeing as you’re leaving and won’t be here for the uh... festivities.”

Ian’s chest heaved. He rose from the table. “Where are they?” he growled.

Jake and Anthony’s smiles grew wider. Anthony spoke. “They’re in the dining room, checking out the uh... arrangements for the party tonight.”

Ian pushed his chair away, toppling it in the process. He strode out of the cigar lounge, fury and longing building inside him.

*Fool! You’re a damned fool.*

No way would he give up Nolan...

Not without a fight.

Jake and Anthony shook their heads as they gazed at Ian’s retreating back.

“Looks like your idea worked.” Jake raised his glass toward Seth. “I congratulate you, my friend.”

“That look on his face was priceless.” Anthony grinned. “Man, was he pissed.”

Seth grinned. “Nah,” he replied. “He’s in love.”

Hands clenched at his sides, Ian strode down the hallway to the dining room. When he found Nolan and her young stud, he'd bash Mike's nose, then he'd carry Nolan out of there and spank her bare ass until she promised to never look at another man. Then he'd make love to her sweet body until he obliterated Mike from her mind.

At the entrance to the dining room, his breath caught and held in his chest when he saw her sitting at a table in the back. Ian felt a stirring in his loins, his cock straining against his trousers, much like the way it had the first time he saw her.

She turned her head, her eyes meeting his.

His heart crumbled at the sight of her tear-stained, pale face.

He walked over to her table, pulling Nolan to her feet, leaning down to kiss her, wanting to brand her, hoping she understood how damned sorry he was... how much he loved her.

Ian growled low in her ear. "All right, where is he?"

She angled her head as confusion lined her face. "Who?"

"Mike Chalmers!" He gripped her shoulders and held her away from him. "Do you love him?" Ian dropped his hands to his sides, running a hand through his hair. "If you do, then I'll walk away."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mike isn't here, he's..."

Ian turned when he heard a commotion by the entrance to the dining room.

Clarice, John, Seth, Serena, Jake, Miranda, Anthony and Crystal stood there, along with the crew of *Ghost Seeker*.

And Mike. He stood there, too, giving Ian his famous 'thumbs up.'

Ian shook his head. Then he grabbed hold of Nolan. "I'm staying," he whispered in her ear. "Just so you don't stray."

She giggled and kissed his chin. "I won't stray, and..." Nolan stopped smiling. "I love you, Ian McIntyre. If you leave me, I'll..." Tears filled her eyes.

"I'm staying right here. At Bride's Inn," he told her.

Ian placed an arm around Nolan's shoulders, hugging her to him.

"It's my home." He turned and kissed her temple. "And so are you."

A collective shout went up from the group assembled at the doorway.

They spilled into the room, walking over to Ian, shaking his hand, kissing Nolan.

The music started. Ian reached for Nolan's hand and twirled her on the dance floor.

John and Clarice followed, moving closer to Ian and Nolan. "Should we tell them?" John winked at Clarice.

"Tell us what?" Ian frowned as he held Nolan in the circle of his arms. She pillowed her head on his shoulder.

"We're getting married!" Clarice beamed a smile at Nolan, then Ian.

Ian grabbed his father's hand and shook it. "It's about time." He turned and kissed Clarice's weathered cheek. "Welcome to the family."

Ian smiled at Nolan. "How about you, my pixie faery? Care to make it a double wedding?"

She threw herself into Ian's arms. "Oh! Would I?"

Ian laughed, throwing his arms around her, lifting her feet from the floor.

He kissed her until they were both breathless.

"Champagne for everyone!" Seth and Serena shouted from the stage set up near the DJ.

"Cheers!" came the collective shout from the assembled crowd.

"To Clarice and John, to Ian and Nolan—we wish you much happiness." Anthony and Crystal raised their glasses to the foursome.

"To Bride's Inn!" Seth shouted. He raised a glass in Ian's direction. "My home. Everyone's home."

"To *Ghost Seeker*!" Mike shouted, grinning hugely.

\* \* \* \*

That same evening, a small ball rolled down the grand staircase of Bride's Inn.

A child's laughter echoed in the night as a boy dressed in a plaid shirt ran down the steps. He chased the ball, giggling as it bounced. It rolled down the hall, through the lobby, past the banquet office, stopping near the entrance to the dining room.

The boy grabbed the ball and gazed at the crowd inside...

No one saw him.

No one ever did.

He smiled as he watched them all take their seats.

The boy crawled over to the table nearest the windows and crouched down near a chair occupied by a woman.

He grinned.

She screamed.

That's when he kicked the legs of her chair with his feet.

The chair toppled over, spilling her to the floor.

Then he disappeared.

"Did you see him?" she shouted. "Did you see that little boy by my chair?"

The man sitting next to her shook his head. "What boy?"

She placed a hand near her throat. "I swear to you, there was a little boy in a plaid shirt crouching next to my chair!"

Seth groaned and gazed at Serena. "Not again."

Serena shook her head and sighed. "I think he's the little boy Gregory spoke about. I thought he was Gregory's imaginary friend." She shrugged then smiled. "Looks like we've got ourselves another ghost."

Seth turned and kissed her full on the mouth. "As long as I have you, my love, it doesn't matter."

*The End*

## *About the Author*

Catherine Chernow writes sensual, fast-paced, contemporary romance – the kind of books that make your body sizzle and your heart soar.

She was born in Fairbanks, Alaska, an “army brat”, and at the age of three her family and she moved to Long Island, New York, where she still resides.

Check out her website at [www.CatherineChernow.com](http://www.CatherineChernow.com) for reviews and excerpts.

*Look for the following Catherine Chernow titles at  
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