



Vivi Andrews

*Karmic
Consultants*

THE GHOST
EXTERMINATOR:
A LOVE STORY

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The Ghost Exterminator [A Karmic Consultants story]
by Vivi Andrews

Rebel meets by-the-book businessman. Love doesn't stand a ghost of a chance.

A Karmic Consultants story.

Jo Banks has been seeing ghosts since she was six, so *normal* was never really an option. Embracing the weird and shunning normalcy makes her the top Ghost Exterminator in her region. Then she meets Wyatt Haines, the uptight, materialistic and irritatingly sexy owner of a successful resort chain.

Wyatt's new Victorian inn is *extremely* haunted and the Commando Barbie Ghost Exterminator is just the girl for the job. Except Wyatt doesn't believe in ghosts, or Jo, or anything outside the norm. He'll have to start believing fast, though, because Jo's extermination goes awry and accidentally throws two prankster ghosts into Wyatt's body to haunt *him*.

Every time he falls asleep, the mischievous ghosts take over, turning his perfectly ordered life into chaos. His waking hours are no less chaotic, with his thoughts possessed by Jo's quirky appeal and Playmate physique.

Unfortunately, Jo's ghost-exing mojo is on the fritz just when she needs it the most to unhaunt Wyatt and figure out why his inn is swarming with ghosts. Preferably *before* his spirit is permanently separated from his mouth-watering body.

And before her heart is permanently attached to the most sexy, frustrating, *normal* man she's ever met.

Warning: This book contains prankster ghosts, PG bondage, and a not-so-PG trip to the mile-high club.

The Ghost Exterminator [A Karmic Consultants story]
by Vivi Andrews

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The Ghost Exterminator [A Karmic Consultants story]
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The Ghost Exterminator: A Love Story

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Dedication

For my mom, staunch defender of her position as Number One Fan, who believed in me and loved every word even when my writing was appallingly bad, which proves how biased she is. I couldn't ask for a better cheerleader....even if she does always cheat and read the happily-ever-after first.

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Chapter One: Nightmare on South Elm Street

The house hated him.

Wyatt Haines did not use personification. Cars did not have names. The stock market did not have moods. Computers, contrary to popular opinion, were neither demonic nor temperamental. Wyatt was firmly anti-anthropomorphic.

But the damn house had it in for him. No question about it.

He had bought the Demon House on South Elm—or the Nightmare on Elm Street, as his secretary liked to call it—three months ago, in a frenzy of bargain-induced purchase-lust. The elegant three-story Victorian had shone like a (ridiculously under-priced) beacon of grace and class in a once-shabby, newly chic seaside town.

He had taken one look at the turrets and gables with sickeningly quaint gingerbread trim and seen profits dripping from every eave. And there were a *lot* of eaves.

The South Elm Victorian, once restored and remodeled, would be the perfect addition to his chain of charming—and highly profitable—country inns. The decision to buy had been almost mockingly easy, but it had come back to haunt him, as all such decisions did. Just one more example of life's most annoying lesson—the good things never come easy. Dammit.

The deal had been a snap, escrow a breeze. Hell had waited until the day *after* the sale closed before unleashing its fury.

The Episodes, as he had come to think of them, began the morning the first construction team had set foot on the

premises. After the seventh team walked off the job, he had been forced to admit that there might be some problems with the house that couldn't be solved with new pipes and a fresh coat of paint. His secretary's suggestion to bring in the consulting firm—ridiculous as it had seemed after the Erupting Toilet Episode—had become his last, best hope by the time the Exploding Furnace Episode had sent the ninth, and final, contractor storming off the site.

Wyatt glared at the mockingly perfect Victorian, convinced, irrationally or not, that it was glaring back at him.

"Dude. That house hates you."

Wyatt swung around at the dry drawl of a female voice behind him. His frown deepened as he took in the figure leaning against his antique, hand-carved fencepost, one hand idly flaking away the chipped paint. *Surely this couldn't be the consultant.*

Wyatt excelled at sizing people up at a glance. It was one of the things that had helped him take one rickety country inn and turn it into a multimillion-dollar, themed resort chain. Taking his cues from posture and attire, a firm handshake or a nervous laugh, he had learned who to trust and who was going to be a liability to his business. He was an expert at avoiding risks. What he saw leaning up against his fencepost was enough to set off every risk-tuned warning bell he had.

She was tall for a woman and visibly muscular—though in the sleek, I-can-run-fifteen-miles-before-breakfast way rather than the more disturbing, I-can-bench-press-your-car style. Her hair was yanked back into an unforgiving ponytail, revealing a quarter-inch of blonde roots along her forehead

before the cheerful color was sucked up by the inky black, light-sucking dye job that covered the rest of her head.

She wasn't wearing a drop of makeup and should have looked washed out and hideous in the glare of the streetlight, but instead her face was compelling—her expression fixed and stubborn, as if trying to compensate for the fact that her features were overwhelmingly cute and her nose turned up like a pixie's.

A battered backpack rested against the ankle of one combat boot. Black jeans and a snug black tank top completed the look. Wyatt tried not to focus on what the low-cut tank revealed—had been trying since the second he turned around—but his eyes were itching from the effort.

Pamela Anderson, eat your heart out.

Between the come-to-papa figure and what was clearly long blonde hair beneath that hideous dye job, she could have been a playboy bunny. *Lucky Hef*. Instead, she looked like Commando Barbie.

Wyatt Haines recognized temptation when he saw it—every disciplined molecule in his body recognized it—but he knew better than to give in to it. Order, discipline, planning—there was no room in his life for the unexpected. The militant playmate would just have to try her tricks somewhere else.

There was no way in hell she was the consultant. *Please, if there is a God...*

"You're trespassing." His bark didn't have its usual force because he was still trying to make his eyes focus properly.

She continued to gaze blandly at him as if he hadn't even spoken. "You Haines?"

Oh, no. Wyatt was not a religious man, but he was willing to consider the possibility of a deity—particularly if that deity had a personal vendetta against him. The universe had been just that unfair lately. "I'm Wyatt Haines," he admitted grudgingly, waiting for her response with a healthy dose of dread.

Don't say it, don't say it, don't say it.

"I'm Jo Banks. Karmic Consultants."

Damn.

Jo watched, perversely fascinated, as Haines flinched and his perma-frown deepened. He was frowning in the general direction of her cleavage, but since The Girls had always gotten more attention than she did, she didn't take it personally.

"I was expecting a man," he blurted out, sweat breaking out across his brow.

"Yep."

"Joe. That's short for something?"

A real rocket scientist, this one. "Yep."

He waited for a beat, then seemed to realize that she wasn't going to supply a nice girly name for him to use instead and cleared his throat. He tore his eyes off The Girls and raked her with the single most disapproving glance she had received from a man since puberty. Landing at her feet, his eyes locked on her goodie bag where she'd dropped it. He cleared his throat again, his lip curling as if he expected spray paint and toilet paper to leap out of the bag and begin trashing his perfect little Victorian mansion.

Not that it was perfect. That house had some serious issues.

Jo levered herself off the fencepost and bent to grab her goodie bag. Straightening, she flipped the bag onto her shoulder, ignoring the way Haines's mouth fell open and his eyes glazed at the glimpse down the front of her shirt. She took a step up the gravel walk and Haines suddenly snapped out of his cleavage-induced haze. He planted himself between her and the house.

He frowned and cleared his throat.

*That stick shoved up his ass must be tickling his tonsils.
Poor baby.*

"This'll go a lot faster if I have access to the house," Jo said dryly, hoping Haines would take the hint and get out of her way.

He didn't. She couldn't say she was surprised.

Wyatt Haines, with his Armani everything, three-hundred dollar haircut, and designer disdain, continued to stand in the middle of the path, every muscle in his (admittedly gorgeous) body clenched in defense of his financial assets. Jo was tempted—just for a moment—to football tackle him and see which one of them came out on top. She might even let him be on top. A delicious little shiver wriggled down her spine.
Down, girl.

He may be a stuck-up prick and a soulless businessman, but Jo was woman enough to admit that he was a seriously dishy stuck-up prick. Objectively speaking. Every black hair neatly in place. No trace of a shadow on his face, even though it was well past five-o'clock. And eyes that were so freaking

blue, she could see their color in just the light of the one streetlamp that shone over her shoulder. He practically radiated anal-asshole vibes, but he was also putting off some serious pheromones. Luckily, Jo was immune to studly businessman pheromones. *Well, mostly immune.*

She reined in her libido and arched one brow at him, going for aloof and supercilious. Haines didn't appear to notice her impressive superciliousness. He was too busy frowning.

"I was under the impression Karmic Consultants was a reputable firm," he said, clipping off the words, abrupt and precise.

Jo ignored the insult and gave him a nice lazy smile with lots of teeth. "Depends what you mean by reputable, I guess."

Haines's frown went up a notch or two on the Richter scale. "I require a certain level of professionalism."

It was all Jo could do not to roll her eyes. He'd probably expected her to show up in a powder blue suit and heels, looking like a realtor and genuflecting at his feet. Even if she had been the powder blue suit type—*not in this lifetime*—she still wouldn't have been stupid enough to crawl around a hundred-plus-year-old house in the middle of the night in heels.

Jo upped the wattage on her smile. "What? Don't I look professional to you?"

Haines's eyes dropped to her boots, surveying the landscape along the way. He winced.

Prompted by some devilish impulse, Jo slapped on her most innocent expression and offered, "I know some of the

consultants work in the nude. If you'd be more comfortable..."

"No!"

Jo smothered her grin at his obvious discomfort and focused on looking harmless. It wasn't something she'd had a lot of practice with, and judging by Haines's expression, her skill had suffered through lack of practice.

He was frowning again. But only about a 2.2 on the Pissed-Off-CEO Richter scale. Certainly not enough to make her quake.

He waved a hand toward her goodie bag. "What are you going to do with that?"

Jo patted her pack and smiled reassuringly. "I'm going to make all of your troubles go away, buddy."

The frown went up to a 3.4. "You don't have explosives in there, do you?"

Jo snorted out a laugh. It was even funnier because he was serious. "That's not how this works, pal."

"How exactly does this work?"

At last, a question she was used to. "You wait out here. I go in there. I do my mojo. Your house is all better." Jo made a dusting off gesture with her hands. "Poof."

Haines shook his head, looking impressively grim. "I can't let you go in there alone."

Jo sighed. She'd heard that before—though usually it was from big, strong men who wanted to protect her from the Big Bad rather than some stuck-up businessman who thought she was going to vandalize his property if left unsupervised.

"Don't worry, buddy. I'm a pro."

He snuck a glance over his shoulder at the house. "That house is possessed."

Jo peered past him and let her eyes fall on the big Victorian mansion. Even before she drew on her second sight, she could see there was some serious shit going down in that old house. It gave off a dim greenish glow and seemed to be slowly expanding and contracting. Breathing. It definitely appeared to be breathing. *Well, that's new.*

She unfocused her eyes, looking without looking, and was nearly blinded by the luminescent energy pouring off the house. *Damn, girl.* She blinked away the vision, still seeing stars, and focused on the frowning businessman.

"Nope," she said cheerfully. "Not possessed. Just really, *really* haunted."

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Chapter Two: Commando Barbie Does her Thing

Wyatt felt lightheaded, but ruthlessly suppressed the irritating weakness. She was messing with his mind. That was it. The house wasn't really haunted. "There's no such thing as ghosts."

She tipped her head and looked at him as if *he* were the crazy one. "If you don't think the house is haunted, why did you call Karmic for a Ghost Exterminator?"

Instead of admitting he had reached the point of blind desperation, he countered, "How do you know it's haunted?"

"I can see it."

Wyatt felt a headache starting behind his eyes. "You see a ghost."

She shook her head, bouncing on the balls of her feet like a Goth cheerleader and growing more bright-eyed even as his headache intensified. "Not just one ghost. *Lots* of ghosts."

Wyatt closed his eyes. "Lots. Of course. Lucky me. How many is lots?"

In the silence that followed his question, he opened his eyes to find her staring blankly at the house, her eyes a little glazed. "I'd say upwards of thirty," she answered finally. "You've got one hell of an infestation, buddy."

"Hell. So it *is* possessed."

She made a face. "Figure of speech. No demons. Just ghosts. Good thing, too. I don't do demons." She tapped her forefinger against her sternum, drawing his attention southward again. "Exterminator. Not Exorcist."

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Wyatt worked his jaw and struggled to maintain a logical approach in the face of this lunacy. "You haven't even been inside yet. How can you tell there aren't demons?"

She tipped her head inquiringly. "You're pretty hung up on demons, huh? That easier for you to believe than ghosts?"

He didn't want to believe in either and he was going to stick with disbelief as long as he could manage it. "My secretary thought the Episodes..." It was all his secretary's fault. *She* was the one who believed in ghosts and spirits and auras. Her desk had more crystals than post-its, for Christ's sake.

"She an expert? No. I didn't think so. Let the experts work, honey."

"How does an expert tell?"

She shrugged, as casually as if they were talking about the difference between deep dish and New York style pizza.

"Different energy. Demons are all angry red and pulsing. Ghosts are green and glowy. You've got green."

He glared at the house. "I don't see green." He saw a money-sucking bastard of a house, but certainly no green.

"That's because you're insensitive."

"Excuse me?" Now she was insulting him?

"I'm a sensitive. You're not. Almost all children are sensitive, but as they grow up, it's like they stop looking. Some adults continue to see ghosts as wisps of fog and most people will feel cold or a sort of static electricity hum in the air, but to see more definition and color, it takes either a really badass ghost or a sensitive. Or a near-death situation will usually do it." She frowned suddenly. "Although, you have

some pretty badass ghosts in there by the look of it, so even you should be able to see something. You don't see anything?"

Even him. Charming. Wyatt glared at the bane of his existence—the inanimate one. "I see a house."

"That's it? No glow? No breathing?"

"*Breathing?*"

"Yeah. Your house is breathing. Weird, huh?"

Wyatt closed his eyes and cleared his throat repeatedly in an attempt to quell the urge to run screaming into the night. When he opened his eyes again, his personal ghost exterminator was watching him with a carefully neutral expression as if she were trying not to laugh. Wyatt was not in the habit of being laughed at, however silently. He ground his teeth together, trying to remember what patience felt like. "What happens now?"

She smacked one fist into her opposite palm, grinning with unholy anticipation. "I go in there, kick some ass, take some names, and you wait here. Easy as cake."

"Pie."

Jo made a face. "Yeah. I can't make pie. My cousin got all the baking genes, but if it comes out of a box and has very detailed instructions, I can make an edible cake. Cake is easy. Pie's a bitch."

Since Wyatt had never stepped foot inside the kitchen in his condo other than to access the leftover pizza stashed in his fridge, he couldn't really comment about the relative difficulties of pie versus cake. Frankly, it was not a conversation he'd ever expected to have. Certainly not with a

Goth playmate who was supposedly going to rid one of his properties of a ghost infestation.

What the hell had happened that his life had come to this?

As if in response, a gust of wind came from the direction of the house, howling eerily. The blast of chill air plastered his suit to his skin and did very interesting things to Ms. Banks' skimpy tank top, which Wyatt tried his hardest not to notice.

Jo whirled into the wind and planted her hands on her hips, shouting, "Yeah, you'll huff and you'll puff and I'll knock your ass down! Settle, you punks!"

The wind died down instantly.

Wyatt's eyes felt tight and he closed them as he asked incredulously, "Were you just yelling at my house?"

"You betcha. Gotta let 'em know who's in charge."

Wyatt winced, the throbbing in his head redoubling. "Of course."

"So, you just hang here, try not to have an aneurism, and I'll be back in a jiff." A loud creaking noise emanated from the house. "Maybe two jiffs."

Wyatt pried open his eyes and straightened his shoulders. There was no way he was letting her waltz into Hell House by herself, no matter how cavalier she was about the whole thing. "I'll go with you," he announced. Then he turned and forced himself to start walking up the path, toward the ominous moaning of the house.

He hadn't lied when he said that he couldn't see any glowing or breathing, but that didn't mean he didn't sense *something* from the house. It was as if the air around it was

heavy and somehow *wrong*, pushing against his brain and clogging in his lungs.

The sound of rapid footsteps behind him distracted him from such fanciful thoughts as the consultant trotted up the path.

"Whoa, buddy! I work better alone, *capisce*? You should really wait out here."

"My house. My rules. I'm coming."

"Fine," she snapped, her good cheer vanishing in another mercurial mood shift. "Just try not to get in my way, okay, buster?"

She quickened her pace and edged past him to take the lead, muttering something about stubborn pricks with no survival instincts, which he was clearly meant to hear. Wyatt frowned at her back, but held his tongue.

He followed her up the path, lengthening his stride to keep up. She didn't mince or strut. There were no swiveling hips or dainty steps. Jo Banks prowled up the walk with a loose-limbed athleticism, unintentionally graceful and undeniably purposeful. The rear view had nothing on the front, but there was still something accidentally sexy in her obvious attempts to thwart her own femininity.

The pipes rattled strangely as they stepped up onto the front porch, sounding like laughter echoing. Jo stopped suddenly and Wyatt nearly plowed into her back, stopping himself with a hand braced on her hip. She was suddenly close and warm and she smelled like—fruit? Was that peaches? Whatever it was, he breathed it in. Then Jo looked down at his hand and shifted away, easing her hip out of his

grasp. Wyatt let his hand drop, still feeling the warmth of the denim against his palm and smelling that teasing hint of peach.

She took a step forward and bent at the waist to peer closely at the etchings around the door. Wyatt didn't bother pretending not to notice her ass extended toward him like a forties pin-up. There was definitely something to be said for the rear view.

The pipes laughed again, higher this time, like children giggling, jarring him out of his appreciation.

"Was this place ever an orphanage?" she asked without looking up from the doorframe.

"No." Wyatt usually didn't pay much attention to the history of the places he bought—he was more interested in the future than the past—but after the Episodes started, he had done a thorough background check on the Demon House. "It was built as a private home, a vacation getaway for an oil tycoon and his family. When the tycoon died, he bequeathed it to his youngest daughter who lived here until her death two years ago, at the age of ninety-four. Nice old lady. Went to church every Sunday. Gave to charity."

Jo straightened, seemingly satisfied with the front door, but less than impressed with him. "Anyone can give to charity. Doesn't make them a good person. Hitler probably gave to charity. I bet the Manson family was all about giving to the United Way." She tried the door then jiggled it harder when it didn't budge.

Wyatt came up behind her and reached over her shoulder, jangling his key ring. She sidled out of the way—a waft of

peach, there then gone—as he worked the ancient lock. The new, state of the art lock he'd ordered installed had jammed so often, he'd finally had to have it removed again. As soon as the old lock gave way, the door swung slowly inward, creaking dramatically.

Jo snickered, although Wyatt couldn't imagine what she found so damned funny. She grinned at him. "Are you *sure* no kids died here?"

"Positive."

"Huh." She stepped past him, into the dusty foyer. Construction dust mingled with the much older dust of the house and swirled around her feet. "They didn't build over an old graveyard or anything? Use the house as a hospital during the war?"

"No graveyard and what war? This house was built after the civil war."

"Battle site, maybe?" she asked then frowned, shaking her head before he could answer. "No. Wrong part of the country. And that still wouldn't explain it."

Wyatt stepped into the foyer behind her and the door swung shut of its own volition, creaking all the way. Jo turned her head and grinned at it in a friendly way that made Wyatt almost as uncomfortable as the fact that it moved on its own. It clicked shut. He thought he heard the snick of a lock, but shook away the idea. *Impossible*.

"Explain what?" he asked into the echoing silence that filled the foyer.

She tore her attention away from the door and focused on him. "Explain the ghosts."

"What's to explain?" He didn't really want to know, but if she kept talking about ghosts, he could pretend they were just having a theoretical discussion. Anything to delay the reality of the ghost extermination—*surely that couldn't be a reality.*

She looked at him with a slightly martyred expression, as if exerting a great deal of effort to be patient with an extremely stupid student. "Ghosts don't just pop up wherever for no reason," she explained. "Most hauntings occur where the ghost lived or died or in a place of particular importance. There are some people, mediums, to whom ghosts are naturally drawn—like my cousin Lucy—and other people, channels, like my boss, who can help direct a ghost to a specific site or person as they are first crossing over, but for the most part, ghosts are going to latch onto the familiar. So unless you had an apartment fire or something in this house, there is no reason for you to have this many ghosts. Especially since I'm fairly certain you're being haunted by the ghosts of children."

"Children? Children can be ghosts?"

Jo nodded and began moving around the room, peering into the shadows. "It's actually fairly common. See, there are two primary reasons why a spirit will get trapped between this world and the next in the form of a ghost. Either they have unresolved issues from their mortal life that they need to face before they can enter the white light, or they just got lost or confused on the trip and sort of ended up as ghosts, stuck between here and there. Kids tend to be in the latter group."

She bent and peeked under an antique desk, flipping up the dust cover and then letting it flutter back down again. "Luckily, there's an entire organization of mediums who work full time to help lost ghost kids find their way on."

"Is that what you do?"

Jo made a face. "Not quite. My talents are a little less subtle."

"What makes you think my ghosts are kids?" Wyatt winced a little when he realized he had just used the phrase "my ghosts", but Jo didn't appear to notice. She was too busy crawling behind the broken door to the closet under the stairs. The same stairs that had nearly collapsed under contractor number three. "Jo? I'm not sure that staircase is stable."

She waved a hand at him in what she probably thought was a reassuring gesture. It just made his blood pressure spike all the higher, but then she crawled back out again, dusty but whole. "Little buggers are hiding from me."

"Excuse me?"

"The ghosts. They're hiding. When I was standing outside, I could barely look at the house, it was so full of ghosts, and now they're all playing least in sight. Even the one who opened and shut the door managed to stay just on the edge of my vision."

"And that makes you think they're children?"

She made a humming sound in her throat and continued to prowl the room. "That and the giggling. And the pitter-patter of little feet, and the fact that you've had dozens of incidents, but no injuries and no sightings. Playing pranks, then hiding

out to make sure your parents don't catch you and punish you. Sound like kids to you?"

"But they're..."

"Dead? Yeah. Still kids though. What's weird is that I can't seem to figure out why they would be here. Do you have any idea when the infestation started?"

Before he could respond, a crash sounded from the direction of the kitchen. Jo spun toward the sound. "Sounds like someone's getting impatient for the seeker." She grinned with entirely too much relish for Wyatt's peace of mind and rubbed her hands together in anticipation. "Ready or not, here I come!"

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Chapter Three: When the Ghost Exterminator Says Jump...

Jo took two steps toward the kitchen then paused and shot Haines an exasperated glance when he fell into step behind her. "I'm fine, you know. I'm not going to trash your place and I can totally deal with this without you. You don't have to come with me."

Wyatt frowned. "It's my house."

Wind whistled through the eaves above them, moaning and howling in eerie cliché. Jo grinned. "You sure you want me to do this? Halloween is right around the corner and you've got your very own bona fide haunted house. I bet the kiddies would love it if you threw a big ole Halloween party."

"The dead kids or the living ones?"

"Both." When he just continued to frown, she sighed. "Oh fine. Be a stick in the mud. Come on, cowboy, let's go rustle us up some ghosties."

Jo led the way back to where the crash had sounded with Haines so close on her heels he was practically walking on them. Irritation snaked through her as he continued to lurk over her shoulder, his hulking presence abrading every nerve she had. Did he have to walk so freaking close? Did he have to be so damned big and smell so damned good? Like aftershave and expensive leather—which made no sense whatsoever since Jo had a feeling excruciating torture would be necessary to get Mr. Big Business into some bad-boy biker leathers.

She stopped in what must have once been a formal dining room, gritting her teeth when Haines's momentum carried him into her—not hard enough to bump her, just enough for his front to brush against her back. A shiver tried to snake its way down her spine, but she ruthlessly suppressed it. *Focus, Jo. You are not a raging hormone. You are a professional.*

Distance. She needed distance.

She stepped out of the range of his heat and looked around the room for something to distract him, something to make him take a step back.

Where the hell is a big, scary poltergeist when you need one?

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and saw the permafrown working about a 2.6 on the Pissed-Off-CEO Richter scale. She could do better than that.

Jo went to stand in the center of the room, spreading her arms in a very hokey, mumbo-jumbo way that would have caused her boss to smack her upside the head. With a two by four. She made a little humming noise in her throat and then whispered, "I feel a presence!"

The frown went up to a 3.4.

Better, but not good enough. She needed him good and pissed if he was going to stop trying to walk down the back of her spine.

Jo closed her eyes and continued humming, knowing she sounded like an idiot. She tried to think of any other stupid cliché she could throw into the mix. She raised her hands to the sky, tipped back her face and began a sort of keening in her throat.

Another peek showed about a 4.4.

Jo suddenly stopped keening and dropped her arms, slumping over on herself.

"Jo?"

She started a low hum, then straightened, making her movements as jerky and zombie-esqe as possible.

"Jo? Are you all right?" The frown was at a solid 5.0 and his laser-blue eyes were filled with annoyed concern.

Tipping her head back, Jo let out a howl and then shouted, "Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice!"

There was a beat of pure silence, then Wyatt growled wordlessly. Jo snickered.

"Damn it, Jo! I thought something was wrong!"

She snorted. "You thought the same thing you've thought since I showed up—probably since before I showed up, come to think of it—that I am a total charlatan."

"And that little display was supposed to convince me otherwise?"

"That little display was supposed to show you that you don't know shit and maybe you should take a step back and let me do my freaking job."

He worked his jaw for a moment, then nodded crisply and took a step back, his frown dropping down to about 3.8. "I'll try to stay out of your way."

"Neato. And don't move or talk either."

He made a choking noise and then cleared his throat roughly. *There's that stick again...*

"I can't move or talk?"

"It's distracting," Jo said. "If you're going to be here, then you need to be as close to invisible as possible. Even then, it probably isn't a good idea. Are you sure I can't convince you to leave?"

"Do most homeowners just let you run wild in their homes, all alone with ghosts on the loose?"

Jo shrugged. "Pretty much. That is what they pay me for."

Wyatt muttered something that sounded distinctly like "Cowards", but since he was still glaring at her, she couldn't reconcile any protective tendencies with his current irritation.

"I don't like this," he growled, loud enough that she was clearly meant to respond this time.

Jo crossed her arms over the Girls and narrowed her eyes at him. "Is this because I'm a girl?"

His face screamed yes, but instead of admitting it, he ratcheted up the fiercest frown she'd seen from him yet and growled. "I assume your contract releases me of any liability if you die on the premises."

Jo fluttered her eyelashes at him. "Oh, Haines, you do say the sweetest things."

"If you're determined to put yourself in danger, I just want to be sure I'm cleared of any liability."

"I'm a little more qualified than you are to determine whether or not I'm in danger, don't you think, Mr. I-Don't-Even-Believe-Ghosts-Exist? Trust me. I'm golden. This place is cake."

Although, there's definitely something weird about it.

Jo shook away that disquieting thought, shot him a brassy grin and turned back toward the source of the original crash—where now there was only silence.

Wyatt followed—but at a distance this time—trying so hard to keep his footsteps silent that Jo imagined she could feel the effort radiating from him.

Damn. He was *still* distracting. She needed to focus on the task at hand and forget he was there. It wasn't as if she'd never performed exterminations with the clients on hand before. Hell, she'd even done a few while her clients videotaped and provided live narration. She could deal with distractions. She just had to tune them out.

Jo closed her eyes, cleared her thoughts and stepped into the kitchen. Even before she opened up her second sight, she knew they were there. And she knew that her original estimate of thirty was nowhere near the reality. The house was *crawling* with ghosts, a hundred, maybe more, and every one of them was drifting in and out of the kitchen around her.

Jo unfocused her eyes, letting the second sight in, and quickly scanned the room for something that could be drawing the ghosts there, something out of place that radiated the force of paranormal energy to lure and hold so many. All she saw was a kitchen that, while far from Victorian, clearly hadn't been remodeled since the early seventies. Orange countertops, outdated appliances, garish patterned wallpaper, all of it drowning in the bright greenish energy of too many ghosts.

It was *possible* all of the ghosts had just migrated there naturally—wildly improbable, but possible. She'd be more

comfortable if she knew what had brought them there, but wherever they had come from, she knew where they were going.

Jo moved to the center of the room, and dropped her goodie bag. She dug around inside for a moment, pulling out her Lucky Mojo Spiritual Cleansing incense, quickly lighting it and setting the holder at her feet. The incense wasn't necessary to the process, but she enjoyed the ritual and it helped her focus. Focus was absolutely essential.

She braced her feet in a wide stance and steadied her breathing. Now for the fun part.

Jo let her second sight seep into her consciousness, soaking into her mind until she wasn't looking at the energy in the room, but rather *being* the energy. The energy of the ghosts fluttered against her and through her, constantly in motion.

So many of them. She felt a moment's trepidation at the thought of trying to exterminate so many at once, but with them all concentrated in one place, she didn't see another option.

The frantic movement of the ghosts, like minnows in her mind, dizzied her, but Jo kept her breathing even and let them in and out, ruthlessly quelling all her instincts to struggle against the energy. If she fought them, even for a moment, she would lose control—and possibly her sanity, but she tried not to dwell on that little tidbit.

Breathing through her expanded self, her energy self, Jo felt the air around her for a place where the world felt different. Thin.

When she didn't feel it immediately, her concentration wavered a bit and the energy of the ghosts beat at the back of her eyes like the wings of a thousand moths. *It has to be here.* She pushed out again, felt again, and then—*there.* Above the sink.

Jo gently probed the soft spot, mentally mapping its dimensions, then took a breath and *reached.* A quick yank and the window between this world and the beyond snapped open, spilling bright white light to burn too brightly against her inner eye. When a ghost transcended naturally, that light would appear to be piercing them from the inside out, splitting them open until they exploded and were nothing more than the light that took them.

If a ghost wasn't going to transcend on its own, that was when Jo came to work. The ability to open portals at will was rare, but even more rare was the ability to continue to control other energies while they were open. It was one reason why she was the only ghost exterminator within eight hundred miles.

As long as she didn't look directly into the blinding light, holding the window open was easy. Forcing ghosts through it, less so. Luckily, they usually didn't need to be forced. Most ghosts longed for the beyond, searched for it and mourned it. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, Jo opened a window and the ghosts surged through of their own volition. Easy as cake.

Unfortunately, this was that hundredth time.

When Jo threw open the window, the ghosts didn't budge. Not even a twitch in the right direction. If anything, their movements became more sluggish, reluctant. She tried

guiding the ghosts in the right direction, but it was like running her fingers through smoke. They broke and melted around her, lethargic and insubstantial.

Crap. Looks like it's gonna be one of those nights.

Jo narrowed her focus, keeping the window open with a corner of her mind, but using most of her attention to herd the varied energies of the ghosts. She guided them gently at first then with more force as they began to push back away from the portal she had opened.

What the—

Jo swayed as they shoved against her, their movements stronger and more defined. She shoved back, beginning to hear their voices, indistinct at first, then a blur of sound, like the cacophony of children on a playground, only these were not the sounds of laughter, but distress.

I'm not hurting you, she tried to tell them, but could not split her focus any more to give voice to the words. *Go. You should want this. Go on.*

The first ghost brushed the edge of the portal and disappeared through it with no sound or apparent movement—just there, then gone in an instant. Houdini on speed. The next few vanished just as easily.

Then she felt a peculiar rumbling.

Behind her, beneath her, *where was it?* The unseen force yanked back on her ghosts and Jo stumbled back a step, jerked by the ricochet of that pull. She braced her feet again, gritted her teeth, belatedly reminding herself to keep breathing, and shoved again.

The force—*what* is *that*?—pulled back again and Jo gave a startled yelp as she staggered again.

The room was colder now, but instead of the clean, open crispness of a brisk fall night, the air felt thick, pressurized, like a humid summer day gone wrong. Jo's breath formed a cloud as it puffed out, then that cloud doubled back on her, wrapping around her throat. Her own breath twisted around her neck in an ethereal garrote.

Okay, no more fun and games. She needed to end this.

Jo gathered herself, centering and bracing. She was stronger. They had numbers, but if she timed it right, putting all of her strength into one moment, she could have the rest of the ghosts through the portal before whatever held them there had time to yank them back. *And God help us if that doesn't work.*

Breathe in, breathe out. Each breath was focus, strength. Jo forced herself to ignore the tendrils of her own exhalation that wound tightly around her throat, sinister and barely visible. *Breathe in, breathe out.*

She drew in for the last push, ready, waiting for the moment when the force beneath—behind?—her would release ever so slightly, gathering itself for the next pull. She waited, braced, ready, and then she felt it, the minutest slackening.

Jo slammed her will into the ghosts, through them, shooting them toward the portal like a hundred arrows. They flew true, fast, too fast, with too much momentum to be pulled back now, but the force that battled her had not given up. It yanked one last time, hard enough to send her crashing

backwards onto the floor, crying out in surprised pain, laid out like a boxer at the end of a brutal round.

"Jo!" Wyatt shouted her name. Just that. It was enough.

Her concentration splintered, shattering at the last moment. Her gaze flew to where Wyatt stood in the corner, an expression of confused shock twisting his usual frown.

The portal snapped shut, hard enough to send an echo slamming through her. A high-pitched squeal pierced her mind and then two green streams of light, so tightly intertwined that she thought for a moment they were one, slammed into Wyatt's chest, sending him stumbling backward against the corner.

He gave a shout of surprise, his hands reaching out automatically to brace on the walls on either side of him as the house began to tremble and roll. Jo wrapped her hands over her head and squeezed her eyes shut—as if that would save her if the ancient ceiling decided to come crashing down on top of her.

The earthquake lasted only a moment, there then gone, like the crashing of a wave. Then all was silent and still.

She opened her eyes, not bothering to get up from her position sprawled on the floor, and threw open her second sight.

Nothing.

The ghosts were gone. The air held only the natural chill of an October night. The force that had fought her for their spirits had vanished as suddenly as it had arrived.

It was over.

Jo rolled onto her side, the better to glare at the businessman in the corner. "Haines. Next time someone tells you not to talk or move..."

"I'll do it," he responded promptly.

Jo nodded wearily and let her head flop back down onto the floor. She closed her eyes, exhaustion sucking at her. *God, I need a vacation.* Then, so softly she wondered if she had heard anything at all, there came the unmistakable whimper of a child's cry. Coming from Wyatt's corner.

She opened her eyes and there it was. The faintest of ghostly green glows, inside Haines's body, directly beneath his sternum.

Oh, that can't be good.

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Chapter Four: Good Karma

Ungodly early the next morning, Jo breezed through the tasteful front office of Karmic Consultants, smiled cheerfully at the latest in a long line of confused secretarial temps who never lasted more than a week, and waltzed right into her boss's office without so much as a courtesy knock.

She marched up to the imposing black stone desk, full speed ahead, take no prisoners, boosting herself up to sit on the smooth, black marble and swinging her feet in a way that never failed to piss off her boss.

Luckily, her boss wasn't in yet.

Karma, founder and executive dictator of Karmic Consultants, was still in the Bat Cave—as Jo had taken to thinking of the mysterious condo beneath the KC offices. As far as Jo knew, no one had ever seen inside it, save Karma herself. The only entrance was an elevator connected directly to her office and controlled by a biometric panel—which only increased Jo's belief that Karma was leaping into black spandex and flying off to save Gotham. Seriously, who used biometric sensors besides the CIA?

The elevator itself had been painted to resemble a Japanese screen, blending seamlessly with the subtly Asian-influenced luxury of the rest of the office.

Jo smiled cheekily up at the most visible of the surveillance cameras that monitored Karma's office twenty-four/seven. Somewhere, Karma was watching—if she wasn't already on her way up to tell Jo to get the hell off her desk.

The elevator doors opened with a barely audible *shush*, and Karma's one-nine-hundred-operator voice slid sensuously into the room in front of her. "Get the hell off my desk, Jo."

Karma did not look like a stereotypical psychic, or a channel, or any other mumbo-jumbo magician. Her tailored grey power suit would not have looked out of place on a courtroom lawyer, and she wore it with confidence and ease. She was tall and slim, and her features possessed the same subtle Asian influence as her furnishings, but her skin was dark—more caramel than cream. Jo had never seen her black hair unconfined, but she always imagined it would be long and geisha-straight if Karma ever released it from its rigid chignon prison.

It was a pointless fancy though—Karma did not let her hair down. Ever.

Jo bounced off of the desk, an unrepentant grin ruining the effect of her instant obedience. "Sup, boss?"

"You are, apparently. Rather early for you, isn't it, Jo?" Karma slid into the executive chair behind her desk, as elegant and collected as ever, despite the hour.

Jo had visited Karma's office at every possible hour of the day. If the boss wasn't in the office when Jo arrived, she appeared within moments, always looking crisp and unflappable, whether it was two or ten, a.m. or p.m. Jo had no idea when, if ever, she slept.

She would wonder if Karma was human, if not for the fact that the big boss's little brother Jake had recently gotten engaged to Jo's cousin Lucy. Jake's existence proved that Karma had not actually sprung fully formed from the head of

Zeus, but rather in the more traditional way from the loins of a retired FBI Agent and a hippie from New Mexico.

Karma made a delicate throat-clearing sound, which immediately reminded Jo of Wyatt and his stick and the reason she was here at this dreadful hour.

"We have a problem." Jo flopped down onto one of the high-backed chairs facing the desk.

"Do we?" Karma said without inflection, her voice pouring over the words like liquid.

"My client—Wyatt Haines?—he's haunted."

"Yes, dear, that's what he hired you for."

"No—I mean, yes, that is what he hired me for—but, no, that's not what I meant. His house is fine—sort of. It's him. *He's* haunted."

Karma blinked and slowly leaned forward in her chair. "Perhaps you'd like to explain that."

Jo squirmed in her seat. "So...it isn't *entirely* my fault."

"Explanations first. Excuses later."

Jo wiped every trace of expression from her face, trying to mimic Karma's blank professionalism. "The client was already on site when I arrived at the designated meeting time. Preliminary examination of premises revealed abnormally high spectral energy emanating from the structure, but no indicators of the cause for this on the grounds. Client expressed reluctance to allow me access to the premises, stating possible demonic possession as grounds. No apparent signs of demonic energy. Client insisted on accompanying me into the structure and remaining present during

extermination." *And if he had just listened to me in the first place, none of this would have happened.*

"Despite overwhelmingly high original readings, no ghosts were present upon immediate entry. The client and I followed sounds of activity to the kitchen, where I found an abnormal concentration of juvenile ghosts. I opened a window to let them out, but they resisted."

Karma didn't move, but Jo felt her attention sharpen to a razor's edge at that little tidbit. Jo was tempted to add a pithy comment about how resistance was futile, just like the Borg, but she didn't want to ruin her uber-professional recitation with too much Trekkie geekery.

"I then attempted to push the ghosts through the portal. After an initial measure of success, a secondary force began to forcefully draw the ghosts away from the window."

Karma's chair squeaked as she sat forward suddenly, but she made no move to interrupt Jo's report.

"I exerted more force and directed the majority of the ghosts through the portal. At this point, the client interrupted the proceedings, splitting my concentration. I allowed the portal to close, believing that all of the ghosts had been expelled. A tremor passed through the house, after which I moved to check the wellbeing of the client and discovered two distinct spectral presences residing inside his body. In his diaphragm, to be precise."

"I imagine he took that well," Karma said dryly.

Jo winced. "He ran like the hounds of hell were after him, actually. I told him it probably wasn't wise for him to take off while his stomach was still haunted, but he didn't exactly

react favorably to that suggestion. Couldn't get away from me fast enough." That had stung more than she cared to admit. It wasn't like she'd *tried* to haunt him.

"I see." Karma blinked slowly, thick black lashes sweeping down then up again with a deliberateness that spoke of patience, understanding, and contemplation. Jo's eyelashes were never so eloquent. "Do you believe the client to be in danger?"

Jo pulled a face. "Not in danger, *per se*, but it probably isn't a good idea to let a haunted executive run around town telling everyone we put a pair of baby ghosts in him."

"But you do not believe the spirits to be malevolent."

It wasn't a question, but Jo answered anyway. "Naw. They're kids. Whatever else was in that house might be a badass S.O.B., but the ghosts were just pranksters. Completely harmless."

"I assume the presence in the house disappeared again after you closed the portal?"

"Yeah. I think it's what rattled the foundations, but after that the house was totally empty of paranormal energy of any kind. Not so much as an echo."

Karma pursed her lips speculatively. "You did a sweep of the premises anyway, of course."

"Yep. I snuck back in after the haunted CEO took off in his Bentley. No more ghosts, no more weird presence and no indication whatsoever as to why either had been there in the first place."

"How many juvenile ghosts were present initially?"

"Over a hundred."

Karma's eyes widened fractionally, but her voice remained coolly unmoved. "So you exterminated a hundred ghosts last night. Quite an accomplishment."

Jo shrugged. "Should have been one hundred and two."

Karma made a humming sound acknowledging that and tapped one finger on her desk phone. "I'll contact Mr. Haines and inform him that we will exterminate the ghosts in his diaphragm. Free of charge, of course."

Jo stiffened, even though she'd known walking in that she was going to have to deal with Wyatt Haines again. "I don't think he'll be terribly receptive. He didn't exactly believe me when I said there were spirits in his stomach."

"I'll speak to him," Karma said, as if that settled it. In a way, it did. "You will need his permission to return to the house. You can obtain it when you exterminate his ghosts."

"Return to the house?" Ignoring for a moment the fact that Wyatt had run from her last night like she was a leper chucking spare body parts at him, Jo focused on Karma's second improbable request. "It's clean."

"It will be *clean* once we've adequately explained the anomalies present at last night's extermination. You will determine what happened and why. With the client's permission and assistance. Now, go get some sleep. You look like death."

"I'm supposed to look like death," Jo said cheerfully as she rose and strode toward the door. "I'm Goth now."

When she turned back with her hand on the knob, Karma was eyeing her sunny blonde roots.

The Ghost Exterminator [A Karmic Consultants story]
by Vivi Andrews

"Let me know how that works out for you," her boss said dryly, already lifting the phone from the cradle to dial the haunted CEO.

Jo left her to work her magic. Maybe Karma could convince Wyatt that he was haunted. And that he believed in ghosts. And that he was deliriously grateful to the ghost exterminator who had cleaned out his house.

Hey, it could happen. For all Jo knew, mind control might be one of Karma's mysterious abilities.

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Chapter Five: The Horrible Haunting of W. Haines

Wyatt did not have time to be possessed. Or haunted. Or whatever the hell she called it. He was a busy man. He had the Grand Opening of a new inn to launch, the remodeling of the Victorian to oversee, and the daily operations of a multimillion-dollar corporation to head. There was no time in his life for ghosts in his stomach.

In his *stomach*, for Christ's sake. Had she actually expected him to believe that?

After the debacle at the house, he'd gone home, drunk enough scotch to drown any ghosts in his stomach, and passed out in his bed.

At least, he *thought* he had passed out in bed. He'd woken up sprawled on the floor in front of the television with the SyFy channel blasting at an unholy volume. He *never* watched the SyFy Channel. He didn't even know which channel it was. CNBC, ESPN, sure. But SyFy?

Wyatt had scoured the condo for signs that someone—perhaps a certain sexy Exterminator—had broken in to play a prank on him, but his scouring skills weren't at their best, given the fact that he was still somewhat drunk from the fifth of scotch he'd swallowed only hours earlier.

The scotch provided an excellent explanation. Drunk and prompted by the previous day's so-called ghost activities, he must have followed some subconscious cue to stop at a channel playing *The Twilight Zone* or *The X-Files*. Why he'd

gotten out of bed to go watch television in the middle of a bender was still a mystery, but no cause for concern.

It didn't mean he was possessed.

He'd been late into the office, which had his entire staff gaping at him in shock, including his flaky, new-age secretary who peered at him as if in fear for his soul. Since it was her usual expression, this morning it was actually somewhat comforting.

He'd grabbed the morning profit-loss reports and shut himself in his office with what was quickly becoming the worst hangover ever recorded in human history.

Then *she* had called.

When his secretary buzzed to tell him Karmic Consultants was on line one, he'd experienced a brief flare of something—not quite excitement, but definitely not dread—at the idea that it was Jo, but the voice on the other end of the line had none of her sassy brass. Although there was a healthy helping of sex appeal to make up for the lack.

Then what the woman was saying in that fuck-me-suck-me voice registered and Wyatt found himself growling into the phone like an untrained dog.

"I am not haunted!"

He hadn't meant to shout. He winced, images of his sane, normal employees pausing in their daily routines at the unexpected verbal explosion from their boss's office running through his head.

"Jo is very good at what she does, Mr. Haines," Karma purred soothingly. "If she suspects there is spirit activity

within your body, it is in your best interest to allow her to deal with the phenomenon."

Wyatt could think of a number of things Jo Banks could do with his body, but none of them involved spirits or could be repeated in polite company. Although, she had mentioned that some of the Karmic Consultants worked in the nude. Maybe there could be some overlap between her professional life and what he wanted her to do to him personally. Wyatt shook away a very graphic image and focused on growling at her boss.

"Ms. Karma—"

"It's just Karma."

Wyatt rolled his eyes. *Of course it is.* "Karma. I have tried to be understanding. I think I have maintained a very open mind up to this point. I allowed your employee access to the house. I allowed her to do...what she did, and I have every intention of paying your bill." The last thing he needed was Kooks-R-Us publicly suing him for non-payment. "I do not, however, have time to entertain fantasies about ghosts and spirits when I have a business to run."

Wyatt thought he'd been very clear. Very final.

Karma simply purred, "You fantasize about ghosts?"

He nearly swallowed his tongue. "Excuse me?"

"You said you don't have time to entertain fantasies. I'd say it's safe to guess that doesn't refer to the ghosts, but the ghost exterminator."

Wyatt cleared his throat, but it sounded more like he was choking.

Karma's voice hummed throatily through the phone even as she scolded him soundly. "Jo Banks is a professional, Mr. Haines. The sooner you realize that she is just trying to do her job—her *legitimate* job—the sooner I believe you will realize that this isn't about fantasies or delusions, but about a very real concern for our client's wellbeing. *Your* wellbeing."

"I'm well. My wellbeing is fine. I don't need her."

"We do have other mediums. None are quite as proficient in this particular area as Ms. Banks, but if it would make you more comfortable to work with someone else—"

"*No*. It has to be Jo." Wyatt winced and backpedaled as soon as he realized what his mouth had said without his permission. "It has to be a *no*," he stressed, lamely covering his tracks. "I don't need anyone. Ms. Banks was perfectly satisfactory," *every luscious, edible, mentally unstable inch of her*, "but I do not require any further assistance from your company."

"Of course there would be no charge for this as it would be considered part of the original service," Karma persisted.

"It isn't the money," Wyatt growled. He'd resigned himself to throwing money after folly before he'd called Karmic Consultants in the first place. "I simply do not need any distractions right now and this fiasco can't possibly be anything else."

"Mr. Haines..."

"This is not negotiable. Our business is concluded. Goodbye."

Wyatt disconnected with a finality that would have been much more gratifying if he hadn't had the uncomfortable

sensation that their business was not as thoroughly concluded as he might wish. He squashed the tiny little voice of doubt and took a deep, cleansing breath.

He was fine. Completely unhaunted.

Wyatt shoved all thoughts of Karmic Consultants from his mind and focused on the profit-loss reports. Almost immediately, the numbers began to blur and bleed across the page before his eyes. Wyatt groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to battle back the hangover by sheer force of will.

It wasn't a terribly scientific approach, but this morning it was surprisingly effective. The pounding receded slightly, but when he cautiously opened his eyes, the numbers refused to hold still, swimming in front of his eyes rather than sitting firm and stable in neat columns as they were supposed to.

God, he was so *tired*. Exhaustion swamped him suddenly, reminding him that he'd had no more than two hours of sleep and enough scotch to fell a horse the night before. The temptation to close his eyes and put his head down on his desk, just for a moment, was nearly overwhelming.

Wyatt grunted and shook his head sharply, trying to shake away the nagging exhaustion. For a moment, the world cleared, but within seconds he was nodding and bleary again.

Just for a second...not going to sleep...just closing my eyes...

"Wyatt!"

He jerked awake with a jolt. Shit. Had he fallen asleep at his desk?

Then reality sank in a little further and he realized he wasn't sitting at his desk. He wasn't sitting at all. He was standing in front of the sink in the three-quarter bath he'd had installed in his office for the nights when he couldn't be bothered to go back to his condo.

Wyatt shook his head. If he was standing, he clearly hadn't been sleeping. He was not a sleepwalker, never had been. So why did he feel as though he had just woken up from the deepest sleep of his life?

A pungent scent tickled his nose and he shook his head again to clear it. Had he been drugged?

Wyatt looked up and saw his secretary, whose shrill screech had woken him—except he hadn't been asleep, so how could she have woken him?—standing over his shoulder, gaping at his reflection in the mirror. Slowly, she raised one finger, her mouth working like a fish, and pointed at his face.

Wyatt frowned, shifting his eyes from her reflection to his own. It took a moment to register that it was his reflection. The man frowning back at him had Wyatt's eyes, his jaw, his frown, but thick black lines had been drawn across his face, making the features seem foreign.

Bushy black eyebrows were drawn in above his. Thick squiggles in a cartoonish imitation of a handlebar mustache marred his smooth shave. And to top it all off, wide black circles around his eyes, with a thick bar across his nose and lines extending toward his ears made him look like someone had drawn a caricature of Groucho Marx directly onto his face.

Wyatt's hands fisted in anger at the thought of one of his employees drawing on his face when they caught the boss

napping. He opened his mouth to demand that his secretary fire the prankster on the spot, but the feel of something clenched in his left hand stopped him. He glanced down, forcing his rage-curved fingers to unclench and his frown deepened as he tried to make sense of what he was looking at.

It was a marker. A black Sharpie with the cap off. The pungent aroma was the distinctive waft of ink. *Permanent* ink.

"I'll call Karmic Consultants at once, sir!" his secretary called out as she ran from his office.

Wyatt stared at his inked face for several seconds before the realization that he had fallen asleep and *drawn on his own face* sunk in.

No, the ghosts did the drawing, a little voice spoke in the back of his mind—his voice, not any ghost's voice, thank God. He was *not* hearing voices. He was just drawing on himself. And had no memory of it. Sleep drawing. Surely that was a common phenomenon. Stress. Stress could bring on sleep-drawing. There were probably thousands of documented cases of stress-related self-impressionism.

Wyatt put the cap back on the marker, put it beside the sink like he might his toothbrush, and walked over to his desk to be ready for the call he was about to make. Every step of the way, he racked his brain for some explanation that did not include ghosts. It wasn't entirely beyond the realm of possibility that he could have sleepwalked over to his vanity and drawn on his face in permanent ink. He was certain stranger things had happened. Just never to him.

"Karmic on line one, Mr. Haines."

Jo. Jo will fix this.

Wyatt shook his head. She wouldn't fix this. Because *this* was not about ghosts. There was a sane, rational explanation. He was *not haunted*.

Maybe she'll fix it naked.

Nothing to fix. *Not* haunted. He was a sane, rational man. Who had just drawn on his own face while he took a little catnap.

Wyatt picked up the phone and punched the button for line one, trying to think of what he could possibly say that would sound sane and rational, and still get across the point that he was clearly losing his mind.

He wasn't haunted. Clearly not haunted at all.

Stress-induced sleep-impressionism. Fine. Perfectly understandable. But the marker was in his left hand.

And that one little thought would not stop repeating itself in his clearly addled brain. Wyatt wasn't even left-handed.

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Chapter Six: Oh, How the Mighty Have Fallen

Karma smiled smugly as she hung up the phone after her second conversation with KC's newest hysterical client.

Not that she took pleasure in her clients' hysteria. Well, perhaps a bit, but certainly not an undue amount. It was always particularly gratifying to have them crawl back to her, begging and sobbing. The day the world learned to solve its own problems was the day she was out of a job, so she made a point of being amused by ignorance and gross incompetence whenever possible.

Karma's smile faded.

Jo wouldn't be pleased to learn she was going to have to deal with Haines again. Or perhaps she wouldn't mind it too terribly much. Karma had a hunch that Jo and Wyatt were not quite as indifferent to one another as they would have her believe, and her hunches were rarely wrong.

The image-conscious Mr. Haines was *not* the kind of man Karma would have chosen for Jo, who had enough difficulties with her self-image already, but people so rarely let her tell them to whom they ought to be attracted.

Jo needed someone accepting. Someone who would be charmed by her apparent contradictions, paranormal skills and lightning-quick mood swings. Karma had only spoken to the man on the phone a handful of times, but she was quite certain Wyatt Haines was not that man. Quite the opposite.

And there was definitely something odd going on in that house of his. Jo's recounting of last night's events had set off

a number of warning bells in Karma's mind, not the least of which was Wyatt Haines's suspicious involvement.

Still puzzling over the possible ramifications of last night's anomalies, Karma picked up the phone and dialed Jo's home number from memory. When her ghost exterminator answered groggily on the third ring, Karma belatedly recalled she had ordered her home to sleep.

"Sorry to wake you, Jo, but I need you back on Wyatt Haines."

"Karma? What Haines?"

"Wy-att Haines," Karma enunciated precisely, waiting for Jo to wake up fully. Due to her tendency to call her employees when she needed them rather than during normal business hours, this wasn't the first time she'd caught Jo napping. She knew from previous experience that it would be a solid five minutes and a lot of repetition before Jo was firing on all cylinders.

"The stuck-up businessman?" Jo mumbled, and the sound of shuffling came through the line. Karma imagined her employee stumbling blindly toward the kitchen and hoped Jo had some coffee readily on hand. "D'you do a Vulcan mind-meld on him?"

Karma bit back a laugh. She did like Jo. Absolutely no verbal filter and the most fascinating leaps of logic. Karma tried not to have favorites among her many extremely talented employees, but there were days when Jo made that pretty damn difficult. Of course, there were days when they each made it difficult, in their own ways.

"Actually, he came around on his own. Some sort of incident involving a permanent marker, although I couldn't quite make out exactly what happened. He was a trifle distraught."

"A trifle. Yeah, that sounds like him." Jo paused for a loud slurp of coffee. "Was he clearing his throat a bunch? He does that."

"I didn't notice. Would you care to tell me why you felt it was necessary to mention Ciara's condition to him?"

"What?" Jo's confusion came through readily. "I didn't...oh, wait, I did. He was giving me shit about my combat boots, so I volunteered to strip."

"Very professional," Karma commented dryly.

"Yeah, well, he was being an ass. I didn't say anything about Ciara. Just that some of our people work naked."

Ciara Liung was an extremely sensitive psychic who specialized in finding lost and stolen items—sports cars, jewelry, you name it, Ciara could find it. Human lo-jack. However, the nature of her gift was such that, while she was working, the touch of anything on her skin, even her own clothing, was distracting to the point of pain. Her weakness was a well-kept secret at KC. The local FBI office had a man whose entire job it was to liaise with Ciara and even he had no idea that their best finder spent most of her time floating naked in her pool.

"You aren't going to tell Ciara, are you?" Jo asked, interrupting Karma's musings. "If she's pissed at me, I'll never find my keys again."

Karma ignored the whining. "Do you have Haines' office address in the dossier I gave you? I need you to get there as quickly as possible."

Jo followed the change in subject without missing a beat. "What am I supposed to do when I get there?"

"Get his permission to re-inspect the house and remove the ghosts from his body."

There was a long pause, then Jo gave a thoughtful slurp and mumbled, "Huh."

"Jo? You can remove the ghosts, can't you?"

The extended silence that met her question was far from comforting.

"Jo? Can you?"

"Maybe," Jo piped up finally. "Probably," she amended, although if anything she sounded less sure. "I definitely have some ideas. This isn't exactly well-charted territory we're covering here. But don't you worry. I'm gonna boldly go where no ghost exterminator has gone before."

"Been watching much *Star Trek* lately?"

"Fell asleep watching the SyFy channel. It's Trekkie month. This week is all Shatner awesomeness and next week the TNG kick-ass marathon begins. SyFy channel rocks my world. Even if they did stupidly change the spelling of their name. They are Trek-tastic so I must forgive them. How could I survive with only USA and TNT to quench my syndicated thirst?"

Karma refrained from mentioning that she had never seen a single episode of *Star Trek*. She needed Jo out helping

Wyatt Haines, not storming into the office to force Karma to view the *Shatner awesomeness*.

"How quickly can you be at Haines' office?"

"Warp speed, baby."

"Good."

"No, no, Karma. Your line is 'Make it so'."

Karma coughed to hide her laughter and then obligingly commanded, "Make it so, Banks."

Jo gave a squeal of delight and shouted, "I need more *power*, Captain!" in a terrible Scottish accent as she threw down the phone. Karma gave in to her laughter as soon as she heard the line go dead.

* * * *

Warp speed turned out to be eighteen minutes and thirty-seven seconds. Jo timed herself. Considering she had to throw on a fresh T-shirt and yesterday's jeans, drive halfway across town, find parking, and take the slowest elevator on the planet up nine floors while listening to Muzak, eighteen minutes and thirty-seven seconds was pretty damn awesome.

She stepped out of the elevator to escape the most painful synthesizer version of *The Phantom of the Opera* she'd ever heard, only to find herself in a beige office suite so sterile surgery could probably be performed on any flat surface.

The receptionist, wearing a white button-up shirt and khaki skirt, was nearly as colorless as the rest of the office. She smiled blandly, and said in an expressionless monotone, "May I help you?"

Jo didn't need to double check the name engraved on the wall behind her to know that she was in Wyatt's office. The receptionist had about as much personality as the average droid. "I'm here to see Mr. Haines. Jo Banks. Karmic Consultants."

Droid-girl glanced down, checking some sort of list and then looked up and offered Jo another automated smile. "You can go right back. The last door down the hall on your left."

Jo saluted and headed off down the hall, looking for some scrap of flavor along the way. There were no paintings, no decoration of any kind—not even some trite Successories poster telling the employees to achieve or visualize, climb every mountain, reach for the stars, or whatever inspirational platitude corporate America approved of this week.

The last door at the end of the hall was not a door, but an open doorway. It led into a small waiting area with enormous mahogany double doors at the opposite end and a small curved desk off to one side. The woman sitting at the desk beamed at her as soon as she walked in.

"You must be Jo!" she twittered excitedly. "I'm Moonbeam, Wyatt's secretary."

Jo locked her jaw to keep it from dropping to the floor as Moonbeam swept around the curved expanse of her desk and moved toward her with her arms outstretched for a hug. Moonbeam looked to be in her early sixties, her long, flowing brown hair liberally streaked with grey. She wore a plethora of colorful silk scarves, some wrapped around her hair to keep it back from her face, some draped across her shoulders and still more around her waist as belts. A loose, peasant-style

blouse and flowing calf-length print skirt completed the classic hippie look, along with a pair of flip-flops with crystals sewn onto the straps.

Before Jo could react, Moonbeam embraced her enthusiastically, enveloping her in warm arms and the powerful scent of lavender oil. Moonbeam gave her an extra little squeeze, released her and floated back around the other side of her desk.

"I'm so glad you're here!" she enthused. "I've been so worried about Wyatt. He's been under so much stress lately, opening the new inn and then all of the Episodes with the Nightmare on Elm Street. I try to help, but he refused to let me Feng Shui his office and he didn't go to a single one of the yoga classes I signed him up for. There is something seriously wrong with that boy's chakras, let me tell you. I'm not trying to say that it's his fault. Far from it. The poor boy is a Virgo with a Scorpio moon, born to be a controlling prick. You can't escape your sign, but if he doesn't learn to harness his energy in a more positive manner, I know it's going to corrode his soul. When I saw him drawing on his face this morning, I just knew it was a cry for help. I called Karmic right away. I knew you would be able to help him find the balance in his chi."

Jo debated telling Moonbeam that she wasn't there for Wyatt's chi, but decided that discretion was the better part of valor. Instead she smiled and said, "Is he ready for me?"

Moonbeam sighed and shook her head, taking the question in an unexpectedly philosophical direction. "I just don't know, Jo. I completely agree that he will never find balance in his

soul unless he is ready to accept it, but how do you know when a man is ready to embrace change?"

Jo cleared her throat, then realized she sounded like Wyatt and muttered, "Crap."

"Excuse me?"

Jo felt her face heat and tried for a subject change, feeling more off balance the longer she spoke to Wyatt's unexpected secretary. "That's a nice desk. It's different from the ones in the rest of the office."

Moonbeam smiled and ran her hands along the smooth edge of the desk. "I can't work around angles. They absolutely *destroy* my chi. Wyatt was very understanding and found this for me."

"You must be a wonderful secretary."

It was the understatement of the year. If Wyatt was willing to put up with angle-free, chi-conducive desks and her attempts to balance his soul, Jo could only imagine that, beneath her fluffy exterior, Moonbeam was the kind of woman who could single-handedly run the state department.

"He's a sweet boy."

Not the description Jo would have used, but she wasn't going to argue with the Secretary of State. "Is he in?" Then she realized that the question was *much* too open-ended for Moonbeam and quickly clarified, "His office. Is he in his office?"

"He most certainly is. You go right on in." Moonbeam pushed a (round—no angles) button on her desk and the mahogany doors swung open. Jo strode toward Wyatt's inner sanctum, debating with herself whether the free-spirit

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secretary was the reason Wyatt had been open-minded enough to call Karmic or the reason he was so closed-minded in the first place.

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Chapter Seven: Tea with Mussolini

Wyatt sat behind his desk, his face raw and chapped after scrubbing the top two layers of skin off in an attempt to disprove the *permanent* label on the marker. He hadn't had much success. There were still faint grey lines on his face in a Groucho Marx configuration.

He knew he looked ridiculous, so he was duly impressed when Jo's lips didn't even twitch as she dropped into the chair facing his desk and took in his experimental artwork. He would have attributed her lack of reaction to professionalism, if not for the fact that she was still sporting black jeans and combat boots. Yesterday's tank top had been replaced with a Black Sabbath T-shirt that looked like it had been painted on. He could actually see the lace pattern on her bra through the fabric. Not that he was looking. He certainly wasn't staring hard enough to cross his eyes and drooling like a feeble-minded idiot, though the urge to do so was nearly overwhelming.

"Mr. Haines?"

Okay, so he was staring and his eyes were crossed, but there was no drool. He was willing to accept small victories today. "Ms. Banks. Thank you for coming so quickly."

She arched one eyebrow suggestively and Wyatt felt blood rushing south away from his brain. Dear God. He had *not* meant it like that.

Wyatt cleared his throat, trying to kick-start his brain and get back in control of the situation. If he had ever been in

control. He thought he had. At one point. He vaguely remembered what control felt like.

"I fell asleep and drew on my face," he blurted out uncontrollably.

A ghost of a smile flirted around Jo's mouth, vanishing so quickly he wondered if he had imagined the crack in her expressionless calm. "The ghosts inhabiting your body are children. If the Episodes, as you called them, are anything to go by, they are children who are very adept at pranks. We should have expected them to make their presence known in this way as soon as you relinquished conscious control of your body."

"We didn't expect any such thing," Wyatt growled, his tenuous control of his temper going the way all of his control had gone. "We didn't expect anything to happen when we went to sleep, because we did not believe that we were haunted."

"But you do now, huh? Persuasive little buggers, aren't they?"

"Ms. Banks."

"Mr. Haines," she mimicked his somber tone, but under hers was a layer of amusement that he couldn't begin to feel.

"Jo," he said her name on a plea, knowing he sounded weak and pathetic and for once in his life not caring. Desperation could do that to a man. "Fix it. *Please*."

"Did you try nail polish remover?" At his defeated groan, her expressionless mask melted as sympathy filled her eyes. "It's been a daunting twenty-four hours for you, hasn't it?"

"Fifteen hours," Wyatt growled, knowing he sounded like an ungrateful prick and having a hard time caring when the alternative was accepting her pity. Wyatt Haines was not a man to be pitied. "I'll be fine as soon as you fix this."

The sympathy evaporated from her face—thank God—and her mouth tightened into a bow as she glared at him. "It might not be that easy."

"It is that easy. It has to be that easy," Wyatt insisted, hearing desperation creep into his voice. "You said my stomach was haunted and you un-haunt things. Un-haunt my stomach."

"Well, first of all, they aren't in your stomach anymore. And secondly, haunted people are a little different than haunted houses."

"Where are they? My brain?" Wyatt groaned and closed his eyes. "I'm possessed, aren't I?"

Jo slammed her fist on his desk. He opened his eyes at the bang to find her glaring at him. "What is it with you and demons? You aren't possessed. Your house isn't possessed. *No demons*. Get it?"

"But you said..."

"I said haunted people are different. Frankly, I've never seen a ghost inhabit the body of anyone who wasn't a very strong medium. There has to be a powerful supernatural link between the host and the spirit or it just doesn't work. It's like Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost*."

He winced. "Please don't tell me that movie is a documentary."

Her eyes shot daggers at him. "You're a prick, you know that? I was trying to explain this to you in a way you would understand and you have to be an ass. Of course, it isn't a documentary. Whoopi Goldberg is an *actress*, not a medium. She isn't a nun, either, in case you were confused by *Sister Act*."

"Never saw it."

"You have no culture, you know that?"

"Whoopi Goldberg is culture?"

"Movies. Life outside of profit margins. That's culture. I'm amazed the ghosts bothered to haunt you. I bet if I left you alone they'd get so bored hanging out in you they'd leave on their own within a week."

"Because I won't take them to see *Sister Act*."

"Oh, shut up." She dropped back into the chair and crossed her arms across her chest. "I need to get back into the house. You need to give me permission."

"You can't just take the ghosts out here?"

She tipped her head to the side and Wyatt could see her considering whether or not to lie to him. The devil of it was, he couldn't tell which way she had decided when she finally sighed and opened her mouth. "How much did you see last night?"

Wyatt frowned. "How much did I see? I didn't see anything. You went into the kitchen then you tensed up and sort of stumbled back and forth like things were pulling on you. Then you fell and there was an earthquake—not that the two were related, but it was a pretty nice bonus at the end of the show."

Jo was up out of the chair so quickly it looked like she had been launched. She slammed her fists onto her hips and leaned across the desk aggressively. "*Show?* Did I just hear that? Are you implying—*still* implying—that I'm a phony? How do you explain the moustache then, huh, Mussolini?"

He raised a hand defensively to cover his upper lip. "I thought it was more Marx than Mussolini. Did Mussolini even have a moustache?"

"Mussolini, Marx, Stalin, whatever. You look fascist. Was that your goal or are you willing to admit there might be something supernatural at work here?"

Wyatt froze. She had to ask him straight out, didn't she? He couldn't just go on humoring her belief in the unbelievable. Not if he wanted her help, at any rate. But he couldn't quite bring himself to say the words. It would be too much like joining her insanity. "I meant Groucho Marx, not Karl," he said instead.

She didn't say a word. She just spun on her heel and stalked toward the door.

Realization hit like a fist in his gut. She was going to walk out and leave him like this, drawing on his face, watching the SyFy Channel and doing God-knows-what-else every time he fell asleep.

"Jo!" He stood and came around the desk, moving toward her quickly, even though he doubted he'd be able to intercept her before this became a scene for the viewing pleasure of his entire office.

To his surprise, she stopped before she even reached the office door, though she didn't immediately turn around.

"Groucho Marx," he heard her say pensively as he came up behind her. "What decade was Groucho Marx popular?" she asked.

"What, you don't know Groucho Marx? Don't you have any culture?" Her shoulders stiffened at his sarcasm and he immediately felt like an ass—not his most tactful moment. When she gave her head an irritable shake and took a deliberate step toward the door, he spoke hurriedly. "1930s? I don't know. The Marx Brothers made most of their movies in the thirties, didn't they? But he was also the host of *You Bet Your Life*, which was on in the forties and fifties, I think. Why?"

She turned to face him, and he could see her puzzling over something. Jo was about as opaque as a sheet of glass. Every thought, every emotion, showed right there on her face. The openness seemed out of place when matched with her biker chic wardrobe and badass posturing.

Although it was possible it was all an act. Part of Wyatt still desperately wanted to believe that he was the victim of an elaborate con. Jo would make a hell of a con artist. Reeling him in with her killer body and suckering him into admitting he believed in ghosts with her open, honest face. It would be so much easier to blame this all on her and explain it away as a hoax if another part of him—the irrational, hormonal part, probably—didn't want so badly to believe her.

Jo spoke, completely unaware of his internal debate over her trustworthiness. "How many kids do you know nowadays who have the faintest idea who Groucho Marx is, let alone would think to draw his face onto yours as a prank? I'm

thinking your inhabitants might not be such recent arrivals into the spirit world as I initially thought."

"Does that change anything? You can still get them out, right?"

She pulled a face and fidgeted just enough to make him *extremely* nervous. "Okay, so here's the thing. About getting them out. It might not be quite as straightforward as just pulling them out, you know?"

Dread congealed in his stomach. Or maybe that was the ghosts. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Jo squirmed a bit as he frowned down at her. "Yanking a ghost out of a host can be sort of, ah, uncomfortable, or so they tell me. I've never actually... Okay, technically I don't think *anyone* has ever actually yanked one out. Pushing them out as a medium when they don't want to go is supposed to be pretty, ah, unpleasant, shall we say? So I can only imagine that the pulling... you don't look so good." She reached out to brush her fingers against his arm. "Are you okay?"

He probably looked like he was about to lose his breakfast, which was how he felt. Although, considering that his breakfast had been scotch, it was probably a good thing to get it out of his system. "Why can't you just do what you did last night?"

She pursed her lips, irritation suddenly flashing in her eyes again. "Yeah, my little *show*. You didn't see anything? No lights? No glimmers? Nada?"

"You fell."

Jo rolled her eyes. "Thanks, Sherlock. I'll be sure to put that in my report." She shook her head, visibly exasperated. "I cannot imagine why the ghosts went into you unless I somehow—" She broke off suddenly and coughed into her hand. "That is, it doesn't make sense that you would host them. You're about as sensitive as a rock, you hate them, they don't particularly like you, and—"

"Hey," he protested, irrationally insulted by the assumed dislike of her imaginary ghosts, "How do you know if they like me or not?"

"Dude, that house was totally pulsating with anti-Wyatt vibes last night. They probably think of you as an interloper, some kind of evil stepfather figure who's going to force them to eat their vegetables. Although..." she tipped her head, her thoughts racing across her face again, "...if you *were* a sort of parental figure, even an evil one, then it would make sense in a twisted sort of way that they ran to you when they were scared."

"I'm not evil—stepfather or no. You're the one who scared them. Why didn't they decide you were the evil stepmother and go haunt your stomach for a while?"

"I didn't scare them," she snapped. "The house was doing the whole tug-o-war thingy. I just sort of dropped my end of the rope and they did a slingshot thingy into you. Which I wouldn't have done if you hadn't distracted me in the first place." She frowned. "I need to get back into that house."

"To get the ghosts out."

She nodded vaguely. "That might work. If we can get whatever was pulling at me last night to come back and try to

yank the ghosts out of you, then I can open a portal and zap 'em right through."

"If," Wyatt repeated, developing a real hatred for that word. "And if that doesn't work?"

"Plan B."

"Which is?"

"Don't worry your pretty little head about that, buddy. I've got contingency plans on top of my contingency plans. We'll get those little buggers out of you."

He would have been comforted, if he hadn't thought he heard her mutter "eventually" under her breath as she turned and wandered toward the wall of windows that overlooked the river.

"I don't understand." He followed her, knowing he sounded petulant and irritable and not caring in the slightest. He was either being haunted or scammed, so either way he was entitled to pitch a fit. "Why is getting them out of me harder than getting them out of a house?"

She turned to face him, leaning back against the window with her hands shoved into the front pockets of her jeans. The pose did interesting things to her tight T-shirt. Of course, *everything* did interesting things to that damn T-shirt.

"It helps if instead of thinking of it as getting them *out* of the house, you think of it as putting them *into* a portal. Some people call it transcending. The trick with a person is that first I have to get them *out* of you and then I have to put them *in* the portal. The second part is easy. Well, it's easy for me. But it's the first part that's more of a challenge."

"Can't you just put them in the portal directly from me?"

"I could, yeah, but the problem with that approach is that I've never tried to open up a portal inside a person before. People aren't houses. Even stick-up-their-ass businessmen have souls, believe it or not. Assuming I could even get a portal open inside you, which is a pretty big assumption, there would be a very real risk that along with sucking the ghosts out of your body, your soul would get sucked through the portal too. So that would be bad."

"I would say so."

"Although, I haven't actually tried it before, so for all I know it won't suck your soul out of your body after all. You wanna try it?"

Wyatt couldn't help it. He started to laugh.

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Chapter Eight: See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me, Heal Me

When her client dropped to the floor, laughing uncontrollably, two questions crossed Jo's mind. First, was he actively being taken over by ghosts at this very moment? And second, could he possibly have any idea how attractive he was when he wasn't frowning down on the world?

She was fairly certain the answer to both questions was no, but she took a second to check him out with her second sight and a minute or two to enjoy the smile. The ghosts looked like two little green fireflies behind the left side of his collarbone, rather than the full-body glow that mediums had when they were hosting, so she was pretty sure the laughter—and the edge of hysteria—were all Wyatt.

Jo plopped down cross-legged onto the floor in front of him and waited patiently for him to stop rocking and wheezing. God, he was gorgeous when he smiled. It was as if the constant mask of disapproval and condemnation evaporated into an easy, open grin that didn't just change his face, it changed *him*. If not for the glimmer of panic in his too-blue eyes, she could have let him keep on laughing forever, smiling back like a dimwit and loving every second of it.

"Wyatt?"

He subsided into periodic high-pitched giggling accompanied by shudders that racked his shoulders as he struggled to suppress his hysteria.

"Why don't I try just giving them a little tug and see if they pop right out?" she suggested helpfully. "Maybe they won't

resist and you won't have to come with me to the house after all. It's probably better that way anyway." That way she couldn't accidentally throw any other little ghosts into him if he distracted her again, which she suspected was what happened in the first place.

Wyatt sighed heavily and flopped onto his back, letting his arms fall spread-eagle to the sides. "Do your worst, ghost exterminator."

"Hopefully it won't come to that," Jo muttered, crawling on her hands and knees to lean over Wyatt. He looked up at her, his eyes lazily half-lidded and a teasing shadow of a smile still curving his mouth. He looked utterly relaxed and completely nonjudgmental, lying there, willing to accept whatever she wanted to do to him.

Her hormones provided several deliciously wicked, and physiologically challenging, suggestions as to what she could do with him at her mercy, but Jo simply placed her palm flat against his shoulder where the ghosts were hiding. He was warm—and here she'd thought all businessmen were as cold-blooded as snakes—and surprisingly muscular beneath his Armani, for someone who spent his days sitting in a chair.

A lock of her hair slid out from behind her ear as she bent over him and he reached up to slowly run the inky black strands through his fingers, the act far more distracting than it should have been.

Did he have to look so damned post-coital? She already felt like one giant exposed nerve when she was in his presence and now he had to add this lazy sex appeal to the

mix of frustration, anger, and prejudice she was already defending against.

She closed her eyes against the hypnotic sight of him toying with her hair, ignoring the occasional gentle pull against her scalp indicating he hadn't stopped playing with the lock just because she stopped watching him. Her two-year-old niece had taught herself how to play peek-a-boo by herself by holding her hands in front of her own eyes and then removing them and giggling hysterically. Jo had thought this particularly ridiculous until her sister had explained that, in Maya's world, what she couldn't see simply wasn't there, so taking her hands away from her face was a bright new surprise every time. Jo suddenly found herself wishing she had that same lack of awareness of what went on beyond her closed eyes.

Only Wyatt Haines could make her insanely turned on just by smiling and touching her hair and simultaneously have her wishing she were two again.

Instead of opening her eyes and seeing him lying on the floor like an open invitation, she opened her second sight, focusing on the ghosts rather than the body—and what a body—they were hiding out in.

The pair of them were compacted down to their smallest size, two little balls of green energy about the size of marbles, rolling around behind Wyatt's clavicle.

Leaving her physical hand pressed against his shoulder, Jo reached in and wrapped her ethereal fingers around the two spheres. With her other hand braced on the floor on the opposite side of Wyatt's head, she tugged ever so gently.

Then less gently. The ghosts didn't so much as budge, so she closed her metaphysical fist around them and yanked.

"Ow!"

Jo would have had more sympathy for Wyatt's exclamation of pain if his hand hadn't simultaneously clamped down on her hair and yanked hard enough to have her yelping herself. She collapsed against him, sprawling across his chest.

"Let. Go."

"I will when you do," Wyatt ground out from between clenched teeth, but even as he said it, his fingers relaxed.

"I already did," she said, quickly tucking her hair back behind her ears and out of his reach.

"Then why does it still hurt?" he growled.

Jo propped herself up on his chest. "It still hurts?" She peered at him through her second sight and saw the two ghosts were now zipping around his body like agitated bumblebees. "What does it feel like?"

"Like my body is trying to turn itself inside out."

"Huh." Jo tipped her head to the side, considering that one. "Maybe they're trapped in there. They might even be trying to get out. Here, open your mouth."

"That's your solution?" he barked. "Open my mouth?"

"Do you have to argue about everything? If it makes you feel better you can yell at me, just do it with your mouth open nice and wide. Go on."

He glared, but obediently opened his mouth.

Jo leaned forward, shaking away the mild distraction caused by his minty-fresh breath, and sent a tendril of energy past his tonsils and down his throat. "Here, little ghosties..."

He made a choking noise that might have been his signature throat-clearing if not for the fact that his mouth was wide open. He started to close his jaw. Jo wrapped her hand around his chin and forced it down. "Open!"

She sent a piece of her energy snaking into him a second time, guiding it through the dense warmth of his life-force, so different from the ghosts she usually dealt with. She searched for that other quality of energy, the cool after-impression of life, rather than the pounding heartbeat of vitality that pulsed through his veins, drowning out every other sensation, washing over her in a drugging rush.

"This is so weird," she murmured to herself, drawing back enough to get a sense of where she was again before diving back in. His hands were braced on either side of her waist, holding her steady on top of him. All at once, Jo was powerfully aware of the intimacy of their position. Her uptight businessman lay on his back on the floor of his office, with her draped on top of him like a cashmere throw, clinging and limp.

Jo felt heat rushing to her face—not to mention all of her erogenous zones—and cleared her throat. She was immediately struck by a horrifying thought. What if every time he cleared his throat, he was trying to get *his* brain out of the gutter? *Did Wyatt Haines actually have the hots for her?*

"Jo?"

Oh God. She was gaping at him like an idiot. "Just, ah, just give me a couple more seconds," she said hurriedly, slapping an I-am-peering-into-your-soul-with-my-super-ghost-vision

expression onto her face, which hopefully did not resemble her I-am-thinking-of-stripping-you-naked-and-covering-your-body-with-chocolate-syrup-just-so-I-can-lick-it-off expression.

Unfortunately, she couldn't seem to focus enough to actually peer into his soul. Her brain was unnecessarily cluttered with random trivia like *damn, he smells amazing*, and *his hands are so big and feel so good*.

Jo shifted against him, in theory to get a better look down his throat, but really just to feel him better. She was right above him now, eye to eye. If she leaned down, just a little closer...

"Mr. Haines, your three o'clock call is—oh." Moonbeam froze two steps into the office.

Jo rolled off of Wyatt and quickly scrambled to her feet. She'd almost kissed him. *Shit*. She'd definitely almost kissed him. Thank heaven for Moonbeam and Wyatt's three o'clock.

Jo nervously ran her hands down her shirt and tried not to look like she had been seriously considering trying to remove Wyatt's tonsils with her tongue fifteen seconds ago.

He groaned and spoke from the floor, "Please tell Brenner I'll have to reschedule. I appear to be haunted."

Jo forgot to be flustered. "Well, stop the presses, Wyatt Haines just admitted to believing in ghosts."

"Hallelujah," Moonbeam said over her shoulder as the office doors shut behind her.

Wyatt winced and got to his feet. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Oh no. You can't take it back now. I have a witness."

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by Vivi Andrews

"Fine," he conceded with ill grace. "I will admit to believing in ghosts until you can get whatever the hell is inside of me out again. So could you please hurry up so I can go back to being a faithless heathen?"

Jo felt herself smiling. He was actually sort of charming, completely by accident, but it was endearing nonetheless. "Anything you say, boss. I never could say no to a man in glasses."

Groucho Marx had nothing on Wyatt Haines.

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Chapter Nine: Vehicular Compensation

Wyatt insisted on driving them out to the South Elm Street Victorian—with a quick stop for nail polish remover. Jo couldn't make herself protest his take-charge attitude when it meant she got to ride in the plush Bentley Continental GT.

Jo was a Harley girl herself, but even she could appreciate the hand-selected leather-hide upholstery and the sexy purr of the six-hundred-horsepower engine—even if it was blatant compensation. As compensation went, it was a hot little way to blow two-hundred grand.

Jo stroked the baby-soft leather and watched Wyatt maneuver the Bentley through the late-afternoon traffic. He was such a contradiction—the materialistic, soulless corporate machine who made his millions by providing people with peaceful getaways in unique, artistic inns with a reputation for spiritual refreshment.

"Has anyone ever told you that you don't seem like the kind of man who knows how to take a vacation, let alone create the ideal vacation for millions of people every year?" she asked.

Wyatt didn't even glance in her direction. "Yes."

"That doesn't seem odd to you?"

"It's a job. Are you defined by your job?" Then he did glance at her, taking in the black hair, the rock T-shirt, and her general nod toward badass attitude. "Never mind. Forget I asked that."

Jo's irritation spiked. "Hey, I'm more than just a ghost exterminator, thank you very much."

"Of course you are. You're an anti-establishment stereotype."

He did not just go there. "Did you just call me a stereotype, Mr. Corporate Clone?"

"Are you telling me you're not trying desperately to fit in by doing everything you can not to fit in?"

"That doesn't even make sense."

"Sure it does." Wyatt took the turn onto South Elm then draped his wrist over the steering wheel as he slowed on the quiet street. "You're trying to prove that you're different enough to belong with the people who don't belong."

It wasn't true. *Of course*, it wasn't true. But it felt true. And terrifying. Who would she be if she wasn't badass Ghost Girl? "I can't just be different? I have to be trying to prove something or be something I'm not?"

"You could just be different," Wyatt conceded readily then ruined it by continuing, "But you're not."

"You don't know me."

He shrugged. "Not any better than you know me, but you're determined to box me in as a corporate clone."

Jo looked out the window to avoid meeting his eyes. As much as she hated to admit it, he did have a point. At least about that. He was completely wrong about everything else, of course, but on this? She was being just as prejudiced as he was. The apology was going to stick in her throat, but she would force it out. "You're right. It was wrong of me to assume that you are a shallow corporate prick. I'm sor—"

"No, you were right," he interrupted. "I *am* a shallow corporate prick." He slid the Bentley into an empty space along the curb in front of the Victorian. "You were completely right about me, so maybe I'm not completely wrong about you." He cut the engine and climbed out of the car before she could collect her jaw off the floor.

Jo quickly scrambled after him, grabbing her goodie bag out of the backseat and trotting after him up the walk. "Wyatt, wait up." He didn't even pause so she redoubled her speed until she was jogging. "You can't just walk into the house. Give me a minute to assess."

He stopped at the steps leading up to the front porch to wait for her. "It's daylight," he said as she joined him. "Isn't it safe?"

"Did all of your Episodes happen at night? I didn't think so. Ghosts aren't entirely nocturnal. There's usually an increase in activity at night, but that doesn't mean you're safe just because the sun is out. Ghosts, remember. Not vampires." She saw his face tightening and raised a hand to stop him before he could speak. "No, I don't know any vampires. Just let me take a look before you end up with enough ghosts to play mixed doubles inside you."

Wyatt frowned down at her—only a 1.7 on the Pissed-Off-CEO Richter scale.

"What?" she asked irritably. She couldn't imagine what she had said this time to tick him off.

"Interesting choice of metaphor. You just don't strike me as the tennis type."

"I can't like tennis and be a ghost exterminator?" she snapped.

He shrugged. "You can like whatever you want. You just don't seem the type."

Jo rolled her eyes and shoved past him onto the porch. "Everything is types with you."

"With you, too." He followed close on her heels, so close she could feel him breathing down her neck. Literally. The man had no sense of personal boundaries. "With everyone, really. I'm just more up front about it."

"God forbid you should be mistaken for someone with a modicum of tact." She turned and knocked him back a couple steps with a well-placed shove to his sternum. "Give me some room."

"See, there you go again. Modicum. How many rebels use language like modicum?"

"Oh, so because I'm not normal, I must be illiterate too?"

He shook his head. "You're missing the point here, Jo. I'm not arguing that you can't like tennis or literature because you're not normal, as you put it. I'm saying that you like tennis and literature because you're more normal than you want to admit. I bet you grew up in the suburbs."

She stiffened defensively, hating it when he guessed right. "What does where I grew up have to do with anything? You think most Goth kids come from the mean streets?"

He smiled smugly. "And see, there, what you just said. Goth kids. If you were one of them, then you wouldn't have referred to them like that. It's patronizing."

Jo turned around, abandoning any pretense of examining the front door, and folded her arms under her breasts. Wyatt—to his credit—only glanced down once at the attention-grabbing performance the Girls were putting on beneath her snug T. "You know, Wyatt, no matter how hard you argue, you aren't going to be able to turn me into a suburban housewife. At some point, you're just going to have to admit to yourself that you're turned on by a woman who prefers leather over sweater sets and would rather go see Limp Bizkit than Barry Manilow."

"Turned on?" he asked in a remarkable impression of incredulity. "That's what you think this is?"

For one horrible moment, Jo wondered if she had read him wrong. What if he wasn't grouchy and uncomfortable around her because he wanted her against his will? What if he really, genuinely didn't like her?

But then she looked into his eyes and saw the panicked heat there he was trying desperately to hide. *Oh, you are mine, buddy. All mine.*

Not that she wanted him, of course. Neurotic businessman was not her type. But he was pretty damn edible and just because she had never been one for casual flings in the past didn't mean she couldn't start now. If she was going to begin her life as a tramp, there were worse places to start than on top of Wyatt Haines.

"Did you hear that?" He turned to look sharply past her toward the house then spun around as if reacting to a noise behind him. The house remained completely quiet as he twisted around himself.

"Hear what?" she asked, disinterested. *God, he's such a coward.* He couldn't even talk to her about the fact that he clearly wanted her. He had to change the subject and he couldn't even come up with anything more plausible than hearing imaginary noises.

He whipped around again, nearly tripping himself. "There! That sound! Do you hear it?"

"Nope. What's it sound like?"

"There it is again! What *is* that?"

"That's what I just asked you," Jo remarked dryly.

"It sounds like— What the hell?" Wyatt took two stumbling steps forward, right into Jo.

She caught herself, her hands closing over his biceps. "Wyatt, you really don't have to pretend—"

His body jerked forward again. Jo found herself mashed between his firm torso and the door, but only for a moment. The door swung open behind her and together they fell into the foyer.

"Oomph!"

Wyatt put his hand behind her head to keep it from cracking on the hardwood floor, but he wasn't able to stop himself from landing on top of her. The man weighed a ton and a half.

"Sorry," he muttered, rolling off her and sitting up.

"We always seem to end up on the floor," Jo complained, groaning a little as she propped herself up on her elbows.

Wyatt didn't respond. He was too busy twitching and trying to look in every direction at once.

"Wyatt? You look like you've seen a ghost, buddy," Jo quipped.

No response.

A prolonged moaning wail echoed through the house, starting in the rafters above them and spiraling down like a tornado.

Jo sat up all the way. "Okay. That I heard." And it made no sense whatsoever. When she had left the night before, the ghosts had all been exterminated. All except the two in Wyatt, that is.

She opened her second sight and looked at him to see if his two residents had skipped town and were now hard at work rattling the rafters, but the green marbles were lodged in his abdomen, vibrating with frenzied energy and battering themselves against the inside of his abs as if trying to break out of the solid flesh. She looked up and unfocused her physical eyes, letting her mind's eye take a wider view.

"Oh *shit*."

There were ghosts in the house, all right. Dozens of them, by the look of it. Twining around the banisters, hanging from the chandeliers, and snaking through the floorboards. They were everywhere and they were all in motion. Toward the kitchen.

"Oh shit? What do you mean 'oh shit'? What's wrong?"

Jo looked at Wyatt and tried to think of something besides "I fucked up" to explain the situation. What would Karma say? Jo climbed to her feet and offered Wyatt a hand up, accompanied by the frenzied clanging of the pipes as the ghosts around them made their presence known.

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by Vivi Andrews

"Well, Mr. Haines, it appears your house is still haunted.
Mazel tov."

* * * *

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Chapter Ten: Tiny Tim, the Slut

Jo stood in the lobby of Karmic Consultants with her arms folded across her chest, one foot tapping irritably as she glared daggers at the little twit who was denying her entrance to Karma's office.

"I'm s-sorry, Ms. B-b-banks," the twit stammered, clearly debating whether she should be more terrified of her new boss or the woman standing in front of her threatening bodily harm. "Miss Karma said no interruptions."

"No interruptions" had never stopped Jo before. The locked door, however, was a little harder to get past.

Jo narrowed her eyes, trying to look as menacing and outright demented as possible, which wasn't as much of a stretch as it might have been twenty-four hours earlier. "I know you have a key," she snarled at the ineffectual little secretary.

The twit blanched, visual evidence that she did, in fact, have a key. *Well, that's unexpected.* Jo hadn't thought Karma would trust the temporary twit with the keys to the kingdom.

"Jo, perhaps—"

"Shut up, Wyatt. I'll get you a replacement exterminator in a minute. Right now, I'm disciplining the staff."

The girl looked like she was about to pass out from fear, but she wasn't forking over the key. Jo cracked her knuckles, never taking her eyes off the secretary.

Right now, Jo needed to get in to see Karma the same way she had once needed her mommy after a nightmare. There

was something wrong with her ghost exterminating mojo, Wyatt's house was haunted, Wyatt was haunted, and Jo needed Karma to *fix it*. Everything was wrong today.

And no wet-behind-the-ears receptionist on a power trip was going to keep her from the one person in the world who might know what the hell was going on.

Wyatt inserted himself between her and the clerical clone. His broad shoulders completely blocked her view of her target. "Ignore her," he said calmly—*calmly!*—to the secretary. The bastard.

"Move it or lose it, Haines," she growled.

He smiled apologetically at the twit before turning to her with a 4.0 Pissed-Off-CEO Richter scale frown in place. "Which way is your office? We can wait for Karma there."

"My office? What makes you think I have an office?"

"You work here don't you?"

"What exactly would someone with my job do with a desk? Draw pictures of ghosts on it?"

Wyatt was momentarily stumped by that one and Jo felt a little surge of vicious satisfaction. Until the traitorous temporary twit piped up behind him. "Ms. Banks's office is the third door on the left, down that hall, sir."

Jo would have glared at her, but Wyatt was in the way. She glared at him instead. "So I have an office. You have a problem with that?"

He ignored her latest combative snarl, just as he had ignored every other attempt to draw him into a brawl since they had fled the re-haunted Victorian. "Thank you," Wyatt

purred for the secretary, clamping his fingers around Jo's upper arm and half dragging her down the hall.

She smiled cheerfully at the cubicle inhabitants as they passed, trying not to look like she was being bodily forced toward her office. The accountants and filing clerks who kept the office running smoothly averted their eyes as she passed, which was nothing new, but was particularly annoying this afternoon as Wyatt was there to see it, taking it all in with his Executive X-ray vision.

He herded her into her office as if he owned the place and crowded in behind her until he could shut the door behind them. Jo's office didn't exactly qualify as spacious, or even humane. It was microscopic, a glorified storage closet, but it was hers. There was a small desk that she had to squeeze against the wall to get behind, a large, outdated desktop computer, which had been destined for the garbage heap before she rescued it, and a bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling.

Wyatt glowered at every corner of the tiny office before lowering himself gingerly down onto the single chair wedged into the space. "I see Karma knows how to treat her prized employees," he commented dryly, working a 3.2 on the Pissed-Off-CEO Richter scale.

Jo matched him frown for frown. "You have a problem with my office?"

He sighed and leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes. "Stop trying to pick a fight, Jo. I'm too tired to indulge you."

"*Indulge* me? As if I'm some sort of toddler having a temper tantrum?"

Wyatt groaned, pinched the bridge of his nose, and changed the subject with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. "Why was everyone looking at me so strangely as we walked through the office? Could they all tell that I'm haunted?"

She must have seriously lost her mojo. She couldn't even rile Wyatt anymore. Jo admitted defeat. All of the fight drained out of her, shoulders slumping as she edged one hip onto her desk. "None of them can see ghosts. And they weren't staring at you. It was me. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," he growled, glowering in the face of her concern. As she'd seen earlier in his office, Wyatt Haines did not like sympathy. "*What* was you? Did you give them some kind of 'Help me, this insane businessman is trying to kidnap me' signal?"

"Sadly, no. It didn't even occur to me. Nah, they just think I'm a little woo-woo." She spun one finger in a circle next to her ear in the time-honored gesture for lunatics.

Wyatt's frown worked up a few notches on the seismograph. "You aren't crazy," he stated firmly, then grimaced and quickly amended, "Except for your insistence on believing in ghosts. And the way you pretend to be Goth. And the fact that you have the emotional attention span of a fruit fly. What I mean is, you aren't dangerously deranged. Your delusions are harmless."

Just when he seemed to be human, he went and opened his mouth again. Jo rolled her eyes. "Golly, Wyatt, you do say the sweetest things."

"You know what I mean," he growled impatiently. "You're weird, not psychotic."

"A crucial distinction that many people fail to make." Jo stood and waved back toward the front of the office. "Take that secretary, for example."

Wyatt crossed his arms across his chest, the fabric of his suit jacket pulling tight against his biceps. "What about her?"

Jo yanked her attention away from his manly biceps. *How did a professional pencil pusher get manly biceps?* "She'll be gone within a week and it won't be anything Karma does or anything any of the consultants does that sends her screaming into the hills. She'll fall victim to her own imagination, decide that Karmic Consultants is not the professional organization it appears to be, but rather this terrifying freak show, and *poof*. No more secretary."

He arched his brows skeptically. "And you're basing this on...?"

"Years of experience, baby. Karma hasn't kept a secretary for more than a week in all the time I've been with Karmic Consultants. For a while, she hired them herself, but all of the people applying for the front desk position were either wannabe psychics with no marketable skills or supernatural groupies who thought working for KC would be one exciting paranormal catastrophe after another. As soon as they realized that a) they were not going to suddenly be promoted to exorcist or aura reader and b) this is just a regular business offering somewhat unusual specialized services, they lost interest and took off. We were too normal for them. Go figure."

As she spoke, Jo tugged her ponytail loose and finger-combed her hair. "So Karma started using a human resources

agency, but knowing how fast someone can type does not tell you what their personal threshold for weird is. The normal temps are fine until they figure out exactly what kind of company they're working for, or rather what kind of freaks they're working for. Then they're off like a shot. Sometimes they last a little longer, but usually those are just the ones who think we're faking it. Then they realize we're for real and *hasta la vista* secretary."

She yanked her hair back into a tight ponytail, expertly flipping the elastic around it. "Karma could just offer to overpay ridiculously for the receptionist position like she does for all the other normal office jobs—it's amazing what people will ignore for money—but the rotating secretaries have become something of a joke at KC. That, and it doesn't hurt to be reminded every now and again that we aren't normal. The secretaries are good for that."

Wyatt leaned forward in the chair, bracing his forearms on his knees. "Is that why you come in here? Why you have an office? So you can be reminded that you don't fit in?"

Jo smiled. "Believe it or not, you couldn't be more wrong, buddy. I don't come in here because I want to feel like a freak. I come in here to try to feel normal."

"But you just said—"

"The pencil-pushers think I'm nuts, yeah, but it isn't about what they think, it's about what I do. I commute to work. I have an office and a desk. I check my emails and get coffee from the break room. I do normal stuff. So even if they avoid me like a leper, at least I'm still behaving normally. I don't come in for them. I do it for me."

"And the office?"

Jo shrugged. "Karma let me convert one of the storage closets. It didn't cost KC much and it kept me happy."

"Do the other consultants have offices?"

"Not a one," she replied brightly. "I'm special."

"I can't argue with that." His mouth twisted. It wasn't quite a smile, but it was close.

Jo felt herself unintentionally smiling in response. "None of us really need offices. I certainly don't need mine, but it gives Karma someplace to drop the dossiers she prepares on the clients that I never bother to read."

Wyatt's eyebrows flew upward. "I suppose you have a dossier on me?"

Jo snorted. "Who needs a dossier? I had you pegged the moment I laid eyes on you. Uptight, upwardly-mobile, stick so far up your ass it must interfere with your internal organs, and guaranteed to think I'm a fake, a fraud, a freak or all of the above. Wyatt Haines, in a nutshell."

Wyatt gave a short bark of laughter. "Don't hold back, Jo. Tell me how you really feel."

"My God, he laughs!" Jo feigned a swoon. "I didn't think you were capable."

"I care about my business so I'm not capable of laughter?" Wyatt demanded, a frown starting to menace his otherwise pleasant features.

Jo pulled a face. "You frown more than any person I've ever met in my life, Wyatt Haines. It has nothing to do with what you do and everything with who you've made yourself into."

He frowned. 4.2. "And who have I made myself into?"
"Ebenezer Scrooge."

"Does that make you the ghost of old Marley?"

Jo laughed. "Nah. I'm Tiny Tim. God bless us everyone, and all that crap."

Wyatt blatantly eyed her chest, where the Girls were barely contained beneath her tight T-shirt. "Oh yeah, you're tiny all right."

Jo had never been the type to blush and she wasn't about to start now. "Why, Wyatt," she purred. "I didn't think you'd noticed."

"So I'm blind as well as incapable of laughter?" He cleared his throat roughly. "I continue to be flattered by your glowing opinion of me."

"You aren't the one glowing. That's the ghosts hiding in your chest."

"So they've moved to my chest, have they?"

She let her eyes take a leisurely trip over his gorgeous body. "Is there some other location you'd rather they camp out?"

"Yes," he said flatly. "Anywhere else besides inside me."

"Is it really so awful being a ghost host? I've always kind of wondered what it would feel like to have someone else inside me."

She hadn't meant it to sound dirty. Really she hadn't. She didn't even realize her words could have a wicked interpretation until his eyes lit darkly, the blue as hot as the flame from an acetylene torch. *Oh, baby. Come to mama.*

"I didn't mean it like that," she said hurriedly.

He laughed, a low, husky rasp of sound. "Didn't you?"

That laugh was going to be her downfall. She couldn't be interested in him. She just couldn't! He thought she was nuts, for crying out loud. But when he wasn't glowering down on her like a disappointed deity of propriety, he could actually be remarkably charming. And there was no point in denying the physical attraction between them. The man was gorgeous, no two ways about that, and her hormones had been singing the *Hallelujah* chorus since the moment she set eyes on him. As far as Jo was concerned, that was all the more reason to stay away from him.

Unfortunately, there was only so far she could go within the confines of her tiny office and she was stuck with him until she could foist him off on another ghost exterminator whose mojo wasn't on the fritz.

Dammit. Her mojo couldn't be gone. It just couldn't.

Jo began to pace—one step forward, one step back—as much as she could in her miniscule office.

"Jo? You okay?"

"I don't know what went wrong," she said, fighting down hysteria again. "My mojo has never failed me before. It's who I *am*—" Her voice broke on the last word and she shook her head sharply. She was *not* going to cry in front of awful, judgmental, occasionally charming Wyatt Haines.

"Jo, hey, come on..." He stood, reaching out a hand to her.

She didn't know what he had intended. Maybe to pat her on the back or give her arm a comforting squeeze. But when Wyatt stood, he caught her turning in mid-pace. They both stumbled, tangled against one another. He tried to steady her

and one hand brushed against the Girls as the other wrapped around her waist.

Jo looked up into his eyes, startled by his sudden proximity, seduced by the feel of him pressed hard against her.

Then, before rational thought could take control, he was kissing her.

His mouth landed heavily on hers, a full-frontal assault of the lips. The flare of chemistry was sudden, unexpected, and so freaking perfect her brain was instantly wiped of conscious thought.

Her world mojo might be going horribly wrong, but *this* felt right.

He teased and coaxed and Jo was with him every step of the way, throwing herself into the kiss for everything she was worth.

He stumbled under the force of her enthusiasm, his feet tangled with hers, and they tumbled down onto the chair. Jo's legs fell to either side of his. He yanked her forward by her belt loops until she was seated, straddling his thighs with nothing but air between them. And not much of that.

Jo wrapped her arms around his shoulders as he palmed the back of her skull, angling her head for better access as his tongue drove to take possession of her mouth. He untangled his fingers from her belt loops and brushed up under the edge of her shirt with his thumb, just the most fleeting of touches across the bare skin of her abdomen. Then his hands were sliding against her jeans again, moving around to cup her ass, two fingers of each hand sliding into the tight back pockets of

her jeans to hold her still when every hormone in her body was screaming for her to squirm against him, wriggle closer to his heat.

"You can admit you want it," he said against her throat. "Everything doesn't have to be a war. Jo Banks against the world."

God, why is he talking? Didn't he know there are better uses for his mouth? Jo speared her fingers through his hair. He kept it ruthlessly short, completely restrained, but it felt as wild and thick against her fingers as an animal pelt. She gripped his head in both hands and yanked his face back to within a breath of hers. "I like you so much better when you aren't speaking," she growled against his mouth, her lips teasing his with every word.

He kissed her again, each drugging pull of his mouth dragging her further away from reality.

She felt a tug on her scalp and then her hair fell down around her shoulders in a silky mass, released from its ponytail prison. He tangled one hand in it at the base of her skull, using it to angle her mouth more to his liking. His other hand jammed more firmly into the back pocket of her jeans as he held her snug against him. His hardness behind the placket of his pants pressed up against the dampened seam of her jeans, and she ground against him, bringing another rush of wet heat.

He released her mouth and Jo's eyes fell closed as her head fell back limply in relief at the respite. Then his teeth scraped roughly down the side of her neck, the sensation arching her back with an electric elevator slide up her spine,

pressing the Girls against the muscular wall of his chest. She was sure he could feel the hardness of her nipples through all the layers of their clothing, but modesty was the farthest thing from her thoughts. As if she could think at all. She could barely remember to breathe.

His hands were back under her shirt, framing her abdomen and sliding up with heated friction against her skin, closer to the Girls—who were putting on a distinctly undignified display, screaming for his attention with every thick pulse of her blood.

His hands finally closed around them through the heavy lace of her bra. Large and confident, they plumped and shaped her breasts, his palms scraping against the sensitive nubs of her nipples. Jo's eyes rolled back in her head and she moaned his name thickly. He nipped along the edge of her jaw, the sharpness of the bites a heady counterpoint to his deftly caressing hands. Then his mouth was back on hers, softer this time, his kisses liquid and drugging. Her entire body felt as if it were growing heavy, saturated with desire.

The sound of a clearing throat had her moaning into his mouth. *God, when had that sound become so damned sexy?*

Jo clung to him, no longer caring if she was out of control. He could have control. As long as he didn't stop.

"Jo!"

Okay, that hadn't been Wyatt. Even the best ventriloquist in the world couldn't shout her name with his tongue wrapped halfway around her tonsils.

Wyatt froze in place beneath her, his hands still palming the Girls under her shirt and his tongue still camping out in

her mouth. He reeled his tongue back where it belonged as a throat cleared from the doorway a second time.

"Jennifer informs me you wish to see me. Urgently."

Jo didn't turn around. She didn't need to see Karma's face to know that it would be completely expressionless, except for the eyes. The eyes would be all-too knowing. Mortifyingly knowing.

Oh, geez. She'd just jumped a client. In her office. Only hours after she nearly jumped him in *his* office. *Way to be professional, Jo.*

Jo cleared her throat. It didn't help. Especially since Wyatt's hands were sliding slowly—oh, so deliciously slowly—back to neutral territory and sending little shivers of oh-please-don't-stop pleasure jolting through her nerves.

"I'll be there in just a minute," Jo said without turning around and without looking at Wyatt, the second half of which was easier said than done since her face was approximately two inches from his.

"Excellent," Karma purred, as dry as the Gobi desert.

Jo waited until the door clicked shut behind her before she closed her eyes and moaned her embarrassment. She was still straddling Wyatt. She was still one giant, throbbing hormone. And now she had to face him. To *talk* to him. What did you say to a man after you had just given him a fully clothed lap dance while trying to suck the tongue out of his mouth in the middle of your office?

Jo opened her eyes. "Was it good for you?"

* * * *

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by Vivi Andrews

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Chapter Eleven: Defunct Mojo

"I didn't peg you as the kind of girl who would ever need rescuing." Karma's sex-operator voice was as cold and hard as Jo had ever heard it.

So much for pretending nothing happened. Jo crossed Karma's office to flop down into one of the somewhat uncomfortable, extremely upright chairs lined up facing the desk. "What made you think I needed rescuing?" she asked, hoping her attempt at lazy nonchalance could disguise the blend of panic, confusion, and residual lust still churning through her.

"What makes you think you don't?"

The patronizing edge to Karma's words tweaked Jo's temper and she sat up straighter, lazy nonchalance washed away in a tide of irritation. "I'm a big girl and you are not my mommy. If I want to crawl all over a guy—"

"A client," Karma interrupted crisply. "In my offices. I think even if I am not your mommy, I am well within my rights to spank you for this particular indiscretion. But that isn't what I'm trying to do."

"No?" Jo saturated the word with disbelief.

Karma's dark eyes narrowed to angled slits. "No." She reached into a concealed drawer in her desk and flipped a neat manila file onto the open surface between them. Jo had no trouble recognizing the face in the photo clipped to the front of the file. She had been sucking face with that face less than ten minutes ago. He was frowning in the picture, which

made sense. He was probably frowning outside the office right now as he stewed over being left out of her powwow with the big boss.

Karma tapped the photo with one long, blood red fingernail. "Wyatt Haines. Anal-retentive CEO. Merciless businessman. Heartless millionaire. Any man that successful should be the catch of the county, but he doesn't date casually. Not even when bringing a bimbo to a fund-raiser would be the appropriate thing to do."

"Are you trying to warn me he's gay? I think I can vouch for his heterosexuality."

"I'm trying to warn you that you aren't his type."

Jo flinched. *Dude, that was harsh.* Not that she'd ever thought she was his type, but she'd always thought Karma liked her. To have her say Jo wasn't good enough for Wyatt, to have her just spit it out like that, was a shock to the system. "Look, I know I'm not Martha Stewart—"

"Why do you think he wants you?" Karma interrupted, the words direct and unforgiving.

"I don't know," Jo snapped, resisting the urge to wail helplessly. "He frowns and clears his throat as if everything I say and do sticks in his craw. I know I'm not his idea of Miss Perfect—he thinks I'm insane, for crying out loud—but most guys will ignore that if they get to cop a feel. The Girls are a pretty big incentive all on their—"

"No." Karma cut across her tirade. "I meant, what does he do to make you think he wants you?"

Jo waved a hand in the general direction of her office. "That. He grabs me and kisses me like I'm frickin' oxygen."

Karma's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "You mean he instigated that episode?"

An episode? That hadn't exactly been a Brady Bunch re-run. Nor was it one of Wyatt's ghosties' pranks. "Of course he did. You think I mount unsuspecting clients in my office for kicks?"

"He's an attractive man. And you *were* on top," Karma reminded her. "But if he started it..." She tapped one finger against her lips and Jo noticed that her nail polish exactly matched her lipstick.

Karma was the kind of woman a man like Wyatt couldn't resist—cool, professional, feminine but strong, controlled but distinctly sexual. Jo was more Pamela Anderson, wild and open, everything on display for anyone who cared to look. And everyone knew that Pam needed a Tommy Lee, not a Bill Gates.

Karma shook her head sharply, drawing Jo's attention away from her surprisingly depressing musings on her future as a rocker's playmate of the month.

"This is even worse than I thought," Karma muttered direly.

"Because he wants me?" *He* had kissed *her*, after all. Crazy or not, the tent in his pants had been a non-negotiable sign of interest. "That's a bad thing?"

Karma shot her a pitying look. "Jo. Think about this."

God, she hated it when Karma said stuff like that. Jo was not a stupid woman, but there were days when Karma made her feel like she had the relative IQ of a turkey—and not a wily wild turkey, but one of the dumber-than-dirt

domesticated ones that drown in the rain because they are too stupid to close their mouths as they stare upwards watching the wet stuff fall from the sky.

She had missed something, that much was obvious, but Jo couldn't seem to find the apparently blatant logic that led to Wyatt wanting her being considered an unredeemable sin.

"Look, I know there's some company policy against mixing business with pleasure, but it's not like Lucy didn't do the exact same thing, and you know I'm not the kind of girl who'll crawl on top of any guy who sits still long enough. Wyatt's different. He's—"

"He's playing you."

"What?"

Karma stood and began to move back and forth across the room. On anyone else it would have been restless pacing, but Karma's movements were as smooth and deliberate as ever, pensive but not agitated. It was still the most ill at ease Jo had ever seen her.

"Something about this has been bothering me ever since you arrived this morning," Karma said as she paced, the sound of her high heels muted by the plush carpet. "You said there was another presence in the house, pulling against you and trying to trap the ghosts there, but when you went back after Haines left, you couldn't find a trace of it. What if he was the presence? Why else would he insist on being present for the extermination? If Haines were a medium, he could be storing up ghosts in that house for some reason. When you released your hold on the ghosts, it is only logical that they

would then be pulled directly back toward the other force that was pulling on them—Wyatt Haines."

Jo had started shaking her head as soon as she realized what Karma was driving at and she hadn't stopped yet. She was beginning to get dizzy from her own denial. "No. No, that doesn't make any sense. Wyatt doesn't even believe in ghosts." The whole non-believer thing couldn't be an act. It just couldn't.

"He called us, didn't he?" Karma countered.

"Exactly." Jo sprang up out of her chair, too restless not to join Karma crisscrossing the room. "Why would he hire us to exterminate his ghosts if he really wanted to keep them?"

"I've been wondering that myself and the only thing I could come up with was you."

"Me?" Jo stopped in her tracks and spun to face Karma, then decided watching her boss pace wasn't nearly satisfying enough and resumed her own stalking.

"There must be something you can do that he can't. Something he needs your particular paranormal skills for. When I called him this morning to try to convince him to let us complete the job, he slipped up. I offered him a replacement medium and he said it had to be you. It didn't strike me as particularly odd at the time, but the more I've thought about it, the more I've wondered what he could have meant by that. Initially, I thought he was just attracted to you. I'm afraid I may even have inadvertently implanted the idea that he could manipulate you with sex by suggesting that he'd been fantasizing about you."

"Karma, this is ridiculous. Wyatt hates the supernatural."

"Then why would he kiss a medium? He's using you, Jo. I don't know why and I don't know what he thinks he can manipulate you into doing for him, but it's the only logical explanation."

"I could just be having an off day," Jo said.

Karma laughed softly and moved back to the chair behind her desk. "You don't have off days, Jo. Something is throwing you off. Or rather, someone."

"It couldn't be Wyatt," she insisted, moving to pace in front of Karma's desk, still too restless to sit back down. "The presence of another medium doesn't explain why all of the ghosts I exterminated last night are back. It has to be me, something I—"

Karma held up a hand to stop her. "Wait just a second. The ghosts you exterminated last night came back?"

Jo nodded. "The house is seething with them. At least half of them are back already." She threw herself back onto her chair, feeling another wave of helpless dejection at the thought of her clearly defunct mojo. "I can't understand how I could have failed. This has never happened to me before." Then a truly horrifying thought hit her with the force of a sledgehammer to the back of her skull, rocking her forward in the chair. "Oh my God! What if it's been happening all along and I never knew? What if I never manage to send any of them on all the way? What if they just appear to be gone and then come back the very next day? I could have been a failure my entire life and never even known!"

"Jo, get a hold of yourself. You aren't a failure. If there had been anything wrong with your exterminations in the past, we

would have heard about it from your other clients. This only serves to convince me more that Wyatt Haines is behind your current troubles." She tapped a red fingernail against her mouth. "How certain are you that they are the same ghosts?"

Jo looked up in surprise. "Not certain at all," she admitted. "After I realized the infestation was back, I thought there was something wrong with me. I grabbed Wyatt and hightailed it back here. Do not pass go, do not stop to consider if the ghosts were the same ones from last night. Although, admittedly, I might have had a hard time telling even if I had tried to check. I've never been one to get cozy and make friends with the spirits like Lucy. But if they aren't the same ghosts, why are they there?"

"Why were the others there? Whatever it is about that house that drew such a large concentration of spirits in the first place could have drawn another fifty since last night. Haines could have drawn them himself, for all we know."

"Wyatt hasn't had the time or the opportunity to draw more ghosts to the house, even if he was capable of it. He hasn't been anywhere but home and his office since he left me last night."

"According to who? The man himself? You haven't been with him every minute of the day, Jo. He could easily have dropped by and done some supernatural mischief this morning while you were watching *Star Trek*."

"Hey, don't blame Captain Kirk."

"I'm blaming Wyatt Haines. He's up to something and until we know what..." Karma's voice trailed off. She sat behind her desk, regal and commanding, and studied Jo with

narrowed eyes. "Can you stay objective? If I let you stick with him, can you keep your distance well enough to avoid giving him whatever it is he wants from you?"

"Golly, Karma, your confidence in me is so comforting."

"You're the best, Jo. But we both know you're the best because, when it comes to ghosts, you never let your emotions into the equation. I want to be sure you aren't going to get wrapped up in Wyatt Haines' games before I send you out to keep an eye on him, to find out what he wants."

"So we aren't trying to get the ghosts out of him any more. Surveillance only, is that it?"

"We want the ghosts out eventually, but until we know what he's doing in the house and why, maybe it would be best to leave them where they are. At least then you have a good excuse for dogging his steps."

Jo thought bumping hips with him was a darn good excuse, but Karma's idea sounded a little more professional. "So I pretend to be trying to take the ghosts out, figure out if he's really an evil medium collecting ghosts to sabotage his own house—although why anyone would want to do that is beyond me—and keep my hands to myself. Any other instructions, boss?"

"Be careful." She tapped Wyatt's dossier. "I'll put some of our people on finding everything we can about Wyatt Haines and that house, and I'll see if I can find any possible use for that much spiritual energy stored in one place."

"What if it isn't Wyatt? What else could be drawing ghosts to the house besides a rogue medium?"

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by Vivi Andrews

Karma pursed her lips, the subtle tension in her mouth the only indicator of her irritation. "I'll look into other possibilities," she promised. "But it's Wyatt, Jo. And the sooner you accept that, the better off you'll be."

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Chapter Twelve: Viral Insanity

Apparently, insanity was contagious and Wyatt had been exposed to a virulent strain. That was the only explanation for why he had lost his mind so completely in Jo's office and attempted to devour her from the mouth down.

He couldn't deny their chemistry was electric and Jo herself was surprisingly likable, for a crazy person, but Wyatt never acted on impulse. The spontaneous kiss had been impulsive and idiotic. And fan-fucking-tastic. He was still half hard as he paced in the waiting area outside Karma's office.

The kiss may have been electric, but it wouldn't happen again. He wouldn't allow it. Wyatt Haines was scrupulously aware of how each woman he was seen with impacted his professional image. He would not allow his image, and by extension his business, to be negatively impacted by an association with a nutcase—no matter how enjoyable he found her company, or her body.

A relationship was ridiculously out of the question. Jo had to know that. They were oil and water, though judging by what had happened in her office, nitro and glycerin might be a better analogy.

Thank God Karma had walked in. Wyatt hadn't been stopping and neither had Jo. Without that timely intervention, Wyatt would probably have bent Jo over her desk and fucked her right there. What if Karma had come in five minutes later? Wyatt flinched. God, what if she had sent her secretary

instead? It would be all over the papers. His reputation would be ruined. His business destroyed. His life over.

It wouldn't happen again. He wouldn't be around Jo much longer anyway. Wyatt ruthlessly silenced the little voice that protested that he *liked* being around Jo. No matter how likable she was, she was toxic to his life.

There was a scientific explanation for his loss of control, just as there was a rational, scientific explanation for what was happening in the house and in his body.

The Episodes in the house were likely the work of some extremely creative, disgruntled employee. Or just a kid playing pranks. A living kid.

The SyFy Channel and Groucho Marx mask could be the result of post-hypnotic suggestion. Wyatt didn't remember being hypnotized, but wasn't that part of hypnosis? That you couldn't remember it?

That was probably what Jo did, hypnotized people into believing she had solved their problems, which she had probably caused herself with wind-machines and holograms.

Wyatt frowned. No. That wasn't Jo. She wasn't malicious or dishonest. Nutty, yes. Dishonorable, no.

She believed her delusions wholeheartedly. So much so that the longer Wyatt was around her, the more plausible they seemed. There was a scientific explanation—he *knew* there was—but he was willing to say he believed in ghosts if she would fix things.

There was belief and then there was *belief*. Wyatt believed in Santa Claus, insofar as the Jolly Old Elf existed in the minds of children around the world and there was a perfectly

rational explanation for the things he supposedly did on Christmas Eve. Jo believed in ghosts the way children believed in Santa Claus and, for a few seconds there back at the house, Wyatt had felt the belief of childlike wonder for himself. He'd actually thought he heard a ghost.

Which just went to show that she was infecting him with her insanity.

He must be channeling his attraction to her—apparently, the shortest route from his balls to his brain ran straight through a web of delusions. Once he got away from Jo, his world would go back to normal.

Karmic Consultants could give him another ghost exterminator to pretend to believe, or he could just pay their bill and walk away—though neither of those options solved the problem of the house or his post-hypnotic suggestion issues.

As soon as Jo stepped out of Karma's office, Wyatt knew he wasn't going to like the next words out of her mouth.

"Looks like you're stuck with me, buddy."

Of course, he'd been wrong before.

Wyatt knew he needed to get some distance from Jo, but relief poured through him at her words. She was sticking by him. Thank God. Although, God had been a real dick lately, letting him get into this situation, so maybe he should be thanking someone else.

"We've got a lot of questions about the house and until we get some answers, I'm going to be your shadow. No more drawing on your face. No more weird ghostly occurrences of

any kind. I'm gonna be guarding your ass twenty-four/seven."

"Good."

Jo blinked, as if stunned by his response. He was a little stunned by it himself. "Good?"

Wyatt cleared his throat, all of his rationalizations of the last few minutes flying out the window at his relief that he wouldn't have to deal with this crazy, mumbo-jumbo shit without her. "Yes, good. You were in there so long, I started thinking you were reading through my contract to see if there was a pain-in-the-ass clause you could use as an excuse to drop me on my ass and leave me to deal with all this weird crap on my own." Or a sexual-harassment clause that he violated a dozen different ways during their little interlude in Jo's office.

"Nah, you lucked out. No pain-in-the-ass clause." She didn't mention the kiss, but her color was high and she hadn't looked straight at him since coming out of Karma's office.

"So what's next?" Wyatt asked the question with no small amount of dread. He wasn't sure he could take much more hocus-pocus today.

Jo fidgeted, which never failed to make him nervous, and avoided his eyes. "Well, you see, Karma, she, ah, she agrees with me about removing the ghosts being a bad idea. Dangerous. Sucking your soul out and all that. So, we're going to do some, ah, research and see if we can't figure out some alternate way. To get them out. Of you."

Jo wasn't a good liar, but he could never figure out which part she was lying about so the effect was the same as if she

had been double-oh-seven busting lie-detectors for a living. He frowned. "So what am I supposed to do while you're doing your research? Just keep drawing on myself whenever I nod off?"

"Nah, that's why I'm here. To keep you from being taken over. Just go about your life as you normally would and try to avoid falling asleep or doing anything else that would relinquish control of your body over to the ghosts."

"I'm just supposed to stay awake for the indefinite future? That isn't a viable plan, Jo. I have a business to run. I can't do that without sleeping at least once every few days."

"Don't worry," she said in a way that did nothing to reassure him, nodding toward the wall clock. "It's a weekend."

Four o'clock on a Friday afternoon hardly counted as a weekend in Wyatt's book. He didn't bother mentioning that he usually worked through the weekends. No rest for the successful.

"I'm working on Plan B as we speak," Jo continued.

"I thought Plan B was the house. Why don't we go back there and see if the thing in the house pulls the, er, ghosts out of me? I sort of felt something tugging on me when we were there earlier." While he was having a delusional episode. "What if we just left before it could get them out of me? What if all we have to do is go back—"

"No," Jo interrupted sharply, then took a breath and softened her tone as she continued, "We can't go back to the house right now. Not until we know more."

Wyatt frowned. "I don't like this."

For some reason, that comment seemed to make Jo more uncomfortable than anything he had said up to that point. "Is it really so important that you get back into the house?" she asked tentatively.

"It's important that I get my life back!" Wyatt fought for control. He never raised his voice. "The house is just a means to an end."

She eyed him warily. "What does that mean?"

"What do you think it means?" he asked, exasperated by her mumbo-jumbo vagueness. Not to mention the fact that she was looking at him as if she was sure he was nuts, like she was just waiting for him to prove that he was both nuts *and* dangerous before having him fitted for a straightjacket.

Wyatt sighed. As impatient as he was to see the whole fiasco end, more than anything, what he needed tonight was a respite from the insanity of the last twenty hours. He needed a chance to get his bearings and get back on rational footing.

"I have a very important question for you, Jo."

She tensed, as if bracing herself for a blow. "What's that?" she asked, her voice strained.

"New York or Chicago?"

She blinked in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"Thin crust or deep dish? How do you like your pizza? 'Cause I'm starving."

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Chapter Thirteen: Remote Combat

At first, Jo felt awkward and uncomfortable.

It never fazed James Bond in the slightest if he discovered someone he'd been making out with that very afternoon was really his arch-nemesis, bent on using him to achieve world domination. Unfortunately, Jo wasn't James Bond. She was a ghost exterminator. What did she know about going undercover to discover the possible villain's possibly ulterior motives? Especially when she'd been riding the potential villain like a mechanical bull only hours before.

She didn't like listening for double meanings in everything he said, waiting for him to incriminate himself. She hated the idea that he was using her for his own ends, but even with Karma's warnings ringing in her ears, she still couldn't reconcile the uptight businessman who didn't believe in ghosts with a crafty medium bent on using her for his own gain.

Jo didn't know what to do with herself. Her hands seemed suddenly enormous and awkward. How had she never noticed before how useless hands were? What was she supposed to *do* with them?

She was confused, irritated...and relieved beyond belief that he didn't mention the interlude in her office as he drove them back to his apartment for what he called a Night of Normalcy.

He never said a word about the kiss, but she couldn't stop thinking about it. She couldn't look at him without flashing

back to his hands on her. And she had to look at him because she was supposed to be watching him. Jo was a mess.

Wyatt's condo only made her feel more awkward and out of her element. It was all posh and polished. Chrome and glass and luxury everything.

Two pizzas and a few too many beers later, Jo's mood improved substantially.

After Wyatt got over his initial disappointment that Jo's appreciation for beer and pizza did not extend to a passion for all things sports and finance and Jo resigned herself to the fact that a total culture-void like Wyatt was bound to be a useless ignoramus when it came to all things *Star Trek*, *X-Files*, and *Battlestar Gallactica*, they found that they actually got along rather well together, thoroughly lubricated by ice-cold microbrews as they were.

Jo had discovered Wyatt was actually pretty damn entertaining company, when he was at home in his element and had removed the stick up his ass for the night. It also didn't hurt that he had the largest HD TV she'd ever seen in her life mounted on one wall and was woefully inexperienced when it came to remote control combat techniques. Jo, having grown up the youngest of three children, had a lifetime of guerilla remote techniques at her disposal and had managed to keep that big, beautiful television safely on *Star Trek* for the last two hours.

As long as she didn't dwell too long on the idea that Wyatt was quite likely a nefarious, ghost-stealing liar intent on using her attraction to him to manipulate her into performing some

unthinkable crime against the spirit world, well, as long as she didn't think about that, everything was just hunky-dory.

The beer helped.

Wyatt frowned at the television, but with the help of a few brewskies Jo now found that expression remarkably endearing. "This doesn't make any sense," he announced for what had to be the thirtieth time in the last two hours.

Jo studied the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode now being displayed in big screen, HD glory across his wall.

"You're watching it wrong," she declared.

Wyatt snorted. "How can you watch something *wrong*? Hell, Jo, even your defense of the show is irrational."

Jo shook her head, then paused to let the swinging, blurry world settle back into place around her. "You're focusing on the science part. You need to be focusing on the fiction part."

"I don't like fiction."

"That's 'cuz you don't understand it."

"What's to understand? It's all made up."

Jo shook her head again then braced it with her hands to remind herself that shaking, as well as nodding, had been temporarily disqualified from her range of movement options. Stillness was key. "Fiction is about facts. The facts are just bigger." She waved her hands broadly to indicate the massive scope of fiction facts and Wyatt ducked.

"I wasn't aware facts came in different sizes."

"I could fill a...a...something really big with all of the things you aren't aware of, buddy."

Wyatt snorted, then took another long pull on his beer. "And I could fill a thimble with all the facts in this show."

"Hey. Stephen Hawking did a cameo, did he not? Would Stephen Hawking associate himself with something that wasn't sciencey?"

"Sciencey isn't a word."

"Yeah, well, he wouldn't. Stephen Hawking understands the cosmos and the greater truths of fiction."

"The greater truth being don't have an android on your crew because he will turn you over to the Borg?"

Jo experienced a thrill of triumph that he was no longer referring to the Borg as the *weird, machine-headed guys*. "You're ignoring the big picture," she said. "The whole Borg thing is not about whether or not it is possible for there to be a machiney-humanoid hive culture with a collective brain, but rather about what it is to be human. What is it about us, beyond just cells and nerves and stuff, that makes us *alive*. That is the greater truth."

"Are you always this passionate about *Star Trek*, or is it just when you're drunk?"

"Drunk? Are you trying to imply that I am inbreediate-ineebredat, ahem, in-e-bri-a-ted?"

Wyatt grinned. "Yes."

Jo heard giggling and wondered where the hell the sound was coming from. *She* certainly never giggled. But it didn't seem like the sort of thing Wyatt would do. Unless he was being taken over by ghosts. She squinted at him. "Are you being taken over by ghosts?"

Wyatt snorted. "Not that I know of, but I'll keep you posted."

Jo nodded like a bobble-head doll and her head continued the motion without her permission until she stopped it with a hand to her forehead. She closed her eyes, which did nothing to stop the world's slow rotation, then let her head flop back to rest on the back of his couch.

"I might be a touch tipsy," she admitted. James Bond never got drunk. He must have the alcohol tolerance of a grizzly bear to be able to swill vodka martinis by the gallon without ever getting the teensiest bit sloshed.

"Just a touch," Wyatt agreed, a smile in his voice.

Jo found herself smiling dreamily in response to that smile. Which was wrong. Definitely wrong. And his fault. He was too easy to be with. She shouldn't like him. He was the enemy. So what if he could kiss like Casanova and Don Juan rolled into one? The kiss had been a blip. She was not attracted to the enemy. Except when he smiled.

Jo sighed. "You really ought to smile more often, Wyatt. You have such a lovely smile."

"Well, since there is nothing I aspire to more than being lovely, I'll try to keep that in mind."

Jo sniffed indignantly. "Why do men have to be macho all the time? If I'd said you look like a sex god when you smile, then you wouldn't have your knickers in a twist about it, now would you?"

"You may call me a sex god any time you like."

"Yes, well, I don't like. I want to call you lovely, so lovely is what you get."

She felt him reaching across her and opened her eyes, but her reflexes were too slow to keep him from coming up with remote. "Hey. That's mine."

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law. Besides, you had your eyes closed. Eye closure automatically forfeits control of the remote." He punched the buttons and Jean-Luc Picard suddenly became a heavily padded football player being slammed into the turf by a man the size of Samoa.

Jo sighed. "I will never understand the appeal of watching a bunch of men in pads and tights slap each other on the ass after they try to tackle and mount one another in front of dozens of cameras and millions of viewers."

"You are not seriously arguing that football is more homoerotic than *Star Trek*."

"Excuse me? Do you see people on the Enterprise slapping each other on the ass? I don't think so. It's a family show, folks. Not that I have anything against a good ass-slapping. For all I know the Captain and Mr. Spock had a special relationship that we, the viewers, will never know about. *Star Trek* isn't about the sex. Except when it is."

Wyatt gave a bark of laughter. "Damn, I wish I had a tape recorder. You're never going to believe some of the things coming out of your mouth masquerading as logic when you sober up."

Jo made a face. "I'll show you masquerading as logic." She took a slow motion swing toward the remote, which he easily moved out of her reach. Her momentum carried her forward until she landed against him. He was big and strong and warm. And still. Wyatt seemed to be the one object in the

entire room that wasn't in motion. She burrowed closer against his side, sighing with contentment as his arm came around her to tuck her snugly against him. There wasn't anything wrong with a little cuddling with the enemy. She was just resting on him because the rest of the world wouldn't stop moving. Nothing to it.

"Who's winning?" she asked lazily.

"The game's over. These are the highlights."

"Oh. Who won then?"

"Would you recognize the name of a team if I told you?"

"Nope."

"Then the Ghosts won by seventy-nine points."

She twisted around against him to peer up at his face. "Is there really a team called the Ghosts?"

"No."

"Oh. Darn. For a second there was someone I could root for."

He chuckled and she hummed happily as the vibration traveled through her ear where it was pressed against his chest. "I thought you would be anti-ghost, being an exterminator."

"Hey, I don't pass judgment. I just perform a service."

"Just another day at the office, huh?"

"Mm-hmm."

"How do you end up with a job like that, anyway?"

Jo shrugged, closing her eyes and cuddling closer. "Sorta runs in the family. My Gramma Regina talked to spirits. Well-kept family secret." She mimed locking her lips and tossing away the key. "It wasn't nearly as profitable to be our kind of

crazy back in her day." Jo snuggled down into Wyatt's side. "My mom and my sisters are totally normal, but my cousin Lucy and I got hit with the crazy stick pretty hard. I started seeing ghosts when I was six. Lemme tell you, first graders and ghosts do not mix. I learned to block 'em out pretty quick. Forcefully transtend, trassden, transcending them was a defense mechanism to keep from being smothered by 'em. Hit Lucy later. She was a teenager before they started popping in on her. She's more of a talker." Jo held up one hand like a puppet and flapped her fingers. "Gab, gab, gab. She just blabs 'em into transcending. But her dad's a therapist," she carefully enunciated each syllable, "so it makes sense that she'd go the talk-about-your-feelings route."

"What do your parents do?"

"My mom's a homemaker, typical suburban housewife, and Dad was a banker. He's retired now. Not a whole lot of help when it comes to dealing with the dead. I saw a bunch of specialists when I was a kid. My folks paid a lot of people a lot of money to fix me. Gram was the only one who thought I was normal, but she was a few bricks short herself. Then Karma recruited Luce and me and we started getting paid the big bucks for it, though, my parents got a lot more understanding all-of-a-sudden-like."

"Money does tend to have that effect."

"Was that how it was for you? Are your parents proud of you because you're rich?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what exactly?"

He didn't respond and as curious as Jo was about what had turned Wyatt from a little boy into a corporate machine, she was distracted by the feel of his fingers threading through her hair.

"Why would you do this to your hair?" he asked softly.

"Do what? Dye it? It's Goth."

"It's ridiculous."

"You just don't understand fashion."

He chuckled. "Have you realized that every time I disagree with you, you tell me that I don't understand? Fiction, fashion, ghosts. Has it occurred to you the problem might not be with me?"

"Are you implying that *I* do not understand fashion?"

"Yes." She could hear the smug grin in his voice.

"Well, that just shows how little you understand about my understanding of fashion."

He burst out laughing and Jo couldn't help but smile at the sound. She felt fabulous. Safe and dizzy and light all at the same time. As if she were a bubble that could never be popped. Then she remembered that he might be using her—how could he be using her?—and the bubble burst, just like that.

"Wyatt," she said hesitantly, "you wouldn't..." She couldn't finish. If she was wrong about him, and Karma was right, then the last thing she wanted to do was clue him in that they were onto him. But she just couldn't believe the first man she had wanted in ages, who seemed to want her back at least a little and lit her up like Christmas every time he touched her, was really only after her supernatural juju. She would so

much prefer that he only wanted her for her body. She definitely wanted him for his.

"I wouldn't?" he asked in a low voice, his strong arm hugging her tightly to his side.

She prodded the firm muscle of his bicep beneath his white-collar shirt with one fingertip. "How does a pencil pusher get arms like these?" she asked, grateful for the excuse of alcohol-induced dippiness so he wouldn't suspect anything from the sudden subject change.

"I swim a hundred laps every morning," he informed her. "Except for the mornings when I'm hung over because I've been trying to drown the ghosts in my stomach with a fifth of scotch."

Jo smiled. "Silly Wyatt. You can't drown ghosts. They're already dead."

"I'll keep that in mind for next time."

"You do that."

The highlight show ended and Wyatt idly flipped through the channels, passing half a dozen Halloween-oriented movies before he found another sports show.

"Am I keeping you away from other jobs?" he asked suddenly. "I imagine Halloween must be a busy time for a ghost exterminator."

"You imagine wrong," Jo said, mimicking his precise tone. "Halloween's my lightest time of year. People who have ghost problems around Halloween keep 'em. It's festive. Thanksgiving and Christmas, on the other hand, are crazy busy for me. A ghost that's charming and atmospheric at Halloween is a royal pain in the ass with the in-laws coming

to visit. My folks have gotten used to not seeing much of me around the holidays. I'll make a cameo at the family Christmas feast, drop off presents for my sisters' kids and disappear into the night, taking my weirdness with me. It's better for everyone that way."

"I'm sure they would rather have you with them. Even if you come with a fair amount of weirdness."

Jo shrugged. "They have started making a big deal of Halloween lately. Huge family gatherings and all. My cousin Lucy even scheduled her engagement party for... Oh shit. What day is it?"

"Friday, October 28th."

"Is tomorrow Saturday?"

Wyatt laughed. "That's usually what comes after Friday, yes."

"Crap. My cousin's engagement party is tomorrow. I have to go. She so would not understand if I bailed on her." She twisted so she could see his face. "I suppose I could bring you with. Pretend you're my date." Jo laughed shortly, sobering up a bit at the thought. "My parents would love you."

"Should I bring a present?"

"You don't mind coming?"

Wyatt shrugged, the movement ricocheting through her where she was pressed against him. "How bad can it be? Maybe your cousin can even talk these ghosts out of me."

Maybe. Except Jo couldn't let Lucy do that. Karma had ordered her to leave those ghosts where they were.

Jo winced. Of course, Karma herself would be at the party. Even if she hadn't been Lucy's boss, the groom was her baby

brother—although Jake hardly looked like anyone's baby anything. Karma wouldn't be pleased that Wyatt was crashing Jake and Lucy's engagement party, but she *had* told Jo not to let him out of her sight.

Jo closed her eyes to block out the prospect of the morning. She burrowed against Wyatt's side and focused on the strength and warmth surrounding her, pushing away all thoughts of lies, betrayals, and intrigues. She drifted off to sleep, completely forgetting that she was supposed to be keeping watch over Wyatt, both for Karma and for his own sake.

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Chapter Fourteen: The Bubble Gum Wars

Wyatt fought to stay awake, but he was so thoroughly relaxed by an evening of beer and Jo, he knew he was fighting a losing battle. Even the stimulation of her curves mashed up against his side wasn't enough to counter the soporific effect of her sleepy nodding and the soft, sleep-blurred murmuring of her voice.

"Jo?" he asked, hoping for a rousing argument about *Star Trek*, anything to keep him awake and keep the ghosts at bay, but her only reply was a breathy sigh, puffing warm air across his chest. "Captain Picard is a pussy."

"Hmmm," she purred agreeably.

He gave her a gentle shake. "C'mon, Jo. This is no time for sleep." He glanced at the clock. Two a.m. Yeah, right, no time for sleep. He was exhausted. Maybe if he just closed his eyes for a second...

"No!"

Jo jolted against him at his shout, then hummed and nestled down against him, her eyelids not even flickering.

Wyatt flipped through the two a.m. TV options, looking for something that would keep him awake, but finding only infomercials and horror movies. Watching dippy actresses who had been surgically enhanced to have Jo's body running up and down stairs in front of knife-wielding psychos was not his usual preference, but if it kept him awake, he just might become a convert to the horror genre.

Wyatt watched with macabre fascination as blood flew wildly across the screen in an almost comic pantomime of death, cold beer in one hand, warm Jo in the other, and realized for the first time in a long time, he felt pretty damned good. Ghosts and all.

Wyatt had dubbed this the Night of Normalcy, but the truth was there was nothing normal about it. On a normal Friday night, he wouldn't have left work until after ten. He would have come home to his empty condo, maybe ordered in a pizza and watched the highlights from last night's game, but he would have done it all with a stack of work in front of him instead of a warm woman at his side.

Jo had been cautious at first, keeping her distance until she was well into her third beer. Wyatt figured she'd probably been read the riot act by her boss for fraternizing with a client. He could have brought up their little indiscretion, just to put her mind at ease that he had no intention whatsoever of repeating the mistake, no matter how peachy she smelled, but he didn't want to disrupt their tentative truce.

Nothing had been solved. There were still ghosts, allegedly, in his house and his stomach. He still had an image to protect and a business to run. But for *tonight*, at least, he had put all his troubles aside and enjoyed the temporary cease-fire in his combative relationship with the crazy ghost girl.

Wyatt ran his fingers idly through Jo's god-awful black-dyed hair and relaxed to watch another sorority girl get her come-uppance.

Wyatt opened eyes that felt gritty, like he had slept with his eyes open all night, and rubbed his aching jaw. He frowned when his hand came away sticky, then realized the stickiness was from his hands, both of them covered with traces of a pink glue-like substance and a sugary-sweet smell.

"What the...?"

Jo had slumped down during the night until her head was pillowed on his thigh. He glanced down, one hand already moving to run his fingers through her hair when he froze.

"Holy shit."

Jo murmured sleepily and stretched, turning her face up to him as she opened her eyes. "G'morning."

"I'm sorry," he blurted, panicked horror washing through him. "I didn't— Oh, fuck. Fuck fuck fuck."

"You didn't fuck?" Jo mumbled thickly, blinking slowly in sleep-fogged confusion.

"Don't be mad. It wasn't me. I fell asleep. Oh God, I'm so sorry I fell asleep."

"What wasn't you?" she asked, coming awake fully now as his panic began to penetrate her muddled state. "Why does it smell like cotton candy in here?"

Wyatt gave a short, hysterical laugh. "I don't think that's cotton candy," he said direly. "I think that's bubble gum."

Her confusion lasted only a moment longer, then her eyes widened in horror. She bolted to a sitting position, her hands going instinctively to her hair.

Her scream echoed off the walls.

Jo tried to pull her hands away, but clumps of bubble-gum-matted hair stuck to her fingers. "Those little bastards!" she shrieked, struggling to untangle her hands.

She jumped to her feet and ran to the bathroom. She was back before Wyatt could even stand up to follow her. "You little punks!" she shrieked at him—or rather, at his chest. "I'm on your side, you ungrateful little—oooh!" Words failed her and Jo stomped in a circle, her grunting shrieks of anger and dire looks thrown at his rib cage consuming all of her attention.

She did, admittedly, have a right to be pissed off. His ghosts didn't do anything by half measures and they had sure done a number on her hair. Wads of bright pink, gooey bubble gum started about three inches from her scalp and covered her entire head like the shower cap from hell.

"I don't understand," he said. "Where could they have gotten bubble gum? I'm sure there's none in the condo."

Jo had wrestled her tantrum under control and was now standing in the middle of his living room, panting in pink-headed rage. "My bag," she bit out angrily. "One of my sister's brats is addicted to the stuff, but Beth thinks it's bad for her teeth and won't let her have any, so I always smuggle in some contraband when I see her. Damn it! What time is it? Lucy's engagement brunch thingy starts at ten."

Wyatt glanced at his state-of-the-art diver's watch, but found it stopped. "What the hell? This thing is supposed to live longer than me."

"Wyatt!" Jo shrieked, her hysteria barely held in check. "*What time is it?*"

He looked to the display on the cable box. "Eight-forty. Don't worry. We'll get you an emergency hair appointment somewhere and be a little late to the party."

"No," she shook her head wildly. "No. The party's at Beth's house. We'll go there first. We'll get there early and she'll fix it. No problem."

"Jo," Wyatt said hesitantly, "I think this might take more than a comb. I think we need specialists."

"Peanut butter. That gets out bubble gum, doesn't it? Beth will have peanut butter. She's a mom. All moms have peanut butter. Besides, she used to be a stylist before she decided motherhood was her calling. She'll know what to do. C'mon."

She charged toward the door and Wyatt jumped up to chase her toward his front door. "Jo! Wait a second, would you? I can't just show up at your cousin's engagement brunch wearing clothes I slept in without a shower or even a pause to brush my teeth."

Jo spun to face him, and the look in her eyes was terrifying. "Mr. Haines," she bit out acidly, "In case you hadn't noticed, I have enough bubble gum in my hair to keep Violet Beauregard chewing for the rest of her natural life. I am not going to sit around twiddling my thumbs while you go through your morning toilette. I am going to my sister's house. You can come with me or I will see if I can figure out how to hotwire a Bentley, because I am going *right now*."

Wyatt decided it was safest not to ask who Violet Beauregard was. Instead, he grabbed his keys, his shoes, and a towel to wrap around Jo's head to keep her from getting stuck to the upholstery, and sprinted out the door after her.

* * * *

"Christ on crutches, Jo Ellen, when Momma sees this new style of yours, she's going to shit kittens."

Jo winced and waved a hand between Beth and Wyatt. "Wyatt Haines, uptight, haunted CEO, I give you Bethie Carter, potty mouth poster-mom for the PTA."

Beth shook Wyatt's hand automatically, even as she made a face at Jo. "None of the kids can hear me. Why are you so early? I thought you'd pulled clean-up duty. Last I heard you'd claimed anything before ten a.m. was inhumane and made Kim drag her ass over here at six in the morning to help me set up. At least, that's what Kim told me when she showed up this morning."

Jo glared at the most annoying of her sisters, i.e., whichever one was in front of her. "I'm having a little bit of a bad hair day, in case you didn't notice."

Beth shrugged and eyed the pink and black rat's nest on Jo's head. "You can't exactly be pissed at me for not thinking anything of it, after some of the shit you've done to your hair in the past, saying it was a fashion choice."

"I'm sorry if my style isn't Sandra Dee enough for you. Can you just help me out? Please." The last word was a distinct effort, but it did the trick.

Beth shot her a smug little smile and said ungraciously, "Fine. Come on inside and I'll see what I can do. Your boyfriend can go around back and help Kimmie set up."

"He isn't my boyfriend," Jo said automatically, before she remembered she was supposed to be passing Wyatt off as just that.

"Fine, your fuck-buddy can go around back and help Kimmie set up." Beth turned to Wyatt and smiled her suburban princess smile. "Just do whatever Kim tells you," she told him sweetly. Then she turned, grabbed Jo none-too-gently by the arm and started pulling her toward the house like a disobedient eight-year-old. "God, what is that in your hair? Is that fucking bubble gum? Were you going to bring Dinah bubble gum? I swear to God, Jo Ellen, if you give that girl one more cavity..."

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Chapter Fifteen: Safe in the Bosom of Family

Once Beth had time to assess the damage, her demeanor suddenly became a lot more sympathetic. It also didn't hurt that her youngest was watching with intense fascination as Mommy poked at Aunt Jo's pink and black snarls. Jo sat through it all, trying not to scream or cry.

"Sorry, honey. We're gonna have to cut it all off. Shelby, go get Mommy's haircut bag, would you?" The four year old nodded silently and ran from the room on a mission. "How did you even do this to yourself?" Beth asked incredulously. "It looks like the kind of thing you and Kim would have done to each other when we were kids."

Jo arched a brow—at least her eyebrows weren't covered with gum—until her sister amended.

"Okay, fine, it's the kind of thing I would have done to you and then tried to blame on Kim. It still doesn't explain how a twenty-four—"

"Twenty-six." Ever since Beth had started lying about her age, she had started lowering Kim and Jo's ages to match. Kimmie loved it; Jo corrected her every time.

"Twenty-whatever-year-old woman got bubble gum in her hair. Although, I'd like to state, for the record, if this is some kinky sex thing, I don't want to know. Although your guy is pretty hot. Kind of smelly and rumped, but I bet he cleans up well."

Jo felt the first twinge of remorse for not giving Wyatt five minutes to get ready. "He does clean up well. In fact, he's

usually so clean he squeaks, but I was so freaked out this morning by the bubble gum thing I didn't give him a chance to change out of the clothes he slept in."

"Squeaky clean isn't usually your type."

Jo's mouth twisted in a wry grin. "You can say that again."

"Although, if you were going to bring a date to Lucy's shindig, at least you brought someone vaguely human. Mom would have flipped if you'd shown up with another biker."

"Mom'll flip if she finds out that Wyatt has two ghosts camping out in his body and is a client of Karmic Consultants until I can figure out how to get them out."

Beth froze in her poking and prodding at bubble gum wads. "No shit?"

"Here's your bag, Mommy."

Beth turned with her perfect housewife smile firmly in place. "You didn't hear Mommy say the bad word."

"Of course not, Mommy."

"Good girl. Now go help Aunt Kim set up for the party, okay, pumpkin?"

Shelby handed over the bag and shoved her lower lip out into a pout. "I wanna stay and watch."

"Not this time, sugar-bear."

Shelby sulked out of the bathroom and Beth kicked the door shut behind her.

"So, next time my hair is gunked up by prankster ghosts, she gets to watch you fix it?"

Beth looked up sharply. "Ghosts? That's what happened to your hair?"

Jo rolled her eyes. "What did you think, Beth? It's not like I'm ever around live children, besides yours and Kim's."

Beth frowned and set what looked like a large makeup case on the vanity in front of Jo. "It's not natural," she complained as she bent over a combination lock that held the case shut.

"Neither is padlocking your past, in my opinion, but I guess we're all nuts in our own special ways."

Beth made a face. "I'm not padlocking my past," she protested. "It's the scissors. A couple years ago, Dinah found them and decided to play stylist on Shelby. A five-year-old waving sharp shears in range of the eyes and ears of my baby was enough to convince me to invest in a lock. I thank God the only thing Shelby lost that day were her cute little baby curls."

"You said you cut off her curls yourself because they were getting in her eyes."

"I lied. And frankly, I'm amazed you all believed me. Even Mike never suspected and he knew how much I loved our baby's curls. And don't change the subject, how could ghosts do this to your hair? I thought they didn't have bodies."

"They don't. Except when they inhabit a living body. Like Wyatt's."

Beth spun, shears in hand and glared at Jo. "If he's dangerous, you shouldn't have brought him here. I can't believe you would bring him into this house knowing—"

"Cool it, Bethie, I never said he was dangerous. He's haunted, but as long as he's awake, he's in complete control."

When he falls asleep, the ghosts take over, but bubble gum in the hair hardly deserves ax-murderer-level panic."

Beth pursed her lips, made a few experimental snips in the air with her scissors and then bent to her task. "I still don't understand why you brought him here. It isn't appropriate to bring business acquaintances to family events, Jo Ellen."

Jo rolled her eyes as Beth channeled their mother's disapproval. "Karma doesn't want me to let him out of my sight until we figure out what's going on with his ghosts. So it was either bring him with or skip out on Luce. I figured this was the lesser of two evils."

"Karma," Beth sniffed. "I should have known she'd be involved."

"She is my boss and she owns the company," Jo said wryly. "If it has to do with Karmic Consultants, it has to do with her."

Beth huffed and snipped, sending long locks of sticky black hair sliding to the floor. "She's the Pied Piper of crackpots," Beth grumbled, snipping more aggressively now. "You were normal before you started working for her."

Jo snorted, but was careful to keep her head perfectly still. She trusted her sister to turn the gummy mass of her hair into something salvageable, but she didn't want to end up with a bald spot because she hadn't been able to contain her irritation with her family for five minutes. "I was never normal, Beth. Karma just gave me permission to be myself by showing me there were others like me."

"Be yourself? Dressing all in black, dying your hair, and spending your nights in graveyards? That's who you really are?"

"I don't spend my nights in graveyards and I happen to like the color black."

"Black isn't a color. It's a denial of life."

"Then I guess it suits me since I work with the dead."

Beth huffed, the sheers flying fast now. "I may have to accept that Karma woman into the family because Lucy is in love with Jake, but I don't have to like it. She's made you weird."

"Damn it, Bethie! She hasn't made me anything. If anyone made me weird, it was you guys telling me over and over again that ghosts *aren't normal*. If I had been allowed to be a normal girl who just happens to talk to ghosts, do you think I would have turned into Goth Girl and started hanging out with bikers in order to find someone who could accept me?"

Beth's hands paused above her hair. Jo watched her sister in the mirror, but Beth wouldn't meet her eyes. "And have you found them?" she asked hesitantly, focusing intently on Jo's hair to avoid looking at her. "These people who would accept you?"

Jo gave a short humorless laugh. "Not really. Would you believe I'm not dark enough for them? Too normal to fit in there, not normal enough here. I just can't win. I guess it's just as well that I'm losing my hair." She fingered a matted, foot-long swatch of black that had fallen into her lap.

"Goodbye Goth Girl."

* * * *

Wyatt was being ordered around by a four year old. On the plus side, it was a living four year old.

As soon as he stepped out onto the back patio, he knew why they had chosen to have a backyard brunch engagement party. The yard was twice as big as the house and landscaped to within an inch of its life. A wide stone terrace descended down three shallow steps to a neatly clipped lawn, where round tables had been artistically scattered. At the far edge of the lawn was a white gazebo, nestled among a grove of old-growth oak trees. To his left, where the house curved away toward the front, there was a small swimming pool flanked by long buffet tables groaning under the weight of covered catering platters.

Between the complex floral arrangements and the air of panicked excitement, he might have thought he had walked into preparations for an actual wedding, rather than the casual backyard BBQ-style engagement party that Jo had described.

He didn't have much time to dwell on that—or his completely unsuitable attire—for long. As soon as the ringleader—a peppy, thirty-something cheerleader dictator who could only be Jo's other sister, Kim—saw him standing there, she promptly put him to work.

He was fairly certain he saw at least half a dozen different little blonde girls fetching and carrying for Kim, but it was hard to count them since they all looked so damned similar and bounced past him so quickly. The one assigned to run herd on him had introduced herself with a sweet little smile

and a lisp as Shelby and then proceeded to channel a drill sergeant for the next half hour, ordering him around with her hands imperiously planted on non-existent four-year-old hips.

Wyatt, cowed by residual guilt over what he'd allowed to happen to Jo's hair, obeyed each demand to the letter, even when those demands involved climbing up and dangling from a tree branch in order to get the "Congratulations!" banner to hang straight.

By the time Jo emerged from the house, Wyatt was at least twice as grubby as he had been upon arrival and completely unfit for polite company, but all thoughts of his own appearance vanished as soon as he caught sight of Jo's.

The bubble gum was gone, along with most of her hair, but instead of leaving her looking like she had been scalped by an inexperienced Indian, which he had half-expected, she looked like she could have stepped off the runway of a chic fashion show—provided runway models ever grew breasts.

Her hair had been cut off just beyond where her roots had grown out, leaving her with black-tipped blonde spikes, artfully arranged around her face in a funky, sexy style that was insanely hot and extremely Jo.

It also didn't help his equilibrium that she had traded her day-old Black Sabbath tee for a scoop-necked scarlet blouse that must have belonged to her sister, because it was at least two sizes too small across the chest.

Wyatt tried not to swallow his tongue as he took in the brand new Jo. And he'd thought she was fuckable before. All thoughts of steering clear of her vanished. They didn't have to have a relationship—at least not a public one—but he was

getting her into bed with him if it was the last thing he did. Wyatt thought he might just be in love with those ghosts for getting rid of her god-awful hair and turning her into this sex-goddess.

"You look—" Wyatt stopped himself, realizing belatedly that *edible* was not a compliment he could issue in front of the rotating cast of short, blonde people who were rushing past him. "Good. You look good."

She smiled self-deprecatingly. "I'm sorry I was such a raging harpy this morning. Beth says you can use one of their bathrooms to freshen up and borrow a shirt from her husband Mike for the party. He's a little bigger than you, but I thought you'd prefer to have something clean."

"I would. Thanks." He started toward the house where Beth was waiting for him, but turned before he had gone more than three feet. "Jo, I'm sorry about falling asleep on you last night, but your hair really does look great. *You* look great."

Jo beamed. "Be careful today, Mr. Haines. Banks family get-togethers are minefields of smiling faces and unspoken criticism."

"I can take it," he bragged, loving the way her smile lit her face as she shook her head fondly at his arrogance. He turned and continued toward the house, wondering when he had become such a softy, grinning like an idiot from one of Jo's smiles.

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Chapter Sixteen: It's My Party and I'll Commune with the Dead If I Want To

"Wyatt, isn't it? Did you know you have a pair of ghosts in your elbow?"

Wyatt looked down at the petite, dimpled blonde batting her baby blues up at him. He had been trying to avoid drawing attention to himself as the backyard filled with laughing and smiling guests. Jo had been recruited to help her sisters play hostess and Wyatt had taken to hiding near the big oak tree he had nearly cracked his skull falling out of earlier. He thought he had been doing an admirable job of pretending to be invisible until the slim blonde woman separated herself from the crowd and approached him.

"Yes, I did actually."

"I'm Lucy." Shirley Temple's big sister redirected her smile toward his elbow. "Aren't they just adorable? Where did you get them? I never get kids. I mostly get horny dweebs. Jake hates it. Says they don't respect boundaries. Ghosts don't. Respect boundaries, that is. But maybe he wouldn't mind if they were cute. Yours are just darling."

Wyatt couldn't figure out which part of her monologue he was supposed to respond to, so he stated the obvious.

"You're the bride."

"Guilty as charged." Lucy flashed her dimples at him again. "You're here with Jo, aren't you? I'm so glad she found someone who isn't wigged out by the ghost thing. She does not have a healthy relationship with her spirits, in my opinion."

Being involved with a man who has ghosts of his own is the best thing for her. Although, I'm just dying to ask, why do you keep them in your elbow? Sort of an odd place, isn't it?"

"I don't keep them. I can't get them out." When she just blinked at him uncomprehendingly, he clarified. "I'm not a ghost person."

Lucy's open, sunshine-and-roses expression closed and darkened in the blink of an eye. "You aren't? What are you?"

"I'm a businessman."

Her face twisted with distaste. "Oh." Then she took a deep breath and her good cheer returned, albeit with visible effort. "Well, that's just peachy. My cousin Kim is married to an investment banker. You should talk to him. Come on."

Before he could protest that he would *really* rather stay hidden in the trees for the rest of his natural life, Lucy latched onto his arm and dragged him through the mass of guests toward the pool, chattering brightly the entire way.

She pulled him to a stop beside one of the buffet tables in front of a balding man in a bright blue polo shirt with one of the small blonde people clinging to his leg. "Scott!" she exclaimed, absently reaching out to tweak the little blonde girl's nose. "This is Jo's, um, well, this is Wyatt. He's a businessman. Try the scones. I made them myself."

Lucy then released his arm and dove back into the crowd where she could be heard asking everyone she passed if they had seen Jo.

Scott gave an easy laugh and extended his hand for Wyatt to shake. "Don't mind Lucy. All of the Banks and Cartwright girls are more energetic than logical." Retrieving his hand, he

ruffled the curls of the blonde hanging onto his hip. "You get used to it. What kind of business did Lucy say you were in?"

"She didn't," Wyatt replied, wondering exactly how Jo fit into the energetic, illogical mold Scott described. "I'm in hospitality. Haines Hideaways."

Scott's eyebrows flew up and he gave a nod of respect. "Impressive growth portfolio. I own a few shares myself. What do you do for them?"

Everything. Or at least he had, before he'd been infected with Jo's ghost insanity. He didn't even know how the stock had closed yesterday. "This and that. Overseeing renovations, paperwork, the odd ceremonial ribbon-cutting. I'm Wyatt Haines."

Scott gave another, deeper nod of respect. He opened his mouth, doubtless to say something about dividends or profit margins that would make more sense to Wyatt than anything he'd heard in the last thirty-six hours, but the small blonde person attached to his leg chose that moment to interrupt.

"Daddy, can I go swimming yet?"

Scott made a show of looking at his watch and held up a hand with all of his fingers outstretched. "Five more minutes."

Kids made about as much sense to him as ghosts did, so Wyatt quickly brought the conversation back to an understandable footing. "I have a ribbon-cutting on Monday, in fact. The Orchard Hollow Hideaway."

"Will there be candy?"

Wyatt frowned down at the little girl. "Why would there be candy?" *Business was serious. No candy involved.*

"It's Halloween. You have to have candy. I'm going to be a fairy princess. My wings are purple."

"Good for you," Wyatt responded brusquely.

He turned his attention back to the father who gave his daughter a pat on the shoulder, sending her toward the pool. "You can swim now, but no big splashes. Auntie Beth would have my hide if I let you drench her catering efforts."

As Wyatt waited for Scott to finish watching his daughter bounce off to collect her swimming buddies, his eyes suddenly felt heavy and his thoughts sluggish. He'd spent most of the night trying to stay awake without much success. Not the most restful way to sleep. Wyatt tried to shake away his sudden exhaustion, and then turned to Scott with a weary smile. "Buy you a cup of coffee?"

Scott laughed. "Tell you what, since it's free, the coffee's on me."

* * * *

"Jo Ellen Regina Banks, what kind of person wears *jeans* to a social function?"

"Hello, Mother."

The elder Elizabeth Banks, "Betsy to my friends", did nothing so demonstrative as frown disapprovingly at her youngest child, although the subtle hint of martyrdom tainted her features. "I suppose this new hairstyle is your latest rebellion."

Jo smiled cheekily. "Do you like it? Bethie cut it."

Her mother pursed her lips for only a second, barely long enough to crease the frown lines around her mouth. "Bethie is

so busy with her life. Poor dear, she is out of practice. Although I suppose it could be worse."

The "though I can't imagine how" hung in the air unspoken between them. Jo always marveled that her mother could include so many searing non-verbal indictments into an everyday conversation—and this was a variation on a conversation they had every day. At least every day they saw each other. The my-daughter-is-ruining-my-reputation-by-turning-herself-into-a-freak-woe-is-me conversation.

And, as always, despite her best intentions to the contrary, Jo heard herself explaining herself to her mother, looking, as always, for that illusive hint of approval. Or at least a lessening of the disapprobation. "I had a work emergency and couldn't go home to change before the party," she explained. "I thought Lucy wouldn't mind if I went a little casual as long as I'm here."

"Of course she wouldn't say so," Betsy Banks said. "Lucy was brought up right and a well-brought-up young lady would never be so gauche as to tell you that your attire was beneath acceptable standards."

Of course not. That's what mothers are for, Jo thought wryly. "I'm not going to go home and change, Mom."

"I should hope not. What would be the point? You've already made the impression you're going to make."

Jo gritted her teeth and tried to think non-matricidal thoughts. She loved her mother. She did. Really.

"Jo!"

Thank God. Lucy.

"I just left your Wyatt. Did you know he's a businessman?"

Jo smiled in spite of herself. She adored her cousin. Lucy was the one person in the world who accepted her exactly as she was. It was heavenly to feel normal for a while. "I did know that, believe it or not. How did you find out?"

"He told me!" Lucy exclaimed, as if Wyatt had spontaneously confessed to being a serial killer. "Where did you find him?"

"You're here with a businessman?" her mother asked, her ears pricking up at such normalcy.

Jo felt a stab of irritation. She knew it was spiteful and ridiculous to be annoyed by how well Wyatt fit in at Bethie's suburban utopia, but she couldn't help it. He had her mother's automatic approval because he was so obviously normal. Her own mother thought Jo was a crackpot, but Wyatt might as well have been the son she'd never had.

"Jo Ellen, why didn't you say anything?" Mama Banks asked, smiling delightedly at her youngest child. "A businessman!"

Jo gritted her teeth. She didn't want her mother to accept her just because Wyatt was normal enough for the both of them. If anything, that made her feel even more like the crazy one. She was tempted to tell her mother about the ghosts in Wyatt's elbow just to wipe the satisfied smirk off her face. Then Lucy saved her the trouble.

"I didn't think he was your type, but then I saw the ghosts. They are just the most adorable things ever!" Lucy gushed. "Where did he get them?"

And just like that Mama Banks' hopes were dashed.

"Haunted house," Jo said. "He owns this really cool old Victorian that's filled to the rafters. You could talk yourself hoarse and not transcend half of them."

Lucy turned and stretched up on her tiptoes to see through the crowd to where Wyatt and Scott were talking near the pool. "Even considering the adorable ghosts, I have to admit I'm surprised you brought him here. Though I suppose he is hot, in an anal yuppie sort of way."

"Who's hot?"

Jake Cox appeared at Lucy's side with a mock-jealous growl and Jo found herself wallowing in jealousy of her own. Not because she wanted Jake for herself—although he was undeniably gorgeous with a bad-boy chic style that was much more to her taste than Yuppie Boy—but because he looked at Lucy like she was the only woman in the world. Jo could practically see Lucy's insteps melting under the heat in Jake's eyes.

Wyatt would never look at me like that.

When Jo realized what she'd just thought, she could have kicked herself for the stupid sentimentality of it. The last thing she needed was her subconscious deciding Wyatt Haines was her go-to-guy for mushy romantic fantasies. She needed to keep her distance, keep her cool, and keep her pants on. He made her feel crazy—and not in a good way.

Lucy didn't seem to notice Jo's latest Wyatt-related internal crisis. She tucked herself up against Jake's side and answered him. "Jo's new boy toy is a cutie."

Jo groaned. "Luce, he's a client."

"So was Jake," Lucy said with a dimpled grin. "A little business, a little pleasure..."

"He's a client?" her mother exclaimed in horror. "You brought a client to a family event?"

Jo rolled her eyes. "Lucy doesn't mind. Do you, Luce?"

"Course not. His ghosts are adorable. You have to see his ghosts, Jake. You'll love them."

"Somehow I doubt that," he muttered.

"No, really, they're very—"

Whatever Lucy thought they were was cut off by a startled male shout and a splash. They all spun in the direction of the pool.

"Scott!" Kimmie screamed, rushing toward the figure flailing in the pool.

Jo couldn't take her eyes off of the figure standing at the edge of the pool, calmly sipping a cup of coffee. "Oh, no. Wyatt."

"That isn't Wyatt," Lucy corrected. She grabbed Jo's arm as they both sprinted toward the pool and the ghostly party crashers.

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Chapter Seventeen: Impromptu Pool Party!

Wyatt blinked sleepily and was immediately flooded with dread. He decided it was a bad sign that he was starting to get used to waking up in strange places. Standing next to a pool, sipping a cup of coffee, was not how he usually woke up in the morning. Traditionally, he also avoided having blonde cheerleader-dictators screeching at him and large quantities of strangers staring at him in shock and horror as a man he had been talking to immediately before falling asleep fished himself out of a pool.

Another post-hypnotic suggestion. Or, as was looking terrifyingly more likely, the ghosts had taken over again. And the little bastards hadn't even stuck around to get their come-uppance. Now everyone thought *he* had thrown Jo's brother-in-law in the pool.

"Wyatt?" Jo appeared at his side and peered closely at him. "Oh, good, it's you."

It was a bad sign when he couldn't even ask who else it would be. "What happened?"

"What happened?" Kim shrieked before Jo could reply. "What *happened*? You attacked my husband is what happened!"

Wyatt rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. "Oops."

"*Oops?*"

"Chill out, Kimmie. It's not like Scott was in danger of drowning. The pool's only five feet deep."

"That isn't the point, Jo Ellen! You don't just go around throwing perfectly innocent men into pools."

"Maybe Wyatt thought it was a pool party," Jo muttered under her breath.

As Kimmie started to turn purple and hyperventilate, Beth stormed up. "The food! The food is all soaked! You told me this wouldn't be a problem, Jo! You said that *he* wouldn't be a problem."

"He isn't a problem!" Jo shouted and Wyatt was taken aback by her vehemence, not to mention the fact that she was actually defending him.

Beth and Kim were visibly gearing up to say more when a pack of kids in bathing suits rushed past him from the direction of the house, jumping into the pool en masse and temporarily diverting their mothers.

"Dinah! Maya! Out of the pool this instant! Who said you could go swimming?"

"Uncle Scott said!" the oldest of the pack, evidently the elected spokesperson, piped up.

"Well, Uncle Scott doesn't make the rules, does he?"

Jo tugged gently on Wyatt's arm as he watched the drama unfolding beside the pool, along with everyone else at the party. So much for inconspicuous.

"Come on. Let's make a break for it while they're distracted."

Wyatt looked down at her and arched his eyebrows. "Coward."

"Nuh-uh," she denied, shaking her head. "I've had twenty-six years with those two to learn the value of a strategic

retreat. Come on. Don't worry, if you still want to be chewed out, I'm sure they're going to follow us. I just thought my mother might appreciate it if we took the drama to a smaller stage."

Jo grabbed his hand and led him around the side of the house, out of the range of prying eyes. At the sound of footsteps behind them, Wyatt turned and saw Lucy and a large, dark man following them. Lucy winked at him and sent him a finger-wave as she tripped along hand-in-hand with the six-plus feet of unruffled cool that must be Karma's *baby* brother.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere out of the range of breakables and projectiles." Jo stopped in the middle of the front yard. "This'll do."

Wyatt looked around him, wondering what Jo saw in this patch of grass that he was missing. They were about twenty feet from the front of the house and equidistant from the street where a row of parked cars for the party shielded them somewhat from the eyes of curious passersby, but they were still in full sight of any of the nearby houses should Beth's neighbors suddenly get curious. "This'll do for what?"

Jo shoved up the sleeves on her borrowed blouse and faced him squarely. "I think it's about time these ghosts of yours and I had a little talk."

Wyatt winced. "This is going to hurt, isn't it?"

Jo smiled wickedly, but Lucy was suddenly at his side, patting his arm in a conciliatory way. "You won't feel a thing," she promised cheerfully before joining Jo facing him. Jake

wandered up to stand at Lucy's other side, completing the supernatural firing squad effect.

Wyatt braced himself, but the attack didn't come from the quarter he'd expected. Before Lucy and Jo could do their worst, the desperate housewife set stormed around the side of the house.

"This isn't over, Jo Ellen! How dare you just walk away after your...your *man* nearly drowned my Scott?"

"The food is all soaked and you've absconded with the guests of honor!" Beth added her protest to Kim's before Jo could respond.

Jo turned to tackle Beth's grievances first. "Luce and Jake are here of their own free will. If you want to drag them back to the party, you are welcome to try. And if you didn't want the food to get all wet, you shouldn't have put the banquet tables *right next to the frickin' pool*, Elizabeth."

"No one was supposed to go *in* the pool, Jo Ellen!"

"Except all the kids, right? Because I'm pretty sure Wyatt didn't tell them they could go swimming."

"I didn't," Wyatt quickly swore—actually having no idea what he had said while the ghosts were controlling him, but unwilling to take responsibility for anything for which there weren't validating witnesses.

"See? So, I'm sorry about the food. Wyatt is sorry about the food. I'm sure Scott is sorry about the food. You want me to order out for pizza? Wyatt knows this really good place that delivers—"

"*Pizza?*" Bethie shrieked. "You want to replace quiche Florentine and lemon-grilled salmon with *pizza*?"

"Geez, Bethie, it's not like anyone was eating the food anyway. You know what mom says, 'Grazing at a party is for the ill-bred.' So you've just improved everyone's breeding by removing temptation. Congratulations."

"I cannot believe we're related," Bethie snarled as she spun on her heel and marched back toward the backyard, leaving angry divots in the grass with every step.

"Yeah, me neither," Jo muttered under her breath, turning to Lucy. "Do you think it's possible we're changelings? It would explain so much."

"Except for why Grandma Regina talks to ghosts."

Jo wrinkled her nose. "Well, yeah. I guess there is that." She turned to her other sister, who was standing by with her arms folded tightly across her chest, and steam all but pouring out of her ears. "Thanks for waiting your turn, Kim."

"I want a reckoning," Kim growled in a fair imitation of the kid from *The Exorcist*.

Jo sighed heavily. "Kimmie, he's sorry. Look at him, doesn't he look contrite?"

Wyatt did his best to look obsessively contrite.

"See? Is that the face of a man intent on drowning people? I think not. Scott can swim. The pool is shallow. The worst possible interpretation is that it was a practical joke in very poor taste, but I can guarantee you that the last thing *Wyatt Haines* would do is push your husband into the pool. I am absolutely positive that as far as *Wyatt* is concerned, it was a complete accident."

Not unlike her hair had been.

Kim was not mollified. "Grown men do not go around throwing one another into pools."

Jo snorted. "Kim, Scott was in a fraternity. I somehow doubt this is the first time he has been thrown into a pool. I'm willing to bet he's been the thrower a time or two, as well. Which is possibly why he isn't the one out here haranguing us. *He* knows this isn't a big deal. A little male bonding gone wrong. No big."

"It most certainly is big!" Kim protested. "This was Lucy and Jake's day, Jo Ellen! Is it so much to ask to have one normal family event without your—"

Lucy raised her hand like a schoolgirl to interrupt Kim's diatribe. "You know, Jake and I really don't mind. I actually think Wyatt's ghosts are kind of cute."

"Ghosts!" Kim shrieked, loud enough that people back at the party could admire the decibel level. "I am sick of everyone humoring you, Jo! There is no such thing as ghosts!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Jo saw Wyatt's posture change as a uniform green glow washed over his body. "You're absolutely right," Jo agreed abruptly. "I'm nuts. Luce and Jake and Karma and everyone else who talks to spirits, we're all whack jobs. Congratulations. You caught us. So why don't you head on back to the normal party and leave the crazies to their own devices?"

Kim's eyebrows drew down in a threatening glare as she dug in her designer heels. "If you think I'm just going to walk away..."

Wyatt's body took a step toward her sister and Jo decided not to wait to hear whatever baseless threat Kim had dreamed up. Her middle sister had always been all talk and no action. Kimmie was the most likely to go for a screaming hissy fit, but Bethie's wrath was a thing to fear. Bethie carried a grudge and was diabolically creative when it came to vengeance. Jo had learned from the best.

She needed to get Kim out of there before Wyatt's ghosts got creative in their attempts to prove their existence.

"I didn't want to do this," Jo said. "But if you don't leave us alone and go back to the party right now, I'm going to have to tell Scott that you would only answer to Mrs. William T. Riker for three months during seventh grade."

Kim visibly paled. "You wouldn't dare," she whispered in horror.

"Wouldn't I?"

"He won't believe it." Kim's eyes shuttled nervously back and forth.

"Even after I supply proof? You really shouldn't have left your diaries lying around the house. Anyone could pick them up and Xerox a few pages for future blackmail."

"You little thief!"

"Poor Scott. He thought he was marrying the Homecoming Queen, but instead he got saddled with a closet Trekkie."

Kim screeched and fled back to the party as fast as her Jimmy Choos could carry her.

"I never knew Kim liked *Star Trek*," Lucy said conversationally once they were alone again.

Jo shrugged. "You were younger and didn't have to live in the same house with her. I love me some *Star Trek*, but having to ask Mrs. Riker to pass the salt got old in a hurry."

"Why do you like *Star Trek* so much?" Wyatt asked suddenly.

"Back with us, are you?" Jo gave the no-longer-glowing Wyatt a grin. "I love *Star Trek* because no matter what freaky shit was happening, no matter what wormhole or alternate dimension they stumbled into, they took it in stride and treated it like it was totally normal. Some of the crew weren't even human, but they were accepted for what they were. The world should be more like *Star Trek*."

"Here here," Lucy raised an imaginary glass in mock toast, grinning. "To the crazies, long may they rave!"

Jo laughed. "And on that note, let's talk to some ghosts."

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Chapter Eighteen: The Young and the Dead

"Before we get started, why don't you tell me what they said when you talked to them previously." Lucy knelt on the grass, settling the skirt of her sundress around her.

"I haven't talked to them, Luce." Jo dropped down beside her cousin, stretching her legs out and absently plucking at the blades of grass. "That's why I need you. You know I don't see them the way you do."

Lucy made a face. "You don't see them because you aren't *looking*."

"I see them," she said, waving a hand at Wyatt. "They're in his left shoulder. But I don't see them. Not as, like, people. They're marbles."

"They look like marbles because you're looking for marbles," Lucy insisted. "Look for ghosts. Look for kids. Look for the traces of *life*."

Jo's expression turned mulish. "How exactly is this helping Wyatt?"

Lucy smiled sweetly. "I'm helping you help Wyatt. Now, look."

Jo opened her second sight, *looking* for all she was worth, but she still only saw two small, vibrating green marbles rolling around in Wyatt's rotator cuff. Jo gave up and turned to Jake in frustration. "What do *you* see?"

Wyatt looked at Jake in surprise. "You see ghosts?" he asked him.

Jake shrugged, "I'm a sensitive, so sometimes I'll catch glimpses. Usually when I'm around Lucy. I don't see much on my own, but your shoulder is kind of glowing."

Lucy nodded sagely. "Mediums amplify supernatural presences. Since your ghosts are trying to hide, Wyatt, Jake probably wouldn't see a thing if Jo and I weren't here."

"So if I'm around Jo, I should see ghosts?"

"If you're open to it," Lucy confirmed.

Jo snorted. "Wyatt doesn't *believe* in ghosts."

"Oh." Lucy turned to Jo with obvious concern. "You aren't dating him, are you? Because I don't think it's smart to date someone who thinks your entire job is make believe."

Jo laughed. "Thanks for the relationship advice, Dr. Ruth, but Wyatt and I dating is the last thing you need to worry about." She ignored the twinge of disappointment she felt at the truth in that statement.

"Oh, good." Lucy turned back to him with a smile. "So, Wyatt. How do you *feel* right now? Have you been hearing any voices lately? Seen any funny green lights?"

"I feel impatient," he grumbled. "And the only voices I heard were when the house seemed to be talking to me."

"Bethie's house talks to you?" Lucy asked impishly.

"My house. The Victorian. I couldn't really make out what it was saying. It was like someone was whispering too fast for me to pick out actual words."

Jo sat up straighter and met Lucy's eyes as dread hardened in her stomach. She should be ecstatic that Wyatt seemed to actually be treating the ghost problem like it had to do with actual ghosts, but hearing voices was almost never

a good sign. The whispering could have been demonic—which Jo didn't want to admit, given Wyatt's previous insistence that everything could be blamed on demons and her own declaration that he didn't have any evil forces in his house—or Wyatt could have been picking up on a spell of some kind. But why would a spell affect ghosts?

"Let's talk to the little buggers, shall we?"

Lucy made a gesture as if she were pushing up her sleeves, except for the fact that her dress was sleeveless. She smiled gently at Wyatt's shoulder. "Come out..." she cooed encouragingly.

"Has anyone ever told you that you sound like Glenda the Good Witch sometimes?"

"You aren't helping, Jo," Lucy muttered out of the side of her mouth, continuing to focus her energy on subtly coaxing the ghosts forward. "Come out, my little friends. No one will hurt you."

The glow rippled across Wyatt's body from the shoulder out. His perma-frown vanished, replaced by a truculent pout and his ramrod straight posture deflated into a slouch. He scuffed one loafer against the other in a quintessentially boyish gesture. The lights were on, but Wyatt wasn't home.

Lucy beamed at him like a proud parent. "What's your name, sweetie?"

Jo had heard Lucy talk about her relationship with her ghosts enough to know that she could see a ghost's name, but before Jo could question her, Wyatt spoke, a slurred little-boy drawl coming out of a thirty-something man's mouth.

"Teddy."

"Teddy," Lucy repeated, her voice soothing and gentle.
"That's a lovely name. How old are you, Teddy?"

"Seven."

"Why did you push Scott into the pool, Teddy?" Lucy asked soft and curious, without an ounce of recrimination in her voice.

Wyatt/Teddy's lower lip shoved out in an exaggerated pout. "I didn't," he protested unconvincingly.

Lucy made a soft, disappointed tscking sound against her palate and suddenly words began to pour out of Wyatt/Teddy's mouth.

"It was Angelica! She's always trying to take over the body. Like she can do it better than me 'cuz she's *older*. She's the one who spilled the coffee on the bald man and pushed him into the pool to cool him off. I didn't do nothing."

"Anything," Lucy corrected automatically. "How old is Angelica, Teddy?"

"Nine," Teddy spat, as if the age itself were an insult. "But she barely turned nine before she died."

Jo blinked in surprise. "You know that you're dead?"

"Obviously." Teddy rolled his eyes and looked at her like she was, well, a nine year old.

"When did you die, Teddy?" Lucy asked.

Teddy frowned, puzzled by the question. "Before."

"Do you remember what year it was?"

Teddy shrugged and scuffed his shoes—and Jo realized with a jolt that she had stopped thinking of the body as Wyatt. Riding hard on that thought was the realization that she could see Teddy. It was as though a faint green image of

a little boy had been superimposed over Wyatt's body. Teddy was thin, with a pointed chin and large eyes. He wore a button-down shirt that could have belonged a modern boy all dressed up or been daily attire for the *Leave It to Beaver* era.

This ghost, this *kid*, had been hiding out in Wyatt all along and all she had seen was a marble. Jo felt her stomach turn over queasily as she thought about everything she had said and done in front of those little eyes and ears over the past two days. *Oh God, the kids had probably seen her making out with him in her office.* She had crawled all over the body they were hiding inside. She had probably scarred them for life. Or for death, at least. She was like a pedophile for dead kids. *Ewww.*

Lucy was asking Teddy a series of questions, but Jo's conscience wouldn't let her wait for a polite break in the conversation. She interrupted, "Can you see and hear things going on around you when you aren't in control of the body?"

Teddy made a face. "It's all fuzzy and distant. That's why Angelica and me always want to run the body. We can't see nothing but clouds when *he* is in control."

"Clouds. Thank God." She was not a necrophiliac pedophile. Hallelujah.

Lucy shot Jo a speculative look. "Anything you'd like to share?"

Jo waved a magnanimous hand. "No, no. Carry on."

Lucy turned her attention back to the ghost. "Teddy, can we talk to Angelica for a moment?"

"Angelica? Why would you want to talk to *her*?" Teddy huffed indignantly.

Lucy was momentarily stymied by Teddy's unwillingness to give up his prized position as ruler of Wyatt's body. However, Lucy was an only child. Jo, who had grown up with two siblings, knew exactly how they could get Teddy to hand Angelica over to them.

"Teddy, Angelica is in trouble for pushing the bald man into the pool," Jo told him.

"She is?" Teddy asked eagerly. Ripples of green light passed through Wyatt's form. Wyatt/Teddy twisted and stamped his feet.

Angelica arrived screaming.

"I won't, I won't, I *won't*!"

The voice was high-pitched and girlish, but Jo didn't spare a thought for the oddity of Wyatt's vocal chords forming those sounds. Angelica's presence completely obscured his. She wore a white nightdress and her long, dark hair curled loosely around her shoulders. She twisted her fingers in it as she stood mulishly before them, the gesture made bizarre by the fact that her hair was at least a foot longer than Wyatt's, so the hand twisted in the empty air beside his shoulder.

"Hello, Angelica. Teddy tells us it was you who pushed Scott in the pool."

"Teddy's a tattletale," Angelica replied in a sing-song voice.

"Charming," Jo muttered under her breath. "He had to be haunted by the Brat of Christmas Past."

"Why have you taken over this body?" Lucy asked, her voice as calm and soothing as ever.

"It's boring in here when we aren't in charge."

"Why don't you just leave?"

Angelica shrugged. "Can't. We're trapped."

Jo leaned forward, her interest snagged. "How did you get trapped? Who trapped you? Was it Wyatt?"

Angelica frowned at her. "*You* did."

"No, I didn't," Jo protested automatically.

"Did so!"

Jo gritted her teeth. She was *not* going to get into a did-so-did-not argument with a nine-year-old girl who had probably died before she was born. She was more mature than that. At least, that's what she told herself. "Is that why you bubble-gummed my hair?" she demanded instead.

Lucy burst out laughing, stopping suddenly when Jo shot her a glare. "Sorry. I wondered what happened to your hair. It looks very cute, by the way. Very you."

"Thank you, but that doesn't change the fact that this little brat put about two tons of Double Bubble into it this morning."

"Which was very wrong of her." Lucy nodded solemnly, the flash of her dimples ruining her attempt at sober understanding. "Angelica, supposing Jo did trap you in Wyatt's body—just for argument's sake," she amended quickly when Jo shot her a death glare. "How did she do it?"

"She was shoving us toward the light. Teddy and me didn't want to go—"

"Teddy and I."

"—but she was really strong. Then all of a sudden she stopped pushing us toward the light and threw us at him. We just popped right in."

Jo coughed, feeling a blush burning her cheeks. "Do you think we could avoid telling Wyatt that I *might* have been involved in haunting his stomach?"

Lucy continued speaking gently to the ghost brat. "Do you know how we can get you out of there?"

"Why don't you ask her?" Angelica pouted. "She's the one who did it."

"I did not!" she protested automatically.

"Jo, that isn't helping. Angelica?"

The brat shrugged. "I dunno. It's not my fault. *She's* the one who messed up."

A screech of tires on the street accented Jo's irritation as she glared at the one she now identified as the ringleader in Wyatt's body.

"Look, kid, we are working on getting you out of there, but until I get my mojo back in working order, you are just going to have to be patient and lay off the pranks. *Capicse?* If you're good, I'll take you to a Pixar movie or something, but that means no more drawing on Wyatt's face, no more throwing people in pools and absolutely no more bubble gum."

"Jo!"

All three of the non-haunted people on the front lawn turned at the imperious shout. Karma squeezed between two of the parked cars and strode toward them. Every hair was in place, as always, but Jo got the impression that Karma was hanging onto her icy composure by a thread. She'd found something, some clue, some bit of evidence about this mess, and Jo was afraid to ask what.

"Yo, sis."

"Happy engagement," Karma mumbled vaguely in Jake's direction, but her eyes stayed locked on Wyatt/Angelica, studying the ghost girl warily. "So you're the mystery guest?" she asked Angelica, who squeaked and disappeared back into her cloudy hiding place inside Wyatt's body.

Wyatt came to, clearing his throat. His posture grew rigid and the perma-frown was back in place even before he noticed Karma glaring at him.

He groaned, "What did I do this time?"

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Chapter Nineteen: The Plot Thickens

"We have a problem."

Karma waited until Jake and Wyatt disappeared into the house in search of Mike's much-needed hidden beer stash before turning to Lucy and Jo with those dire words.

Jo didn't bother standing up. Living in a constant state of crisis was downright exhausting. She just couldn't work up the energy to panic about whatever this new development was, even though Karma was showing more uneasiness than Jo had ever seen before. "So is this a new problem or just a modification of the same problem we've had since Thursday?" she asked mildly.

"I took Rodriguez to the house."

"The exorcist? I told you it wasn't demonic."

"And you were right. He confirmed that it isn't. But there is something beyond normal ghost activity happening there and I thought he might pick up on something you couldn't."

"Like demons."

"Like the source behind whatever is drawing the ghosts. And to be clear, that is present tense. The house is still drawing new ghosts. Which is a concern in and of itself."

Jo snorted. "Unless Wyatt wants to hire me to live in the house and transcend them as they come. Talk about job security."

"I think we should avoid that option if possible," Karma put in dryly.

"Yeah, that's right, you think Wyatt is the cause of all this," Jo grumbled, letting her irritation with that conclusion show through her voice.

"I've reconsidered that hypothesis," Karma admitted. "He hasn't been back to the house since you left."

It wasn't a question, but Jo nodded to confirm that he'd been a good boy.

"But the ghost population is still increasing. That would seem to indicate he isn't the source."

"Which is exactly what I told you yesterday."

"I told you sos are so attractive," Karma muttered.

Jo just smiled angelically. She loved being right. Especially because she had royally sucked on the espionage front. It was a relief to know there hadn't been any secret plot to uncover, since she'd uncovered jack shit.

Karma wasn't done with her revelations. "Rodriguez seemed to think that long-term haunting of a body would have the same effects as long-term possession."

Jo sat forward suddenly. "The effect of long-term possession is *death*."

"It's just a theory," Karma said. "But it would also seem to make the culpability less likely to fall on Mr. Haines himself. The danger of his body detaching from his soul would be a powerful incentive against this brand of mischief."

"You think whatever set the ghost-sucker in the house and shoved the kids into Wyatt wants to hurt him?"

"I can't imagine a man reaches that level of success without accumulating a few enemies," Karma said, her tone far too calm. They were discussing murder, after all. "Has he

mentioned anyone who might be trying to sabotage him, or worse?"

Jo shook her head, the "or worse" ringing loud in her ears. "He hasn't said a thing. I don't think he spends much time thinking about the little people he steps on to get where he is."

Karma pursed her lips. "He might have to start thinking about it. If we can figure out who or what is responsible for what's going on with the house, we are much more likely to be able to stop it. I need you to ask him who might have a grudge against him. Particularly any mediums he might have met."

"Why limit it to mediums?" Jo asked. "If the house is whispering at him, that sounds like magic to me."

Lucy came to attention. "Witches? They almost never meddle with ghosts. The power is too different to be of any use to them," she protested.

Karma shook her head. "Lucy's right. They might be capable of setting a spell or enchantment to draw ghosts, but why would they bother? There's no purpose in it."

"Not even to harm Wyatt Haines?"

"I believe the witches go by the phrase 'Do no harm'," Lucy reminded her.

"Not all of them," Karma muttered darkly, her mouth drawn into a severe line. "We won't know anything for certain until I can get one of our witches out to check it out, but with Samhain coming up, it could be a week or more before I can get in touch with any of them."

Jo launched herself to her feet. "So we just wait and hope that Wyatt's soul doesn't give up the ghost and vacate the premises?"

"No," Karma countered. "You talk to Wyatt, see if you can figure out who set the enchantment and why, while I look into other possible sources."

"Wyatt has the supernatural sensitivity of a rock. I was throwing open portals and transcending a hundred ghosts, but all he saw was me twitching and falling over. What makes you think he would recognize a witch if he met one?"

"Do I need to assign someone else to liaise with Mr. Haines, Jo?"

"I'll liaise with him," Jo insisted, prodded by a completely irrational stab of jealousy at the thought of Wyatt *liaising* with anyone else. "But I don't know how much help he'll be. Witchcraft just adds a whole new level of suck to this mess."

Lucy frowned at her. "I thought you liked witches. You always seem to get along so well with Sally and Gillian."

"I like witches fine. I would just prefer this was strictly a medium problem, because then not only are we more likely to be able to fix it, but it narrows down the number of people who could be causing this to the two of us and about a dozen others on the entire continent. If it's witches, any idiot with a grimoire and a thimble-full of latent talent could be stirring up this shitstorm."

"Unfortunately, I'm inclined to agree with Jo that if magic is involved then this is probably the work of an amateur," Karma said. "Witchcraft is all about balance and harmony. Any adept witch would be too wary of the karmic ripples this

kind of magic would cause to attempt something so potentially destructive."

Lucy frowned. "But nothing is being destroyed. The ghosts are being pulled and pushed around, but there is no destructive energy in that."

"We don't know where the ghosts are coming from. The house might just be drawing any ghost in the vicinity, but the age of the ghosts is disturbing, as is the quantity. For all we know, the house is drawing ghosts who would have crossed over naturally and preventing them from going over. Or worse, pulling spirits who are on the verge of death, but might yet survive, and tipping the balance to draw the spirit into the ghost world. Who knows what length the enchantment will go to in order to accumulate the ghosts it needs?"

"You think the house might actually be killing sick kids?" Lucy asked in horror.

"Right now, I'm not ruling anything out," Karma said somberly. "Did you learn anything from Wyatt's ghosts? How long they were in the house or how far away they were drawn from?"

Jo shook her head. "Names and ages, and a propensity for pranks. They couldn't even tell us when they had died."

"Ghosts often struggle with the concept of time though," Lucy commented. "I would be more surprised if they *did* know how long they had been dead."

"Well, they didn't," Jo said shortly. "So that closes that door."

"There still might be more they can tell us. If they come back again, see if you can get any more out of them," Karma instructed.

"Before or after their presence permanently detaches Wyatt's soul from his body?" Jo asked sarcastically.

Karma narrowed her eyes. "Before, preferably. Are you going to be able to handle this, Jo, or should I assign someone who doesn't have such emotional reactions to the client?"

If only her boss's memory were not so accurate. If only she hadn't caught Jo playing cowgirl on top of Wyatt.

"I've got this, Karma," Jo insisted, even though she had never felt quite so off-balance and professionally unsure in her life. "I'm a pro."

* * * *

Wyatt took a long pull of the lukewarm beer Jake had filched out of a cooler hidden behind a tool chest in the garage and tried to pretend, just for a few minutes, that he was having a normal Saturday, hanging out, drinking beer and watching his alma mater get their asses kicked on the gridiron.

Of course, on a normal Saturday he'd be working all day and catching his alma mater's game on TiVo when he was too exhausted to accomplish anything else. And he'd be alone.

For the second time in as many days, he realized how pathetic his normal life was.

Jake shifted on the sawhorse he was using as a chair and waved with his beer toward the small, static-filled TV Mike kept in his tool area. "Their D sucks."

Wyatt didn't bother to defend the defense of his team. "Their D always sucks," he said agreeably. "But the combined IQ of the other team's entire offensive line isn't as high as any one of our guys. We may not be tough, but we can do our own taxes."

Jake snorted. "If only there were bowl games for accountants. Of course, half of them would probably get killed on the field and invade Lucy's and my bedroom in the afterlife. Accountants are the worst."

Wyatt studied Jake. He looked normal enough. A tough guy who carried a sidearm under his leather jacket, but for a cop-type he was pretty everyday average. And yet he didn't bat an eye at the ghost bullshit.

"So you're okay with the whole ghost thing?"

Jake shrugged. "It's Lucy. The ghosts are annoying as hell, particularly when they pop up in our bedroom at all hours of the night, but I've got Karma working on a way to block them when we want some privacy. Of course, no matter how omniscient my sister likes to pretend she is, she doesn't know everything. She thought the horny dork contingent would stop bothering us as soon as Lucy and I got together, but that hasn't happened. Apparently Lucy is catnip for dead dweebs."

"And Jo? Is there some magic recipe to make her ghosts go away?"

Jake eyed him for a long moment before responding. "I don't know the particulars of Jo's situation, but a medium

doesn't stop being a medium. Lucy was supposed to get a break from horny nerds, not a break from ghosts altogether. From what I understand, Jo doesn't draw ghosts to her the way Lucy does, but she has a greater ability to manipulate them."

"If she doesn't draw them, why doesn't she just avoid going places where they are?"

"Guess you'd have to ask her," Jake said unhelpfully. "Look, you seem like a decent enough guy, even if you don't know shit about ghosts, but if you want Jo to stop being a medium, you're asking her to stop being who she is. It's not like quitting a job you don't particularly like—"

"But she doesn't like it," Wyatt insisted. "She goes to the office and tries to pretend she's normal. Why would she do that if all she wanted to be was some ghost whisperer?"

"She likes it," Jake countered, without a shade of doubt in his voice. "What she doesn't like is that people treat her like a leper for something she has always been good at. No one can do what she does, Wyatt. She is ten times more powerful than Lucy, but until she stops repressing that side of herself, she'll never be able to fully tap into that power. So the last thing she needs is to get mixed up with some guy who thinks she'd be better off if she were just like everyone else. She's *special* and if you don't see that, you don't deserve her."

"Our relationship isn't like that. It's business."

"Uh-huh."

"I know she's special," Wyatt protested, knowing he sounded unconvincing.

"Sure you do." Jake turned his attention back to the TV. "Your quarterback has a good arm. Too bad he spends so much of his time on his back."

Wyatt didn't respond. He turned his face toward the television, but instead of the commentators' sympathetic groans, all he heard was Jake's biting words about Jo.

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Chapter Twenty: Business and Pleasure

Night two at Casa Haines proved much less eventful than the previous evening. Jo vetoed beer and TV as "too relaxing", since she didn't want Wyatt falling asleep on her again, which left them with leftover pizza and not much else.

She paced the condo, growing more agitated by the second, as Wyatt watched her. She should tell him. He had a right to know that there was some whacked-out witch casting spells on his house and trying to separate his soul from his body. But he barely believed in ghosts and she wasn't eager to push her luck on the new supernatural experiences front.

"You should relax," he commented, looking relaxed enough for both of them from his sprawl on the couch.

"I can't relax," Jo snapped, willing to pounce on any excuse to pick a fight. At least it would keep them awake and provide some distraction from her guilt over the fact that she wasn't being entirely honest with him. "I have to be vigilant in case the ghosts come back."

Wyatt just shrugged, clearly not understanding the gravity of the situation—which might have been due to the fact that Jo hadn't been able to bring herself to confess the whole 'you might die if we don't get these ghosts out of you fast' part.

"So they come back," he said. "How bad can it be? They've already run us out of bubble gum."

"Do you seriously think they need bubble gum to cause mischief? Are you telling me you don't have any permanent markers in this place? Maybe a bottle of superglue stashed

somewhere? You don't want to think about what these kids could do with a little superglue, whipped cream and condoms."

"Condoms?" he repeated, his eyebrows flying up.

"For example."

"You told them to stop playing pranks."

"So they're just going to listen to me? Just like that?"

Karma interrupted before I could get Angelica to agree to my Pixar bribe." Jo turned and dropped her forehead against the window with a groan. Her breath puffed out against the cool glass and echoed back against her lips. There was a chill in the air tonight, but not enough for her breath to fog the glass.

She didn't hear Wyatt move up behind her, so when his warm hands framed the back of her neck, she started, smacking her forehead against the glass. "Ow."

Wyatt dug his fingers into the tense muscles of her neck. The man had some seriously talented fingers.

"You need to relax."

Great. Now he was putting the moves on her. What had happened to the Hands-Off-Wyatt of last night? Although, really, would it be so terrible to go along with him? Sort of like granting a last request to a prisoner on death row. Give him a little send off. Jo winced at the thought, closing her eyes and leaning into his hands. But she couldn't force herself to relax. There was too much at stake.

"Do you have any enemies, Wyatt? Anyone who might want to hurt you or your business?"

"It's business," he said. "It's not personal and there are no vendettas. Just profit margins, success and failure."

"Some of the inns you converted into Haines Hideaways...you bought them out when they were on the edge of bankruptcy, but they were family owned for generations before that, weren't they?"

He dropped his hands and stepped back. "How did you know—"

Jo shrugged, still facing away from him. If she looked at him, she was going to start confessing sins and she had no idea which one was going to jump out of her mouth first. "I googled you while you were in the shower. My point is, it's not just business to those families."

"Which is why they were failing. You can't run a business with your heart. You have to use your head, even when it means firing your Aunt Millie because she sucks at keeping the books."

Jo had a feeling that wasn't just an analogy. "Did you fire your Aunt Millie, Wyatt?"

"Actually, no," he said, his voice devoid of emotion. "I fired my mother."

Jo choked. "Your *mother*? You fired your *mom*?"

Behind her, he cleared his throat and Jo grinned a little at the familiarity of the sound. She was beginning to think he made it whenever he was uncomfortable or felt like he wasn't in control.

Wyatt crossed to the wet bar and began rummaging through the bottles there, not mixing a drink, just occupying his hands. Probably categorizing the liquor by price. "Haines Hideaways started as just the one inn, my parents' inn. When I was six, my mom inherited some money. My parents had

always wanted to run a B&B so they bought this cute little place and poured every dime they had into it. Then they sold our house, moved us into the manager's suite at the inn, took out a second mortgage and poured money they didn't even have into it.

"By the time I got my MBA and took over, we were so far in debt it made more sense to file for bankruptcy and start from scratch than it did to keep it running. But my mother—after twenty straight years of sliding farther and farther into debt—insisted that we could make it profitable. Which, incidentally, would have been the first time it ever made a dime in all the time they owned it. I told her that I thought I could make it turn a profit, but we would have to do things my way. No more discounts for people just because they had a nice smile or seemed like they could use a break. No more complimentary everything from Swiss chocolates on the pillows to theatre tickets in town at the same price you would pay for a motel room at the Budget Inn. If we were going to run an exclusive, all-inclusive vacation getaway, then we were going to charge exclusive prices.

"My mom had a hard time sticking to the new rules, so I encouraged her to take a leave of absence until we were in the black again. We lost a few customers whom she thought of as loyal and I thought of as cheap, but we ran a profit the second year under my control and by the fifth we had expanded to a second location, both of which were running in the black."

"And now you're a bazillionaire." Jo sighed. "Has your mom forgiven you yet?"

Wyatt cleared his throat, and then was silent for a long moment before he spoke again. "We don't talk about business," he said flatly. "They still own a considerable share of the company, but they spend most of their time traveling these days, just dropping by for the occasional ribbon-cutting."

Jo turned, leaning back against the window as she watched him fidget with the bottles at the bar. "Does your mom ever visit her inn?"

"What?" He'd heard her, she was certain. He just didn't want to answer.

Jo wasn't willing to let it slide though. She was determined to find the human under Wyatt's corporate shell. "Her inn, the first one, the one that was her dream. Does she ever go there?"

"No." Wyatt shifted uncomfortably under her steady gaze then flashed her a charming smile. "But I hardly think she'd set a bunch of ghosts on me. I'm still her son."

"Spoken like truly grateful offspring," Jo grumbled. "What about other victims of hostile Hideaway takeovers?"

Wyatt lost the smile. "I bought unsuccessful inns, Jo. I was getting people out of untenable financial situations. I'm not going to apologize for it. They should be grateful to me."

"It's funny how seldom the heart listens to what it *should* feel."

Her feelings for Wyatt were a perfect example of that.

Jo knew she should be running in the opposite direction, but there was just something about him that wouldn't let her. He was an arrogant, prejudiced, emotionless prick, but when

he frowned, her heart went all gooey to see him struggling to understand a world that didn't fit into his neat little boxes. When he cleared his throat, she couldn't help but grin at the way he tried to never let on that things weren't in his control. And when he smiled...well, that was another problem altogether. Her stomach flipped over at that little boy grin and all her good intentions turned to mush.

But he also treated her like she was one step away from a straightjacket. Jo hated seeing herself through his eyes, the crazy ghost girl. There was no future for them, that much was clear. She couldn't be with someone who liked her in spite of who she truly was. She deserved more than that.

Jo cleared her head and her throat, the corners of her mouth turning up a bit when she realized she was mimicking Wyatt. "So no violent former business partners? Death threats? Maybe a psycho ex-girlfriend with a collection of weird hand-bound books?"

"None of the above."

During Jo's ruminations on Wyatt's unfortunate appeal, he had abandoned the bar. He now crossed to lean against the window beside her, his shoulder brushing hers. He leaned down to murmur conspiratorially, "Do you have a collection of weird hand-bound books, Jo?"

"Um, no." Her brain felt like it was melting, along with her knees. How was she supposed to think when he was standing so close, focused so intently on her? "The, ah, the books are for witches. I'm..."

"A medium?" he reminded her, leaning closer still. His aftershave and leather smell teased her.

"Mm-hmm." Her heart nearly jumped out of her chest when his mouth brushed the side of her neck. "Wyatt...what are you doing?"

His breath fanned the spot where her neck met her shoulder and she shivered. "Isn't it obvious?"

His mouth touched down on the spot his breath had just warmed, barely brushing the skin, a soft, wet abrasion. Jo braced her hands on the windowsill, her nails digging into the paint. There was a reason why they shouldn't be doing this. She *knew* there was a reason. He was...what was he?

"Thank you for defending me today," he murmured against her skin as he turned so that his body faced her fully, leaning over her.

"Anytime," Jo mumbled as he nuzzled against the side of her neck, sending delicious shivers coasting lightly across her skin.

"No one has ever done that for me before," he continued in that hypnotically low voice. "Of course, usually no one has to. I'm not in the habit of throwing people into pools."

Jo smiled as much as the spell of soft-edged want he was weaving around her would allow. "I'm glad to hear it."

"You were my hero today." His teeth scraped her neck and Jo's back bowed, arching her toward him.

"That's me," she gasped out dizzily, her eyes closing against her will. "Defender of the haunted."

The haunted.

Jo's eyes flew open. She wrenched away from him, taking two staggering steps until she was completely out of his reach. They hadn't even kissed, but her breath was coming in

pants and she knew her eyes were just as passion-black as his as he faced her with confusion twisting his pretty-boy face.

"You're trying to seduce me!" she accused.

A lazy grin immediately replaced the confusion. "How am I doing?" he asked, taking a step toward her.

Jo quickly took two steps back. "You can't seduce me!"

"Why not? No one can see us."

"You're haunted! There are little children ghosts inside you!"

Wyatt stopped chasing her around the room and frowned. "You told me they couldn't see anything when I'm in control. I certainly have no idea what the hell is going on when they're in control."

"That isn't the point! They're still there. I *know* they're there. It would be like making out in a playground."

Wyatt's frown grew darker—which was the correct response. If he'd actually liked getting it on in front of little kids that would have been a total deal-breaker. *Ewww*.

"It would not be like a playground," Wyatt insisted. Clearly his hormones were unwilling to give up the fight. "They would never know anything had happened."

"I would know."

"That didn't bother you in your office," he reminded her.

"That was before. I didn't know them then. They were just blobs of light. I have no problem getting busy in front of blobs of light. But when Lucy and I talked to them, when I *saw* them, that changed everything. They're *kids*, Wyatt." She shuddered in revulsion. "And what if we, you know, and you

did the guy thing and passed out afterward? As soon as you're out, they come out to play and suddenly the body they're in is all naked and sweaty, and I'm there and I'm naked and sweaty—"

Wyatt held up both hands to stop her. "Okay, I get it. Enough."

Then something he'd said earlier replayed in her mind. "What did you mean 'No one can see us'?"

"What? Nothing."

But Jo knew it wasn't nothing. She gazed at him steadily until he blurted, "Oh, come on, Jo. You know as well as I do that we can't be seen to be having an affair."

"Excuse me?"

"My professional image is important. Can you imagine what it would do to the Haines Hideaway stock price if it came out that I was running around with a woman who openly admits to seeing ghosts? I'd be a laughingstock."

His words lanced through her. She knew she shouldn't be hurt. She should have expected just this kind of bullshit from Wyatt Haines, CEO, but she still felt as if she'd been slapped. "I see."

"Jo, come off it. It isn't personal."

"Isn't it? I'm good enough to fuck but not good enough to be seen in public with, but it's nothing *personal*."

"Jo, I didn't..."

"Forget it, Wyatt. Nothing was going to happen between us anyway, right? Why should it matter whether it's because of little ghosties or your *image*?"

"Jo..."

"This is when it's best to just stop talking, Wyatt."

"Fine." He held up his hands to call for a truce. "So now that we've ruled out TV, beer, sex, and talking, what do you want to do?"

Jo knew exactly what she wanted to do. She also knew it was a bad idea. She knew that Karma would have her ass if she ever found out. And she knew that she would never be able to get to sleep until she did.

"Well, hell. It's almost Halloween. Let's go check out a haunted house."

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Chapter Twenty-One: Haunt Me, Baby, One More Time

The Victorian looked exactly as it had when she first laid eyes on it two days ago. *My God, was that only two days?* The moonlight cast a faintly bluish tinge across everything it touched, but the house glowed distinctly green under the heavy moon. This time, the house wasn't just breathing, it was practically panting. There were well over two hundred ghosts in there now.

"Time for some house cleaning," Jo muttered to herself as Wyatt rounded the Bentley's hood and came to stand beside her.

"So, what are we going to do?"

"We aren't going to do anything. *You* are going to hang out here while I go in and check things out."

"If you wanted to leave me behind, you shouldn't have let me drive. I'm going in with you."

"My Harley is still parked at your office," Jo grumbled. "I didn't have much of a choice but to let you drive when you wouldn't let me have the keys to your damn car."

"Yeah, I'm a heartless prick. But I believe we've covered that already. Shall we go in?"

"You're a masochist, you know that? Don't you remember what happened to you last time you went in there?"

"I fell on you. I can think of worse ways to end the day." He waggled his eyebrows lecherously and she smacked him.

Jo tried to hang onto her earlier irritation. She reminded herself that no man who wasn't willing to be seen in public

with her could be attractive. No matter how engaging he might seem to be.

She planted her hands on her hips. "What about the time before that? You want to end up even more haunted than you are? Bodies aren't meant to hold more than one spirit, Wyatt."

"What happened to the 'house will suck the ghosts right out of me' theory?"

"You have the self-preservation instincts of a cliff-diving lemming, you know that?"

"Hey, I'll be better this time. When the ghost exterminator says jump, I ask how high."

"Just jump. I don't think there will be time for questions if it gets hairy." She studied him, looking for chinks in his armor, but the bastard was even more stubborn than she was. "Fine, you can come. Just don't do anything stupid." Stupid, like getting emotionally involved with a man who didn't think she was good enough to be seen at the supermarket with, let alone take home to mother.

Wyatt saluted and took her arm, a true gentleman. Asshole. They strolled up the walk like a couple on a Sunday promenade instead of a pair of clueless ghost hunters on a Saturday night. The house creaked and rattled. Wind rustled through the eaves, even though, beyond the house, the night was perfectly still.

Jo knew it was dumb to come back to the scene of the crime when they still had no idea what the hell was causing all of the anomalies, but she hadn't been able to stay away. Somewhere inside this house were the clues she needed to

get the ghosts out of Wyatt and save him from possibly having his soul ripped out of his body by overzealous ghosts. Not to mention finding the source behind all of this and getting her mojo back, once and for all.

Wyatt, for all his control freak ways, had become remarkably easy-going about the whole ghost phenomenon, content to follow her along and do what she said. It was that, possibly more than any other factor, which had made her desperate to come here tonight.

He trusted her to find a solution. The man who hadn't believed in ghosts two days ago was putting all of his faith in her. She still wasn't entirely convinced that he really believed in ghosts, but he believed that she would fix it. Wyatt wasn't overtly worried. He had confidence in her. He may not have noticed he had confidence in the freaky ghost girl, but Jo noticed, and it scared the shit out of her. For the first time since she was in grade school, she was out of her depth with ghosts. Just when she needed her spooky ghost knowledge the most.

They stepped up onto the front porch and Wyatt stumbled, his grip on her arm tightening as he tried to find his balance.

"Wyatt?"

He had gone pale and inside him the glowing marbles that were Teddy and Angelica zipped around his body in a chaotic whirl.

"That's it. I'm taking you back to the car."

But when she grabbed his shoulders to turn him, Wyatt shook her off. "No, I'm good," he protested, straightening. He shook his head as if trying to clear it and gave her a pathetic

excuse for a smile. "I was just a little disoriented for a second. Let's keep going."

"That is such an obvious lie," Jo snapped. "You are not fine and we are not moving one more step until you tell me what you felt."

Wyatt eyed her, but apparently realized he wasn't getting around her stubbornness this time. "I heard the voice again," he admitted. "The whispery one."

"Could you tell what it was saying?" Jo asked, urgency gripping her as she clutched his arm. "Or where it was coming from?"

Wyatt nodded toward the house. "The kitchen, maybe? But there were still no real words."

Jo turned to face the front door head-on. "I am getting sick and tired of this house messing with us," she growled. "I think it's time to show this hunk of plywood what we're made of."

"What are we made of?"

"Well, what *I'm* made of at least. You sure you won't wait here?"

"I'm sure. Let's do this," he declared firmly then ruined it by muttering, "Whatever it is that we're doing."

Wyatt unlocked the front door and Jo marched through.

I am more badass than anything in here, she told herself as she stalked toward the kitchen. Ghosts whipped around her, chilled breezes and eerie moans marking their passing as they swirled through the house. Jo didn't so much as pause. "Ready or not, here I come," she growled to the Big Bad waiting in the kitchen.

She felt the pulse of energy, as if there was too much to be contained within the room, when she was still halfway across the dining room.

"There are more than last time," she muttered. Wyatt didn't respond, though he stayed close on her heels as they approached the swinging door to the kitchen, which was swinging merrily back and forth, caught in the ghostly breeze. Jo caught the edge of the door, stopping its movement, and Wyatt handed her a chair to prop it open all the way.

The pulse of energy was stronger here, humming against her senses. Jo closed her eyes and listened to the hum, straining to hear beneath the static of so many ghosts crammed together in one place.

There it was, barely audible, a soft, sibilant voice whispering words too fast and slurred to make out. The words of a spell.

"Shit," Jo muttered. "It *is* magic." Even knowing it was the most likely explanation, Jo had been hoping for another cause. Just about *any* other cause.

"Magic?" Wyatt whispered, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb her concentration. Jo wasn't actually concentrating at the moment, so she didn't bother pointing out how distracting his attempt not to distract her was.

"There's some kind of spell at work here. That's the voice you keep hearing. I'm betting you only hear it because the ghosts inside you are so strongly affected by it. Just like these ghosts are." She gestured toward the kitchen where a dense stew of green specters spun. "Take a few steps back. I'm going to go in there and release as many of them as I can."

"Release?" he asked, already stepping back as she requested.

"Transcend." Jo waved a hand. "The whole white light thing. Just, if you see a bright light, don't go into it, okay?"

"No problem."

Hopefully, it wouldn't be.

Jo stepped into the kitchen and was immediately swallowed up by sensation. She tried to sort through the myriad energies, tried to see through the energy haze to identify a spot where the ghostly presences were more thickly concentrated, but they never seemed to stop moving and her senses were overwhelmed by the presence of so many. Even as she blocked out the individual imprints of the ghosts—the names and voices—she was still swamped by the force of their residual presence.

This is a bad idea.

Jo squashed the creeping doubts. She couldn't doubt herself now. She needed concentration and confidence. The latter had never been a problem for her before, but she'd never questioned her mojo before either.

She closed her eyes, focused, and shoved back, raising her hands and pushing them away from her, the physical gesture helping her to clear the mental space around her.

Jo opened her eyes and searched the room for a thin spot she could open into a portal, simultaneously scanning for any sign of witchcraft bending the ghosts to a foreign will. There was no sign of either, just a constantly swirling vortex of ghost energy.

Jo stepped farther into the room, until she was standing dead center. It was quieter here, like the eye of a storm. She looked down, searching the tiles beneath her feet for a pattern—a pentagram or some other occult symbol laid into the ground, but there was nothing.

The ghosts were encroaching, so she pushed out again, clearing the space around her and scanned again for a thin spot in the air. She almost missed it, because this time it was directly above her. When she took a step back, the air seemed to thicken, so, frowning, she stood directly beneath her portal. She reached, yanked, and it popped open.

Just like the last time, the ghosts shied back away from it. And just like last time, Jo frowned at the uncharacteristic behavior.

She didn't have the patience for delicacy tonight. Jo gritted her teeth and shoved as many ghosts toward the portal as she could. As soon as they brushed its edges, they vanished through it, but as soon as she had cleared one corner of the room, it filled again as ghosts were sucked into the empty space from other parts of the house.

She hurriedly shoved more through, trying to empty the steadily refilling room, but it was like trying to move a desert one handful of sand at a time.

Jo felt like she had been working for ages, focusing intently on forcing the ghosts to the portal, but in reality it couldn't have been anything more than a few seconds, when the other presence in the house woke up.

The first yank back against the ghosts was so fast and unexpected Jo was thrown to the ground, slammed into the

hard tile before she realized what was happening. She kept the portal open by instinct alone, but with the break in her focus, she lost the ability to block the ghosts and the sudden cacophony of hundreds of children's voices nearly deafened her.

Jo flinched and raised her hands up in defensive reflex to cover her ears, but the noise wasn't coming from outside. It echoed inside her brain. She struggled to block them, fighting for a second of calm, but there were too many and they were too forceful.

She grabbed at the nearest voice, the plaintive wail of a small child, and yanked that one presence toward the portal. The child zipped through into the light, but Jo couldn't thrill in the small victory. She was drowning in voices. She couldn't hope to put them through one by one, especially not if she had to fight that other force along the way.

As if called by her thoughts, the other presence crashed against her, battering her through the ghosts that connected them. The voice, the whispering rush of the spell, grew deafening, blending with the screams of the ghosts and pounding in her brain. Jo writhed on the floor. She couldn't find the source and fight back. It pushed at her from the inside out, simultaneously pressing in on her from all sides.

"Jo!"

Wyatt's hands found her in the middle of the maelstrom. He swung her up against his chest, his body curled protectively over hers as he ran from the room. Jo let the portal snap shut and clung to him, but the ghostly hysteria

that battered her didn't ease until he stumbled and fell to his knees on the front lawn, still holding her cradled against him.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Her voice didn't come out right, so she tried again, putting more strength behind the words. "I'm fine now."

"You're shaking," he murmured, tucking her even more tightly against him as he shoved to his feet and continued toward the relative safety of the car.

Only then did Jo notice the shudders wracking her body. She tried to breathe, tried to calm the adrenaline flood rushing through her veins, but all she could do was hang onto Wyatt. "I'm okay," she tried to reassure him, but even her voice shook and it was hard to talk through chattering teeth. "You got me out."

Wyatt Haines, anal CEO, had saved her. His very insensitivity to ghosts had protected him from the battering she had taken. Her mojo had failed her, but Wyatt had been there. Thank God.

She looked at her unexpected savior and saw the glimmering shapes of Angelica and Teddy still buzzing in his chest. The spell hadn't pulled them out of Wyatt's body as she'd hoped after all.

They reached the car, but he didn't immediately put her down. His arms stayed locked around her as he leaned against the Bentley. His face was lined with strain and there was the afterimage of fear in those intense blue eyes. For some reason, that fear kicked Jo right in the stomach. He had been afraid for *her*.

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He forced a weak smile, gently setting her on her own feet. "Let's not do that again."

Jo smiled back, just as shakily. "Deal."

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Chapter Twenty-Two: Afterglow

Wyatt watched Jo plop down sideways onto the couch, folding her legs up, facing him. She tucked her cell phone back into her pocket. "Karma says hi."

Wyatt tossed her an arch look. "Is that what she says?"

"Yeah. That and if I ever try anything remotely like what I tried tonight, I'll be fired so fast my head will spin. Other than that, it was all pleasantries and small talk." She winked at him.

He'd noticed that her mood had improved steadily the farther they'd gotten away from the house. By the time they got back to his condo, she'd been downright chipper, which was a pleasant change from the arctic blast of her company after he'd pointed out their incompatibility. He wasn't about to mention *that* again.

"It's nice to know she doesn't encourage you to walk into dangerous situations," he said, matching Jo's light mood.

"I don't think it was the danger that bothered her so much as my resounding failure. Not only did I just get my ass handed to me by some funky ghost-spell, we are no closer to figuring out who set it or why. Although, I do have a theory."

"Oh? What's that?"

Jo bounced a little on the couch. "I think the old dead lady, the previous owner of the house, is trying to resurrect herself."

Wyatt snorted with disbelief—the world of crazy just kept getting crazier—then carefully wiped his face of all expression. "Is that so? And what did Karma think of this?"

Jo slumped and made a face. "Pretty much the same thing you just thought. Although she wasn't quite as tactful. The word harebrained was used a lot. I didn't know people still said harebrained."

Wyatt frowned. "Is that even possible? Resurrection?"

He was beginning to think that Jo's Santa Claus belief in ghosts might be more accurate than he had ever imagined, but magic? Spells? Resurrection? There was only so much insanity a man could be expected to process in a forty-eight hour period.

"It's sort of possible," Jo replied, shrugging. "In theory. Of course, her body will have already decayed past the point of being useful, which is why I thought it was likely, given the breathing and everything, that the house itself was supposed to be the vessel for her soul to return."

Wyatt snorted before he could stop himself. "She wants to come back to life as a house?"

"Yeah, I admit that's a little far-fetched, but if she were trying to become a demon of some kind, capable of possessing the bodies of living creatures, then the house would be a logical stop-over between dead and demonic."

"Logical." Logic had stepped out the door as soon as Jo stepped into his life.

"Yeah. She could draw souls to her and feed on them until she had enough power to become a real demon." Jo frowned and flopped back against the cushion. "Although, if she were

feeding on the souls then they wouldn't be stock-piling the way they are. And KC's demon guy who Karma had look at the house would probably have sensed something. But other than that, I really like my theory."

"And what does Karma think?"

"That I should leave the house alone."

Wyatt liked that plan. Every time Jo walked in there, she ended up laid out on the floor. This time, when he'd seen her screaming and writhing, he'd decided he'd had more than enough of that damned house. "And you said?"

"I agreed. For now." She launched herself off the couch and began pacing. "We need more answers. We've got a thousand maybes and nothing concrete."

"We've tried going to the house. We've tried talking to the ghosts. What else do you want to try?"

Jo spun around and struck a superhero pose, planting her hands on her hips. "It's time to go see the expert."

"I thought Karma was the expert."

"Karma's the boss. My grandma is the expert. She's in a home about ninety miles from here. We can go tomorrow."

"This is the same grandmother you said was a little nuts?"

"Yeah, but she's canny. She'll know what's going on." Jo spun to face the window again and hugged herself. "She has to."

Wyatt rose and moved to stand behind her, drawn to her side just as he had been earlier in the evening, but this time he didn't touch her. The last thing he wanted to do was remind her of their argument. "It's going to be okay, Jo," he said. "We're going to figure this out."

But once they did, she'd be gone from his life. He could no longer delude himself that he was still eager for that day. He was going to miss her brand of insanity.

Jo turned to him and sighed, searching his face for answers she knew she wouldn't find there. "Are we going to figure it out?" she asked, hating the doubt that had crept into her life.

He flashed her a cocky grin filled with bravado. "Of course we are. We've got contingency plans on top of our contingency plans."

Jo made a face, hearing him repeat her words back to her. She dropped her forehead until it rested against his chest and sighed heavily. "You know, as pleased as I am that you finally trust me, I could do with a little less pressure."

"Hey—" He caught her chin and tipped her face up so she was forced to meet his eyes. Eyes that seemed to be getting bluer every time she looked into them. "No pressure. We're going to figure this out together. You may be the Ghost Goddess, but you could still learn a thing or two from me. Trust *me*. I don't know how to fail."

Her smile was wry. "I love it. Even when you're comforting, you're an arrogant prick."

He laughed softly. "We all have our talents."

He was still holding her chin, tipping her face up to him, when his mouth settled gently over hers. This kiss was an entirely different species from the hungry attack in her office, but she was no less affected by it. The only points where he touched her were his mouth and the tips of his fingers gently

holding her jaw. His lips were soft and firm, the smooth, reassuring taste of him undiluted by the blind rush of passion.

He didn't push for more than that simple press of lips, but pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. "I know," he said softly. "Not in front of the kids."

Jo said nothing, wanting that quiet moment to stretch for a few thousand years. At length, he drew back away from her, and for a second Jo considered pulling his mouth back down to hers. Whenever she thought she had built a wall between them with her anger and his prejudice, he managed to find a way to sneak through the cracks and get under her skin again.

She tossed her head, trying to banish the blend of lust and affection he stirred in her and was momentarily disoriented by her lack of hair flipping over her shoulders. *The ghosts*. Teddy and Angelica were yet another symptom of her failure.

She was fighting her attraction to Wyatt, fighting to save his cold, corporate soul, and fighting to get her own mojo back. It was exhausting to be fighting every second. As badly as she wanted Wyatt, she wanted sleep just as much, but sleep wasn't an option. Unless...

"Mr. Haines, I believe I have an idea as to how you and I might be able to get a good night's rest."

Wyatt raised hopeful—and bloodshot—blue eyes to hers. "I would sell my grandmother for a good night's rest."

Jo laughed. "Fire your mother, sell your grandmother. You're just a regular family man, aren't you?" He'd probably eat his young.

"I would love to stand here and be witty with you, but someone mentioned something about sleep and my brain just shut off."

Jo grinned. "So, Wyatt, have you ever been tied up?"

* * * *

Jo slipped into Wyatt's bedroom early the next morning and leaned a hip against the bed as she watched him sleep. He looked so peaceful. Much more peaceful than she felt.

She wasn't particularly well-rested, a state that had little to do with the sunlight that started pouring through Wyatt's living room windows at dawn, the too-short couch she had slept on, or even the racket that Teddy and Angelica had caused last night when they found they were not going to be allowed out to play. Her lack of sleep had much more to do with the fact that she had a gorgeous man who wanted her like crazy—*though only as his dirty little secret*, an acidic little voice in her head reminded her—tied to his bed less than twenty feet away.

No, it hadn't been a restful night.

Jo fingered the silk ties she had used to tie Wyatt's wrists to the headboard. The silk dug into his skin and was probably ruined from being stretched and knotted so tightly, but she hadn't wanted the ghosts to be able to slip out of them and Wyatt didn't have anything better to be tied with.

A little smile escaped her mouth as she remembered his teasing that they would have to find a sex shop open on Sundays and pick up a pair of padded handcuffs before tonight. The wicked light in his eyes had promised that, as

soon as she got the ghosts out of him, she could test-drive the handcuffs herself. Jo hadn't been as immune as she would have liked to that unspoken invitation.

He stirred in his sleep and Jo considered untying him, but as long as he was out, the ghosts could still seize the opportunity to take control.

Instead of loosening the bonds, Jo climbed up onto the bed beside him and cuddled up next to his warmth. The man was a living furnace. His heat burned through her tension and doubts, and she relaxed against him.

She should wake him up soon. They needed to get an early start if they were going to get to her grandma's and back in time to do anything about the house tonight. She should have woken him, but she didn't. Instead she let her eyes fall closed and nestled close. *Just a few minutes.*

For just a few minutes, she wanted to lean into his warmth, to feel safe and sheltered and *normal*. No ghosts, no prejudices, and no dirty little secrets. Just her and Wyatt.

It was a foolish fantasy, but Jo couldn't resist its allure. Sunday mornings curled up together like this, lazing through the day. Normal and happy and loved.

Jo closed her eyes and let herself dream, if only for a few minutes.

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Over the River & Through the Woods

The Serenity Hills Senior Facility was not at all what Wyatt expected. It looked more like a high-end resort, not unlike some of his own more extravagant properties, than it did the sterile, clinically depressing old folks' home he had anticipated. Cute, single-level bungalows backed up against golf courses and every carport featured large, low-slung American machinery. This was where yuppies and soccer moms went to retire. Next stop, heaven.

"Welcome to Senility Hills," Jo quipped from the passenger seat as they rolled through streets with ten-mile-per-hour speed limits. "Just follow the main road. It'll eventually get us to the Assisted Living building where Gram lives."

Wyatt followed her instructions, even as he wondered whether it was too early to put down a deposit on a golf-course-view bungalow of his own.

Beside him, Jo snorted out a laugh.

"What?"

She grinned, unrepentant. "I can see you planning your golden years," she snickered. "Nine o'clock tee times and four o'clock dinners. Pinching little old ladies and flirting with the nurses."

"While you gab with your pinochle partners, both the living and the deceased," he countered.

Jo shrugged. "Probably. I've never given much thought to retirement. I'm not a planner like you."

Wyatt frowned. "Don't you have a 401K? What kind of a business is Karma running?"

"A ghost-catching, demon-exorcising, spell-casting, aura-reading business, Wyatt. But, yeah, I have a 401K. And benefits. I'm a regular grown-up." Jo made a face, sticking out her tongue and crossing her eyes—very grown up.

"It's never too early to start planning for the future."

"The future will get here in its own good time. No sense rushing it. Might as well enjoy the now." When Wyatt just frowned, Jo burst out laughing again. "I swear, Wyatt, you are going to have the mid-life crisis to end all crises when you finally figure out that there is more to live for than just financial security."

"I know there's more to life than financial security," he protested. Right now there was Jo and ghosts and more chaos than he normally dealt with in a year. He hadn't been to work in *days*. And he had to admit, if only to himself, that it felt pretty damn good to play hooky.

The lobby of the Assisted Living building reminded him of the foyer of the posh Mayflower Hotel in DC where the Kennedys had once lived and he started fantasizing about retirement again. Jo moved straight to the front desk and signed them in before leading the way to a bank of elevators.

"Gram spends most of her time at the pool on sunny days," she explained, hitting the button for the top floor.

The elevators opened onto a rooftop pool deck overlooking the landscaped grounds. The senior citizens scattered around the patio were bundled up in scarves and caftans in a nod to the breezy October weather. No one was in the pool, though

from the steam drifting off the top, it looked to be kept at the same temperature as the average hot tub.

Jo moved straight toward a petite white-haired lady sitting by herself at a table for four and Wyatt fell into step behind her.

"Gram!" Jo bent and gave her grandmother a squeeze before turning to one of the empty chairs and waving cheerfully. "Hiya, Grandpa."

Wyatt thought it was a sign of how far he had come over the last few days that he didn't even blink.

"Jo Ellen, aren't you just pretty as a picture. I just love what you've done with your hair," her grandmother said in a soft, breathy voice. "Don't you think it's just lovely, Harvey?"

Wyatt had to cough to cover the laugh that threatened to erupt when he heard that Jo's grandmother's invisible friend was named *Harvey*, of all things. From that point on, the image of a six-foot rabbit as Jo's grandfather refused to leave his brain.

Jo smiled in response to whatever Harvey said. "Gram, Grandpa, this is Wyatt Haines. He's a friend of mine who has a little ghost problem and we wanted to tap your expertise."

Wyatt reached out to gently take the elderly lady's papery hand in his. "Ma'am." She gave his hand a surprisingly fierce squeeze and flashed him a wink.

"Your young man is quite handsome, Jo Ellen."

"Yeah, he's a looker," Jo agreed readily, and Wyatt glanced at her in surprise. She gave him a lazy grin and shrugged before turning back to her grandmother—or rather her grandparents.

Wyatt hesitated for a second, unsure whether or not he was supposed to greet her invisible grandfather. Jo grabbed his arm and shoved him into an empty chair before the indecision could paralyze him.

Jo quickly summarized the problem for her grandparents. Her grandmother listened intently, taking each bizarre revelation in stride and occasionally instructing Harvey to "Hush up". Once Jo was done, the sweet little old lady settled back in her chair and gave them a soft smile.

"Well, that's quite a pickle, isn't it?"

Jo smiled patiently. "We were hoping you could help us figure out how to stop it."

The little old lady smiled beatifically. "No, dear, I'm afraid I can't do that."

Jo sat forward abruptly. "What do you mean you *can't*?"

"It wouldn't be fair to you, dear." Her grandmother reached across the table and patted her hand. "It's high time you started doing for yourself, Jo Ellen. If I tell you how to solve your problems, you'll never figure out how to do it on your own."

"Gram, I've tried solving them on my own. My mojo is busted. I can't—"

"Nonsense. There is nothing wrong with your mojo. The problem isn't your abilities. You've always been more powerful than Lucy and I combined. The problem is *you*. Until you learn to embrace who you are, take the reins in your own life—"

"Gram, this is life and death we're talking about. Can we save the self-discovery bull for some time when things are less urgent?"

"No." Her grandmother insisted stubbornly, the mulish set of her mouth suddenly reminding Wyatt strongly of Jo. Then she turned to the empty chair and said, "Oh, hush, Harvey. I'm not hurting the child. She has all the tools she needs to solve her own problems. It's her Pandora's Box. She can just figure out how to close it herself."

Something in Jo's posture changed slightly during this little speech. When she spoke, her expression was contemplative. "Gram, what about Wyatt's problem? *He* doesn't have all the tools he needs to solve his own problem."

"Oh, you think you're so clever do you? Trying to turn my argument back on me, are you?" Gram waved one gnarled finger back and forth. "Not so fast, missy. Is it really Wyatt's problem? Seems to me it's Teddy and Angelica's problem. Which means it is *your* problem, since ghosts are *your* business. The host is just a house."

"Just a house?" Jo asked in confusion. "But if I open a portal inside Wyatt, won't that be a danger to him?"

"Yes, yes, you can't do it *that* way," Gram agreed. "In, out, in, out. It can't be too easy or everyone would do it."

"But how *do* you do it?" Jo asked, exasperated.

"Ghosts just don't go places for no reason, Jo Ellen," her grandmother said, her tone indicating that she had clearly expected Jo to come to this conclusion on her own. Then she turned sharply to the empty chair and exclaimed, "Hush, Harvey! I've told the girl plenty."

Wyatt wanted to protest that she hadn't told them a damn thing, but Jo was smiling and rising from her chair. "Yes, you have. Thanks, Gram. You're a lifesaver."

"You're leaving already?" Gram sighed dramatically and Wyatt saw the guilt-trip train rolling into the station. "You only come to see me to ask me about your ghost problems. You never see me just to talk."

Jo snorted. "Nice performance, Gram. Luce and I come out here every other week, bringing you sweets you aren't supposed to eat and all the gossip mom thinks is too delicate for your aged ears. You can try to play the neglected, forgotten grandparent all you want, but Wyatt isn't going to believe you any more than Jake did."

Gram smiled Lucy's dimpled smile. "You are good girls, but you didn't bring me anything today."

"The bakery you like in town isn't open on Sundays and I didn't think you wanted to risk my attempts at baked goods. Next time we come I'll make Lucy bake you whatever you want."

"Lemon," Gram demanded imperiously. "Lemon bundt cake. Glazed."

Jo saluted as she rose to her feet. "Lemon it is. Have a good week and I'll see you on Saturday. Be nice to the nurses. *Hasta la vista*, Grandpa."

Wyatt trailed along in her wake, even more confused than he was before their fact-finding mission. He waited until Jo was signing them out in the lobby before turning to her and asking the question that had been burning a hole in his brain. "Was your grandfather really named Harvey?"

"Yep."

Wyatt shook away the image of an enormous rabbit. "Did he give you a bunch of advice I couldn't hear? What was he saying?"

Jo just shrugged. "Hell if I know. He transcended fifteen years ago. That chair was empty. She just likes to pretend he's still around. It's sort of her last revenge against him to pretend he's a ghost."

"How is that vengeful?"

Jo grinned. "My grandpa was like you, Wyatt. He didn't believe in ghosts. He told anyone who would listen that his wife was as mad as a hatter, but he loved her anyway."

Wyatt frowned. "I'm still not clear on why we came all the way out here if your grandmother is crazy."

"Oh, she's a loon," Jo acknowledged in the same way she would readily admit to being one herself, "but that doesn't mean she doesn't know more about the spirit world than anyone I've ever met, living or dead."

"But she didn't tell you anything," Wyatt protested.

"Sure she did."

Wyatt pushed the button to unlock the Bentley and they climbed in. Jo pulled out her cell phone, muttering irritably about her lack of service. They were halfway back to the main road before his hold on his curiosity deteriorated.

"Well?" he demanded. "What did I miss?"

Jo turned to him in surprise. "I thought you wouldn't want to know the ghostly details. You don't like the paranormal."

"I still have a right to know what's going on." He knew his tone was unnecessarily sharp, but he was sick of being

confused all the time. It was time he started paying attention to the rules of the paranormal game. Maybe he could figure out a way to beat it.

"Of course you do," Jo acknowledged. "I would have told you right away if I thought you were interested."

"I'm interested," he snapped. It was his life, after all, that had been turned upside down. The invasion of *his* house and *his* body that had started this whole fiasco.

"Yeah, Wyatt. I figured that much out. So which do you want to know about first, the house or your personal problem?"

"Let's start with the house." It was a little easier to force himself to believe in a haunted house than a haunted stomach.

"The house it is." Jo was silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts, toying with her cell phone in her lap.

"Something seemed off about witches being responsible from the first," she said at last. "In witchcraft, there's this thing called the threefold rule. Kind of a you-reap-what-you-sow sort of thing, only more so. Whatever you do comes back to you threefold. So even if you aren't a big fan of the do no harm philosophy, usually fear of the consequences keeps witches from messing with the universe too much."

"But?"

"But there's a loophole." She shook her head. "I'm an idiot for not thinking of it myself."

"Less recriminations, more explanations."

Jo grinned. "You sound like Karma."

"The loophole?"

"Talismans," Jo announced with finality. "A witch will put an enchantment or a spell on an object, but as long as they have no intention to use the object, they avoid the threefold consequences. If a witch wanted to create mayhem without suffering for it, all she would have to do is put the mayhem spell into a talisman. An object has no intent and the intention to do harm is what triggers the reprisals.

"When my grandma mentioned closing Pandora's Box, it was a clue. Pandora's Box was a magic shop that used to sell talismans before it closed down a few years ago. Now, pretty much the only place to go for grimoires, tarot cards, and the occasional crystal ball is a place called the Prometheus Unbound Book Shop. The proprietor is not exactly known for being scrupulous in his business practices. He's something of a supernatural mischief-maker. If someone were going to try to buy or sell a ghost-controlling talisman, odds are they went through Prometheus."

"But if a witch used the talisman, wouldn't the rule still apply?" Wyatt asked in an attempt to apply logic to this bizarre new world.

"That's the bad news. You don't have to be a witch to use a talisman. Any idiot can wander in off the street thinking he wants to be a practitioner and buy something he shouldn't, because Prometheus has a more-the-merrier approach to magic use. Those wannabe witches might not even know what they have. Or worse, they might know *exactly* what they have. We don't even know if we're dealing with someone who wants to harm or help you."

"So are we going to check out this Prometheus place?"

Jo made a face. "It's closed today."

"Right. Sunday."

"No, Samhain. Tomorrow is Samhain night. It's a big witch holiday."

"Don't you mean Wicca?"

Jo burst out laughing. "Well, well, look who's all knowledgeable about the occult all of a sudden. But technically, no, I don't mean Wicca. Wicca is the religion. Witchcraft is the art. Many witches are Wiccan because the principles coincide, but I've met Buddhist and even a couple Catholic witches as well. It takes all kinds."

"But this Samhain is a holiday, regardless of religion?"

Jo wrinkled her nose. "Holiday is the wrong word, I guess. It's a power day. A natural day of death and rebirth. Witches tend to retreat from the modern world and gather to focus their power. The greatest spells are always cast during Samhain and Beltane, a fertility festival at the beginning of May."

"So the spell on the house, will it be even worse tomorrow?"

"God, I hope not. That's all we need."

They stopped at a light and Wyatt turned to face her. "Do we just wait until after Samhain then? Get our answers then."

Jo glanced at him, her eyes somber. "I don't think we can wait. We'll have to search the house for the talisman."

"The house didn't like you very much last time."

"I won't be doing anything to the ghosts this time. Just looking. I don't think it will kick the holy hell out of me if I don't take a few shots at it first."

"What does a talisman look like?"

Jo grimaced. "Yeah, that's the tricky part. It could be just about anything. Usually it's a medallion of some kind, mostly because witches are traditionalists, but I've heard of people enchanting vacuum cleaners. A talisman is just an object that has been imbued with a magic of some kind. For all we know, it's the kitchen sink."

"So how do we find it, if it could be anything?"

The light turned green and Wyatt pulled his attention away from Jo and put it back on the traffic.

"I have a theory," she said, and the hesitation in her voice set off warning bells that almost had him veering off the road.

"Why do I have a feeling I'm not going to like this theory?"

"I think Teddy and Angelica might know where it is."

He frowned. "Why would you think that?"

"It's something my Gram said. She said I had all the pieces I needed to figure this out and she specifically mentioned Teddy and Angelica. I think they can help us get the talisman out of your house. Not only that, I think they might be able to help me pull them out of you, too."

This time Wyatt did swerve, but he quickly brought the car back under control. "How?" If it involved Jo getting knocked around by the house again, he wasn't so sure he was in favor, but just about anything else that would get these ghosts out of him was worth it.

"Gram said they don't go anywhere without a reason. I thought at first she might mean there had to be a reason why they were in you, but now that I think about it, I think she was trying to tell me that I have to give them a reason to be

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somewhere *else*. If I find a place where they belong, getting them out of you should be easy. I hope."

"So you're going to ask them where they belong?"

"Something like that. Let's just hope they aren't from Timbuktu."

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Chapter Twenty-Four: Love Means Never Having to Say Untie Me

Jo secured Wyatt's wrists to the headboard with brand-new, pink-leopard-velvet-lined handcuffs.

She'd left a message for Karma outlining her talisman theory and, after a quick stop at a twenty-four-hour sex shop, they'd come straight back to Wyatt's condo to see if Angelica and Teddy could save the day.

"You're enjoying this far too much," Wyatt complained when she bounced on the bed beside him, giving the handcuff links an experimental tug.

"Yup," she agreed unabashedly. "Comfy?"

"As comfortable as I'm going to be, handcuffed to my bed."

Jo chuckled throatily—Wyatt was so not a submissive—and stretched out beside him, leaning close but careful not to touch. "Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Haines?"

"Minx," he growled. "Let's get this over with."

"No foreplay?" Jo flashed him a wicked grin. "You're the boss, boss." She bounded off the bed and disappeared out the door, returning a moment later dragging one of his dining room chairs. She plunked it next to the bed and perched on it, watching him expectantly. "Well? Go on. Go to sleep."

"I don't sleep on command."

Jo rolled her eyes. "You don't actually have to sleep. Just close your eyes and relax. I'll do the rest."

Wyatt closed his eyes, but his forehead was screwed up in a frown and he was about as far from relaxed as a man could be.

"You have trust issues," Jo informed him.

The sound that came out of Wyatt's throat did not sound particularly human.

"Did you just growl at me?" She bit her lip to keep from laughing. Perfect, put-together Wyatt had been reduced to growling. Maybe there was a silver lining in all this chaos.

"I *said* that I trust you," he bit out, his eyes still obediently closed. "It's the damn ghosts I don't trust."

"Buddy, you're handcuffed to a bed. What mischief can they possibly do?"

"I don't like this."

"So noted. Now try to relax."

Jo reached out and grabbed the larger of the two glowy marbles currently lodged in Wyatt's ankle. She wrapped her metaphysical fist around the marble and pulled it to the fore, stretching and manipulating the energy until Wyatt's body surged upward and green light rippled through his limbs. The handcuffs pulled taut, snagging at his wrists and jerking his body back toward the bed as Angelica took form in his body.

The nine-year-old yanked at the cuffs, Wyatt's throat producing a petulant whine.

"Hello, Angelica."

The ghost twisted toward the sound of her voice and sniffed. "Oh. It's *you*."

"Yeah, you're not exactly my favorite person either, Miss Bubblelicious, but I'm going to overlook that for the moment. You and I are going to have a little talk."

"I'm not interested," Angelica huffed, flopping Wyatt's body onto his back and staring stubbornly at the ceiling.

"I don't believe I asked your opinion," Jo said brightly. "You seem to be confused about how this works. See, I'm the ghost exterminator. Which means, I run the show and you answer my questions. Or I can make sure you never get out of that body and you never get control of it again. *Capisce?*"

"You can't do that!" Angelica wailed.

"Cry me a river, kiddo. Or better yet, answer my questions and we all get to live happily ever after. Or die happily ever after, in your case."

"You won't trap me in here. You want me out of the body."

Smart kid. Jo shrugged, as if there was no particular urgency—souls separating from their natural bodies and whatnot—to getting the ghosts out of Wyatt. "You do something for me, I might be willing to do something for you. Like get you out of there."

"Deal." A sly gleam entered Angelica's eyes. "Don't you want to shake on it?"

"I'm not uncuffing you."

The little girl pouted. "Meany."

"Yep. I'm a tyrant. So, Angelica, do you like jewelry? Necklaces? Pendants?"

The little girl brightened—literally. The green glow covering Wyatt upped in wattage. "Do I get a present?"

"Only if you help me find a very special necklace." Wyatt'd probably buy the kid a diamond tiara if she could tell him how to unhaunt the Victorian. "A necklace with magic powers. It drew you to the house. Do you know where—"

"No, it didn't."

"Interrupting is rude, brat."

"Yeah, well, so is being a big, fat bully."

"Did you just call me fat?" Jo hated children. She really, *really* hated children. Even those who were biologically related to her were barely tolerable.

"A big, fat, *dummy* bully," Angelica sneered. "A necklace didn't bring me to my house. It's *my* house."

"It's Wyatt's house. You're an uninvited guest, kiddo. Just like in his body."

"It's my house!" Angelica shrieked. Wyatt's features contorted with childish rage. "It's always been mine. My daddy built it for me."

Jo frowned, wondering if enchanted medallions could create false memories in the ghosts they controlled. It seemed like a stretch. *Her daddy built it.* "Just how long have you been in the house, Angelica?"

"Forever."

"How long is forever?"

"For-ev-er," the ghostling drawled out slowly, rolling her eyes as if Jo were mentally impaired. "That's always, fat-dummy-bully."

"Were you there before the other ghosts got there? Before the medallion?"

"Mm-hmm." Angelica's expression grew sly. "At first, I didn't like the other ghosts in my house. They were as bad as the nasty workmen, banging around. Teddy and I couldn't get away from them, even up in our attic playroom. But then I realized I could get them to do what I wanted. It was so much easier to play my games with all of them helping."

"Your games." Jo had a feeling she'd just discovered the origin of Wyatt's Episodes.

"I'd never have been able to blow up the whole furnace with just me and Teddy."

Jo felt the first twinge of respect for the little brat. She was downright Machiavellian, the phantom infant general. "Do you remember when the other ghosts started to arrive? When the medallion activated?"

"You mean when the flower lady snuck the knot necklace into the kitchen?"

"Yes." Jo sat forward abruptly, realizing too late she'd betrayed her eagerness for this bit of information. "Who is the flower lady, Angelica?"

Angelica frowned. "She's the flower lady."

Jo rolled her eyes. *Obviously.*

"Our sister showed Teddy and me movies and pictures and stuff. She didn't like the flower children," Angelica said primly. "But the flower lady is too old to be a child."

"A hippy." Jo groaned. "Moonbeam."

* * * *

Wyatt blinked blearily at the clock. Three twenty-two. From the darkness in the room, alleviated only by the dim

glow of the bedside lamp, it had to be three-twenty-two in the morning. He'd been out of it for over seven hours. Jo crouched on the bed beside him, shaking his shoulder. She looked like she'd been through the wars.

"Hey," he mumbled groggily. He felt like he'd been drugged.

"Hey, yourself," she muttered crankily. The good mood she had displayed while cuffing him to the bed was clearly a thing of the past. "I hate children. I couldn't even beat them because that would only have bruised your body. I do not ever want to be a mother."

"Duly noted," Wyatt said, though with her youthful zest for life, he had a feeling Jo would be the kind of mother all kids wished they had. "Is there a reason why I'm still chained up?"

"You have to ask?" She waggled her eyebrows lecherously.

"Jo." The warning was clear in his voice.

"Fine, fine. I get it. You aren't into the whole bondage thing. I'll get the key. Keep your pants on. Unless you can get them off without using your hands. In which case I will be duly impressed and reward you accordingly."

As soon as she darted out of the room, Wyatt took stock of the body that a pair of juvenile ghosts had been occupying for the last several hours. He itched. Everywhere. It felt like his skin had shrunk two sizes.

By the time Jo returned to the bedroom, the tiny handcuff key in her hot little hand, he was twisting around helplessly on the bed.

"Wyatt. I was kidding about taking off your pants."

He paused in his writhing to glare at her. "I itch everywhere and I can't scratch a damn thing," he growled.

"It's totally psychosomatic," she said, unsympathetic. "You're just freaking out 'cuz you hate being out of control for even three seconds."

He ignored her psychobabble. "It feels like I've had spiders crawling over my skin for hours."

"Darn, you caught me. How did you guess there was a freak tarantula infestation while you were out? I was against it, but the ghosts are very persuasive when it comes to new and creative ways to torture your bod."

"You're evil," he grumbled, flexing his hand as she released the first wrist. The circulation hadn't been restricted as much as with last night's silk tie experiment, but his arms were stiff from being held above his head for hours on end. His muscles screamed as he shifted his arm down and began scratching every inch of his skin.

She squinted at him as she leaned across him for wrist number two, giving him a nice view of the assets in her tank top. "Are you sure you're Wyatt? You sounded just like Angelica for a second. She kept whining about how mean and evil I was."

"A ghost after my own heart."

"Yeah, she's a peach. Although you might not like her as well once you find out that she was the mastermind behind ninety percent of the Episodes at your pretty new inn. Apparently, Angie dear was an original resident and doesn't take kindly to trespassers."

"A nine year old? Work was stopped for an entire month, setting us back thousands of dollars because of a dead nine year old?"

"Yep." Jo sprawled on the bed beside him, waiting until his scratching frenzy had died down before she asked, "You want the good news or the bad news?"

Wyatt groaned and closed his eyes. "Please God, no more bad news."

"Okay, good news first. Angelica and Teddy both have personal attachments to that house. And from what I can figure, they've both been dead for at least sixty years."

"Why is that good news?"

"*Because*," Jo purred, tapping him playfully on the nose, "if they have a personal connection to the house, it means we are likely to be able to remove them from you there. *And* since they predate the talisman's arrival, it means that they were there to see our Bad Guy put the talisman in the house."

"So who's the Bad Guy?"

She made a face. "Yeah, that's the bad news. How well do you know your secretary, Wyatt?"

"Moonbeam?" He snorted. "Moonbeam wouldn't hurt a fly."

"I don't know about flies, but Angelica saw her plant a silver pendant shaped like a knot in the kitchen and ever since then, the kitchen has scared the bejeezus out of both Angelica and Teddy. That's incriminating enough for me."

"There are a thousand other explanations," Wyatt protested. "You said yourself that the talisman could be anything. It probably isn't even a pendant. Moonbeam could

have just dropped a necklace. She's always wearing bangles and charms."

"And that never seemed suspicious to you?"

"Jo, she's worked for me for over a decade," Wyatt said, his ire on the rise at her persistence. Moonbeam was not the culprit. He was sure of it. "Besides, why would she recommend bringing you in to fix things if she wanted them messed up?"

"To cover her tracks, or because she needs me to do something, provide a catalyst of some sort that she can't do herself."

"This is ridiculous." Wyatt launched himself off the bed, stalking out of the bedroom. Jo followed on his heels.

"Wyatt, Angelica saw her sneak into the house at night, carrying that pendant into the kitchen."

"You trust a ghost over someone I've worked with for a decade?" He began to pace. "She's a kid, for Christ's sake. A dead kid! And did she actually see Moonbeam leave the pendant? I've never seen a necklace in the kitchen."

Jo rolled her eyes. "Sure, because there are no places to hide things in kitchens. No cupboards, drawers, dishwashers or drains to stuff something small into."

"Moonbeam is a friend of the family," Wyatt protested, absolutely certain she was not involved.

"It's business, right? No emotional attachments."

When he stopped his pacing to glare at her for throwing his words back in his face, Jo just shrugged, crossing her arms under her breasts and leaning back against the bar.

"She's been with us since the beginning. Why would she start sabotaging us now?"

"Look, Wyatt, loyalty is an admirable quality and all, but the evidence is pretty overwhelming."

"Evidence provided by a ghost!"

Jo straightened, glaring daggers at him. "So we're back to that again, are we? I wondered when you'd revert back to form. Ghosts don't exist, is that it? I'm just some bat-shit crazy lady who should be committed, right?"

"Damn it, Jo, I didn't say—"

"There's a simple way to prove which one of us is right. We go over to the house, right now, and search the kitchen. There's a talisman hidden in there, Wyatt. I'm sure of it."

"Are you out of your mind?" Jo's expression darkened ominously at his choice of words, but he forged on. "It's three-thirty in the morning!"

"No time like the present." She bit out the words.

"Some of us have responsibilities, Jo. I have a ribbon cutting in the morning. I can't be up all night looking for something that *isn't there*."

She snorted. "I hate to be the one to break this to you, Wyatt, but if we're tearing apart the kitchen tonight, I don't think that ribbon is quite ready to be cut."

"At my other new inn," he snapped. "Orchard Hollow. I'm flying down there tomorrow morning for the official opening."

Jo laughed sharply. "I'd love to see what Angelica does in front of a few hundred people with some ceremonial scissors in her hands."

Wyatt flinched at the reminder of what a mess his life was. The worst part was, he couldn't even pretend not to believe her anymore. Ghosts existed. He was haunted and he needed Jo around to run herd on his personal ghost population. He rubbed a hand across his eyes, exhausted by the whole experience.

"Look, Jo, Moonbeam will be at the ribbon-cutting tomorrow. We can talk to her there. *Talk*, Jo. I still don't think she's behind this."

"Are you sure you want to be seen in public with me?" she snapped acidly. "At some big ceremonial opening, there are sure to be cameras. You wouldn't want people to think you associate with crazy people."

He sighed. She wasn't going to make this easy on him. "I don't think you're crazy. You're fashion-challenged, temperamental, and you talk to ghosts on a regular basis, but you aren't nuts. I need you there with me, Jo. In front of the cameras, if necessary. But do you think you could try to refrain from telling any reporters what you do for a living? That isn't the kind of sound bite I'd like to hear replayed on CNBC every five minutes for the next week."

"Whatever you say, boss." Her tone held a wealth of bitterness. Wyatt's temper snapped.

"I'm not your boss, Jo." He stalked to her, grabbed her arm and swung her around. His mouth captured hers in a kiss before she could mouth off at him again.

He thrust his tongue into her mouth as he pressed her body against his. Everything about her was a contradiction—she was so soft and warm, but beneath that was a layer of

icy, unyielding steel. She was powerful yet vulnerable, impetuous yet unswerving in her loyalties. She believed in the unbelievable with a pragmatism that was unnerving in its certainty. She had exploded his life from the inside out, shaking his beliefs and scattering his priorities to the wind. Nothing was as it should be in his neatly ordered world, but he couldn't escape the feeling that he hadn't really *lived* until he met her.

Jo was breathless when she pulled back from him, her eyes glazed but still flashing defiance. He'd never be able to kiss her into submission. Jo was not the kind of girl who gave up without a fight, but for the moment, they were both too tired to argue anymore.

"The ghosts," she reminded him, but the words sounded like an evasion. He had a feeling she could keep the ghosts from appearing if she wanted to, but she needed an excuse to step away from him.

He let her go, reluctant but accepting that it was the right thing to do. She might make him feel alive, but there couldn't be a future for a workaholic businessman, always in the public eye, and a woman who defied convention with every breath she took.

"You want me to chain you up?"

He laughed shortly without humor. "Yeah. I'm exhausted."

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Chapter Twenty-Five: The Family that Cuts Ceremonial Ribbons Together

The latest jewel in the Haines Hideaways crown in no way resembled the haunted Victorian. It did, however, bear a strong resemblance to the house in *Gone with the Wind*. So much so, in fact, that Jo stopped a passing waiter to ask if this was where the movie had been filmed. The waiter snorted, shoved a glass of champagne into her hand and walked off, leaving her to draw the conclusion that perhaps not all sprawling plantation homes had such rich literary histories.

She would have asked Wyatt, but himself was off schmoozing with the *hoi polloi*. Jo didn't have the first idea who any of the people bumping elbows at this shindig were, but Wyatt knew every one of them and was ready with a cheesy smile and a cheesier one-liner about the health of their family, business, or, in one case, schnauzers.

Moonbeam had yet to put in an appearance.

Jo sipped her champagne and wandered through what had probably been the ballroom before the burning of Atlanta, trying to blend in with the upper-crust crowd. And doing a damn fine job of it, if she did say so herself.

She wasn't wearing a powder blue suit, but it was pretty damn close.

They'd stopped off at her apartment on the way to the private airstrip that morning. While Wyatt had waited in the Bentley, doubtless the picture of impatience, Jo had

rummaged through her closet until she found the peach sheath dress and matching cardigan that Bethie had picked out for her. There was no helping the fact that her hair still had personality and the Girls still garnered a fair amount of attention, but other than that, she looked like the perfect dull-as-dirt yuppie.

Jo stood up on her tiptoes in her Bethie-approved pumps. She might not be able to run away if something nasty started chasing her, but she could see over the crowd a hell of a lot better than normal. Even with the advantage in height, there was still no sign of Moonbeam.

Wyatt stood chatting with a handsome, middle-aged couple on the other side of the room. Since there was no sign of a ghosty freak-out in the offing, she decided to leave him be and let him do his business thing. Just as she was about to turn away, he looked up, meeting her eyes across the room and beckoned to her with a nod of his head.

Jo didn't know which was more depressing, that he'd caught her mooning over him like a lovesick heroine from a gothic novel or that she was so pathetically delighted that he wanted her at his side, in public. She wove through the crowd with a fake smile pasted on her face.

Wyatt reached out a hand to her when she got close, catching her hand and drawing her up beside him. He turned to the older couple. "Mom, Dad, this is Jo. She's been helping me get the ghosts out of my body."

Jo nearly swallowed her tongue. His parents! He'd said that they showed up for ribbon-cuttings, but it hadn't occurred to

her that they would be here. Much less that he would introduce her.

Of course, he couldn't introduce her as a normal person. No, he had to tell them she was the crazy ghost girl. Jo shot him a glare, but his mother interrupted her ire with a coo of delight.

"Oh, Wyatt, how wonderful!" She stepped forward and clasped Jo's hands between hers. "My dear, I cannot tell you how long I have hoped Wyatt would meet someone who would help him get in touch with his spiritual side."

And suddenly Wyatt's attachment to Moonbeam, for all her eccentricities, made much more sense. Physically, the two women bore very little resemblance to one another. Wyatt's mother had the same suburban chic style her own mother was such a fan of. But it was clear that she and the new-age Moonbeam were kindred spirits.

Jo forced her face into a polite smile, restraining the urge to kick Wyatt in the shins for springing his parents on her like this, and said, "I'll admit I am good with spirits. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Haines. Mr. Haines."

Wyatt clearly got his doubting nature from his father. The elder Mr. Haines looked at her as if she had just escaped from the nuthouse, which didn't seem fair considering his wife's fanciful nature. He remained stoic until the petite Mrs. Haines landed an elbow in his gut forcefully enough to knock him back a step. "Nice to meet you," he grunted. Clearly Wyatt had not inherited his schmoozing ability from this parent.

"We were just about to go do the speeches and the ceremonial stuff," Wyatt said to her, his fingers still entwined

with hers in spite of the cameramen strolling through the reception snapping candid photos. "My mom's going to do the actual cutting this time, but I need to say a few words. If you stand over there, you should be able to see everything."

"Cool."

He squeezed her hand and started to move toward the podium, but Jo tightened her fingers around his. "Hey, Wyatt? Is this where *Gone with the Wind* was shot?"

He laughed. "No. But just to be safe, stay off the stairs."

The man had seen *Gone with the Wind*. His mother had clearly done her job well. Except for the fact that she had missed the necessary Whoopi Goldberg aspect of his social education.

Wyatt and his parents picked their way toward the platform, where a bright red ribbon had been hung between the banisters on the wide staircase. Wyatt moved behind the podium and the room immediately fell silent. The man had presence, no doubt about it.

He launched into a practiced speech about the benefits a Haines Hideaway brought to the community then segued into the individual benefits that would be bestowed on their lucky customers, waxing poetic on the value of a unique resort getaway.

Wyatt was completely in his element. She watched him work the crowd, perform for the cameras, and overall be the perfect face for his company. Her stomach tightened nervously.

He needed her now, but what would happen after they'd solved his ghost problem? He would go back to his world of

private jets and boardrooms and she would go back to being the eccentric Goth ghost exterminator. There wasn't any point of intersection in their lives.

For some reason, that thought made Jo's throat close off. She couldn't let herself think too hard about why. Instead, she pushed her way through the crowd, making a beeline for the exit. She needed space, an escape from the curious eyes that had followed her ever since she had arrived on the arm of one of America's most eligible.

The closer she got to the exit, the fewer people crowded around her. Jo walked faster and faster until she was nearly running in her high heels when she burst through the side door into an empty hallway. She stumbled to a stop, leaning against the wall and panting as if she'd just run a marathon.

On the wall opposite her hung a large gilt-edged mirror. Jo stared at the stranger reflected there, her heart tightening in her chest. Who was that woman in the coordinated peach outfit? It wasn't Jo Banks, that much she knew.

How had she gotten here, dressed up like Conformist Barbie, smiling for the cameras? Why did she like him so much, even when he was being an arrogant prick? How had he carved such a huge chunk out of her heart in such a short amount of time?

So what if he was smart and witty, loyal and hardworking, determined and far more open-minded than even he knew he could be? That didn't mean she loved him.

Jo dropped her head back against the wall, fighting back a wellspring of unwelcome emotion.

She couldn't be the woman in the powder-blue suit for Wyatt and he would never want the Goth girl, but why should that make her feel as if her heart were shattering like a glass ornament?

She just wanted to be accepted for who she was. The last thing she needed was a lifetime of pretense. Or worse, ridicule. And that was supposing he would even want her. The way he had kissed her last night and held her hand today might be confusing her heart, but her mind was in fine working order. Wyatt was all wrong for her. She *knew* that. So why was she still so confused?

With a little luck, his ghost problem would be solved soon and she would be out of his life. She'd only known him a matter of days. She should be able to forget him just as quickly. He would certainly forget her.

A shuffling sound at the opposite end of the hallway, accompanied by the wafting scent of lavender, pulled Jo out of her musings. She looked up in time to see a brightly colored scarf disappearing from view.

"Moonbeam!" Jo shoved herself away from the wall and shoved her worries to the back of her mind. She took off down the hall, giving chase as well as she could in toe-pinching color-coordinated heels.

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Chapter Twenty-Six: The Road to Hell is Well Paved

Jo clattered into what appeared to be an unused pantry just in time to see Moonbeam stashing a small, heart-shaped pendant on the top shelf.

"Ah-ha! Caught red-handed!"

Her triumph was ruined somewhat when one of her heels caught in a groove in the floor. Jo's ankle rolled and she stumbled as Moonbeam gave a startled yip, the chair she'd perched on to reach the highest shelf tipping precariously.

Jo caught herself and instinctively reached out to steady Moonbeam. She belatedly realized she might have more luck intimidating her subject if she weren't so visibly concerned about her wellbeing—or such a hopeless klutz in heels—but by then Moonbeam was already clambering down off the chair in a flutter of scarves.

"Jo! My stars, you startled me!" She waved one bangled wrist toward the ballroom. "What are you doing so far from the party?"

Jo blocked the door, slapping what she hoped was a suitably menacing expression on her face. "I could ask you the same thing."

"Me?" Moonbeam gave a twittering laugh, apparently unfazed by Jo's attempt at menace. "I was just doing my own little ribbon-cutting ritual. I like to put a little good luck charm in each of the inns. Wyatt would never admit it, but I just know that the positive energy from my charms is what makes our guests feel so welcome."

"You can drop the act, lady. I know all about your talismans."

"Talismans?" Moonbeam asked, in a disturbingly convincing impersonation of innocence.

Jo's annoyance with the new-age secretary ratcheted up another few degrees. Was it possible this whole mess—the ghosts in the house, the ghosts in Wyatt, the entire situation that had led Jo to fall for the worst possible man in the world for her—was all due to misguided good intentions? Could Moonbeam have been trying to *help*?

Jo narrowed her eyes, looking for some twinge of guilt in Moonbeam's wide-open face. She wanted someone to blame. She needed someone to scream at.

"Where did you get that charm?" she demanded.

Moonbeam stared at her intently. "Are your chakras blocked, dear? You seem awfully tense today."

"The charm, Moonbeam."

The secretary pursed her lips, put out by the interrogation, but before Jo could resort to torture, she spoke. "I always get my charms at Prometheus Unbound. They have the best selection in town."

Jo grimaced. Of course. That stupid, unethical warlock. And he was away making merry over Samhain so she couldn't even walk into his shop and plant her fist in his face for what he'd done to her life. "And the charm you put in the kitchen at the Victorian? Did you get that one from Prometheus?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Moonbeam's pout over being raked over the coals melted into a delighted smile. "How did you guess I'd already placed

a charm at the Victorian? Could you sense the positive energy? There were some Episodes of unpleasantness during the renovations, so I brought the charm I had selected for the Victorian over early. Good luck to counter the bad."

"The Episodes started *before* you left the talisman?" Jo paced in a tight circle in the pantry. "I suppose if Angelica and Teddy were responsible for the first Episodes, then that might make sense. It could still be the talisman drawing the others and fighting me," she muttered to herself.

"What was that, dear?"

Jo waved away the question, coming out of her musings and turning back to her subject. "Moonbeam, I need you to tell me *exactly* what Prometheus said the effects of the charm you placed at the Victorian would be."

"I remember exactly." She beamed. "I selected that charm with particular care. It will draw the spirit of innocence and youthful joy into the house."

"That's all?"

"Isn't that enough? I thought Wyatt could particularly use some youthful joy, the old stick in the mud."

"Yes, I'm sure that would do him good," Jo agreed unenthusiastically.

That was it then. Moonbeam had booby-trapped Wyatt's inn with the purest intentions. Jo's disappointment knew no bounds. She'd wanted so badly for there to be an ass that deserved a ghost exterminator kicking.

"Moonbeam, where exactly in the kitchen did you pu—"

Her words were cut off by the pantry door slamming against the wall as it was thrown open. Wyatt stood in the

doorway, looking dapper in his designer suit and wearing a frown that could qualify as a major seismic event.

"Damn it, Jo! I thought I could trust you not to corner her while I was giving my speech. How many times do I have to tell you that Moonbeam isn't at fault here?"

"Actually, she—"

"When I said that you could talk to her today, I didn't think you would interpret that as locking her in a storeroom as soon as I turned my back."

"I don't think that door has a lock," Jo pointed out, but Wyatt wasn't done ranting.

"How difficult is it—"

Jo was through being taken to task for something she had done right. She shouted over his tirade, silencing him with the venom in her voice. "Mr. Haines, if you would just shut up for a minute, you might learn something."

His jaw dropped. Clearly Wyatt was not accustomed to anyone telling him to shut it. Jo's mood lightened considerably in the face of his gaping shock.

"Moonbeam was just about to tell me where exactly in the kitchen she put the *good-luck charm*."

Wyatt's mouth snapped shut with an audible click. His upper body tipped back until his shoulders connected with the wall. He groaned. "A good-luck charm," Then he swore viciously.

Her sentiments exactly.

"Wyatt!" Moonbeam gasped. "Language!"

Jo and Wyatt turned as one toward Moonbeam.

"Moonbeam," Jo said as calmly as she could manage, clinging to patience. "Why don't you tell us exactly where you hid the charm, how you activated it, any instructions you might have received about deactivating it, and anything else you think might be helpful?"

The secretary's face was suddenly wreathed in confusion. "Why would you want to deactivate it?"

"It isn't a good luck charm," Wyatt explained gently.

Moonbeam's face drained of color as realization dawned. "But I don't...what could it...how..." Her eyes widened as she took in the ramifications of that simple declaration. "The other charms!" She quickly scrambled up onto the chair and grabbed the heart-shaped pendant off the top shelf. "Are they all cursed? What have I done?"

"There haven't been any Episodes at the other inns to indicate there's anything wrong with the other pendants," Jo hurried to reassure her. "But to be on the safe side, we'll have one of Karmic Consultants' witches check each of them out. Later. Right now we need to focus on the one hidden at the Victorian. Where is it, Moonbeam?"

"In the floor."

"*In* the floor?" Jo asked as Wyatt groaned and banged his head back against the wall.

"Well, under the floor," Moonbeam clarified. "Beneath the center tile."

"We retiled the kitchen," Wyatt grumbled. "It was one of the only renovations we were actually able to complete."

Jo looked askance at Moonbeam. "You couldn't just put it in a drawer?"

"Things were being torn up and taken out all the time," she protested. "I didn't want the charm to be lost. That's why I usually wait until the renovations are complete."

"And the activation? Did you say any words? Hold it a certain way? Light a candle?"

"No candles, but I was supposed to say a phrase three times. The instructions said the charm would be more powerful, bring more luck, if I said the words."

"Why three times?" Wyatt wanted to know.

"Numbers have power. Repetition is a common way of activating spells," Jo told him, her attention never wavering from Moonbeam. "Do you remember the words?"

"*Fortuna regna*-something?"

"Latin?" Surprise filled Jo's tone. "Are you sure?" Most witches preferred forms of Gaelic to the language of the Church that had suppressed and oppressed magic workers for centuries. But then Jo ran the words through her rusty knowledge of Latin. "*Luck rules*." She grimaced. "That sounds like Prometheus. I don't suppose there were deactivation instructions."

"No," Moonbeam said. "Sorry."

Jo looked at Wyatt, where he was still propped up by the wall. "You all right, champ? You're awfully quiet over there."

Before Wyatt could reply, Moonbeam was at his side, words tripping over one another as they leapt out of her mouth.

"Mr. Haines, I'm so sorry, sir. I only meant the best. You know I would never do anything to hurt Haines Hideaways. I love this company. I love my job. Please don't fire me."

Jo's breath caught in her throat. It hadn't even occurred to her that Wyatt, who had so staunchly defended Moonbeam last night, might turn around and fire her. But this was Wyatt "It's not personal, it's business" Haines. She studied his face closely, looking for clues about which way he would decide, caring more than she should about this symptom of his humanity. Or lack thereof.

Jo found herself silently urging him to forgive, silently begging him to be the man she knew he could be. She was lightheaded from holding her breath when he finally spoke.

"I'll expect a detailed report, including the location and description of all the other charms you have placed in the various Haines Hideaways on my desk when I arrive tomorrow morning. Jo and I have a plane to catch, but why don't you stay and enjoy the opening? Tomorrow is early enough for you to start looking into finding us a reputable contractor we haven't already managed to run off for the Victorian." When Moonbeam realized what he was saying, relief suffused her face. Wyatt gave her a small smile. "It would be a real nightmare trying to get the Elm Street Inn up and running without you."

He turned to Jo and took her hand, tugging her after him. She was bubbling over with disproportionate quantities of giddy pleasure. He was a good man, a forgiving, *human* man. Maybe there was hope for them after all.

They were slipping out the side door where a car was waiting to take them to the nearby airstrip before Jo put a sentence together.

"I hope you weren't attached to the kitchen floor."

Wyatt snorted. "I'll rip the tiles up with my fingernails if I have to."

"I think a crowbar will suffice."

She stumbled on the steps, the ankle she'd turned in the pantry wobbling, but he caught her easily. His arm wrapped around her waist and he lifted her nearly off her feet. Held pressed against his side, Jo was tempted to swoon for the first time in her life. Luckily, Wyatt was oblivious to her girlish flutterings. He propped her back on her own two feet and continued down the steps, releasing her waist, but keeping his hold on her hand.

"I love having a plan," she said, because she had to say something. If she didn't, he might think that him pulling a Prince Charming on the steps actually *meant* something. Or worse, she might think it herself. "Nothing like a good plan," she continued brightly. "Especially when the plan involves demolition."

"You're in a good mood," he said suspiciously, holding the limo door for her.

"You didn't fire Moonbeam," she gushed, squeezing his hand before climbing in.

"Do you have any idea how long it would take to train her replacement?" he said gruffly.

"You're just a big softie."

"I'm practical. I'm already accustomed to Moonbeam. The office's productivity would suffer if we upset the rhythm."

"You'd have to buy all new furniture if your new secretary had angle-conductive chi," she teased.

"She's a wonderful executive assistant," he insisted stubbornly, but a smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

"She's good for you," Jo declared. "You need someone you're a little afraid of running herd on your soul."

"I'm not going to try to decipher what you just said."

"It's a good thing," she assured him. Then Jo realized she'd just used Queen Martha's famous catchphrase.

She frowned darkly. Four fricking days and he'd turned her into Martha Stewart, color-coordinated outfits and ankle-wrenching heels included. Just like that, her good mood evaporated.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven: Mile-High Cuddles

"My parents loved you," Wyatt said as a peace offering, raising his voice above the drone of the jet's engines. Jo sat silently across from him. She'd been pouting since before takeoff, though he couldn't imagine why. They were close to being done with this fiasco. She should be relieved.

"Your mother thought the ghost thing was a metaphor and your father thinks I'm a freak," she said, never taking her eyes off the window.

"Hey, at least you didn't throw anyone into the pool."

Jo's only response was to grimace, as if the debacle at her cousin's party had been her fault instead of his.

Wyatt watched her, studying the face that, in a ridiculously short span of time, had become as familiar to him as his own. It defied rational thought that he should be able to truly know her after only a week, but he was sure of her. Sure that she would never stop surprising him, but just as certain that he knew who she was at her core.

Jo Banks was not a woman who bottled up her emotions. Her silent stewing could only mean that something was wrong.

"Are you mad at me for springing my parents on you?"

Introducing Jo to his parents had been a spur of the moment decision. The impulse had surprised Wyatt, but no less than it had stunned his parents, who had never been introduced to a single date or girlfriend in his entire life. Wyatt had always been careful to keep the various parts of

his life separate. Business, family, sex. There was no crossover. Business for the mind, family for the heart, sex for the body. There was no mingling of motivations, no mixing emotions. Until Jo somehow insinuated herself into every aspect of his life.

"You could have warned me." The words were a complaint, but her voice was expressionless. His parents, clearly, were not the root of her mood.

He took another stab in the dark. "You were right about Moonbeam."

"Mm-hmm."

Wyatt waited for the "I told you so", but Jo just continued to stare out the window. Maybe it was the schmoozing that had bothered her. The boring, endless smiling for the press. "I'm sorry I had to drag you along. I know how boring those things can be."

That caught her attention, pulling it away from the window. "No, it was interesting." She didn't appear to be lying. "Especially watching you work the room like a pro. Have you ever considered going into politics?"

"There's too much uncertainty in politics."

"That's right. You have to be in control. I forgot." She turned her face back to the window, her expression blanking again.

Wyatt sighed and raked his hands through his hair. "Come on, Jo. I'm terrible at this. Would you just tell me what's wrong?"

She glanced over at him, surprise clearly written across her face. "You know something's wrong?"

Wyatt managed to keep from laughing somehow. She was about as subtle as a neon-flashing billboard. "I'm very astute. Come on. Whatever it is, you can tell me."

She stared out the window, chewing on her lower lip. Wyatt could only watch her abuse that lip for so long. He reached across to unfasten her seatbelt, pulling her onto his lap.

"Hey! I'm supposed to remain seated with my seatbelt securely fastened."

For a supposed rule-breaker, she really got off on following the rules.

"I promise not to let the stewardess spank you." When she stiffened and tried to shove away, he wrapped both arms around her snugly. "Let me be your seatbelt. Now, tell me what's bothering you."

She gave up struggling and slumped against him. When she spoke, her voice was petulant. "You really would make a great politician."

"That doesn't sound like a compliment," he said lightly.

She elbowed him hard in the stomach. Wyatt quickly moderated his demeanor. Apparently this was no laughing matter. Though he couldn't figure out why Jo should be upset that he'd be good in an arena he had no interest in whatsoever.

"I'm no Martha Stewart."

Wyatt snorted, even though he knew he was risking another flying elbow. "No. You certainly aren't." What a nightmare that would be. Martha Stewart was an automaton of perfection. Jo was real and impetuous and *alive*. "But if you

want, I can give you some tips so you, too, can go to jail for insider trading."

She glowered at him, unamused. "You're so *normal*."

Wyatt frowned. "That still doesn't sound like a compliment."

"I hate being around normal people. No one makes me feel more like a freak than a normal person."

Wyatt felt a sudden pain in his stomach that had nothing to do with where Jo's elbow had landed moments earlier. Did she hate being around him? And if she did, why did it matter so much to him? They were just linked by ghosts and sexual attraction, right? When had respect and affection entered into the equation? When had he started *liking* her so damn much?

"You aren't a freak," he insisted, his voice catching a little. Had he really made her so miserable?

"Yes, I am. You know I am. No powder blue suit can change that."

Wyatt frowned, confused. She was wearing sort of an orangey color, but color-blindness wasn't at the heart of the issue, so he let it pass. "So you're different. So what? Normal is boring. I find I tolerate freaks remarkably well."

"So *what*?" she mimicked. She stiffened in his arms, but he wouldn't let her pull away. "This may come as a shock to you, Mr. Haines, but being regarded as a freak isn't a laugh a minute. It pretty much sucks."

"Who regards you as a freak?"

"Yo—*Everyone*. The world. *They* do," she insisted, growing more vehement with each word.

He shrugged. "Who cares what they think?"

"I do!" She shouted the words, and then froze. Her eyes widened as she stared at him, awareness flooding her face. "I care what the world thinks of me. God, I must be the worst rebel ever. I'm so busy worrying about not being approved of that I can never really commit myself to the rebellion. I might as well have been Little Miss Perfect like Beth and Kim. I was so damn scared of not being normal that I never let myself be anything else."

"I hate to break it to you, kid, but no one's really normal. It's all varying degrees of weird. On that scale, you're as normal as minivans and apple pie."

She sighed, dropping her head back on his shoulder. "Cake."

"Excuse me?"

"Cake. I can't make pie. Pie is hard."

"Cake is easy." He laughed. "Yeah. I remember. Apple cake, then."

"I'm normal. Sort of," she said, testing out the revelation. "You thought I was a total freak when we met."

There was a catch, a hesitation in her tone, but Wyatt had had more than his fill of soul-searching conversations for the week. He designed his answer to keep the conversation light and laughing.

"Yeah, well, I'm a prejudiced asshole. I don't know why you listen to anything I say."

"I like listening to what you say," she said. "It tells me what not to do."

He pinched her and she yelped, squirming around on his lap in a way that made life suddenly seem more interesting.

The orange dress she wore had ridden up as she wriggled on his lap, giving him an excellent view of her long legs from mid-thigh down. The snug sweater buttoned up over her breasts had twisted until it was stretched tight across her impressive assets.

Wyatt cleared his throat roughly. He nipped at her ear, his fingers toying with the bottom button of the sweater. "You know, *normal* people join the mile-high club every day."

"The ghosts," she reminded him half-heartedly, turning in his lap so she could twine her arms around his neck.

"You can control the ghosts," he said at his most persuasive, nibbling down the side of her neck. His hands slipped under the sweater, but she squirmed away from the touch before he could get to the good stuff, so he changed direction, stroking down her stomach until she gasped, around her waist, over her hips and down to cup her ass, holding her tight against him.

"We shouldn't," she protested weakly, but her body leaned into him, proving the words a lie.

Wyatt had a sudden flashback to high school and trying to convince the head cheerleader that good girls *did*. He couldn't remember whether he'd actually managed to get her out of her clothes, and right now, with Jo's proximity siphoning all the blood to the lower half of his body, he didn't have the brainpower to care. "We *really* should," he urged, his breath teasing the soft skin at the underside of her jaw. Then he caught her face in his hand and turned it toward him.

The kiss started off slow and persuasive, closed-mouthed and innocent. Well, somewhat innocent. One hand skated

underneath her sweater, spanning her waist, sliding up her ribcage and breezing against the lower curve of her breasts before retreating back down, teasingly tentative, a game of hesitation, advance and retreat.

She leaned into him with a soft little sigh against his mouth, her hands gripping his shoulders, his back, stroking the back of his neck, as she kissed him back. She was the one to coax his mouth open, but he was quick to respond, his tongue teasing the smooth inside of her lips. When she sealed her mouth against his and sucked his tongue into her mouth, all of the blood surged southward, out of his brain. He broke away with a ragged laugh.

"Where were you when I was in high school?"

Jo chuckled against his mouth. "Probably in junior high." She ran one hand down across his chest and the muscles of his abdomen.

When her hand skated over his fly, he swore under his breath. "You are a bad, bad girl, Jo Ellen."

She laughed throatily and caught his mouth again. Wyatt let her take control for now, quietly unbuttoning her sweater as the slow slide of lips, tongue and teeth set a fire in his blood. He brushed the edges of her sweater apart, sliding it back over her shoulders until it tangled around her elbows. Jo didn't seem to notice, until he ran his fingers along the low-cut neckline of her dress, tracing the top curve of her breasts.

She broke away and caught his wrist when his fingers slipped beneath the fabric. "Hey. Nothing under the clothing," she said, channeling her inner cheerleader. "The ghosts."

"You can control them," he reminded her, but he moved his hand—above the fabric this time—to palm her breast as his mouth closed on hers again. Jo gasped into his mouth and clutched at him as he plumped the heavy weight of her breasts. She may look like a silicon-stacked Playmate, but all it took was one touch for Wyatt to determine that Jo Banks was all natural. Her nipples hardened into points beneath his fingers and she gave a little whimper, her hip bumping against his hard-on as she writhed in his lap.

With one hand paying homage to her breasts, he plunged his tongue into her mouth. Thrusting inside, he set up a rhythm to mimic the instinctive pulsing of her hips as he ran his other hand down to her thigh and began gathering up the fabric of her skirt.

She caught his hand, breaking away from his mouth, her breathing short and choppy. "Wyatt..."

"Jo?" He tweaked her nipple, utterly unapologetic. She started to shift away, but he gathered her close against him again, deliberately stroking a finger up her thigh in the process. She shifted restlessly against him, rubbing her legs together as her skirt slipped up another inch.

"You can control them," he persuaded, caressing down the outside of her bare leg. "We can control them. There is no way in hell I am letting a ghost take over my body right now." He teased the sensitive skin behind her knees before trailing his fingers back up the inside of her thigh.

"What if I can't control myself?" Jo bit her lip, her expression unsure, but her legs shifted apart enough to allow his fingers access.

At the first brush of his fingers, her breath caught and Wyatt swore. "Jesus H. Christ. You aren't wearing underwear."

She was hot and wet. Wyatt slipped his fingers easily through her folds. "All fucking day in that demure little orange number, you've been running around without any underwear on?" The thought of that alone nearly had him coming in his pants.

"It's peach," she corrected him, her eyes wicked with the knowledge of what she was doing to him. Her fingers traced the line of his fly again and Wyatt groaned. "Do you have something?"

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. The thought was both an instinctive directive and a curse. He didn't have a fucking condom. It wasn't like he kept a stash on the plane. Most of his business associates were not the kind of people he wanted to get naked with. Jo being the notable exception.

She noticed his sudden stillness. He watched her working at her lower lip with her teeth and was tempted to offer to give it a bite for her. "I'm on the Pill," she said slowly. "Have you—"

"I've been tested!" he blurted, too desperate to have her for any degree of finesse. "Clean bill of health."

"Well, okay, then."

She slid his zipper down.

There was a God.

Her fingers slipped inside to ease him out of his boxers.
Hallelujah.

She kissed him, tangling her tongue with his as she shifted around on his lap. Wyatt helped as much as he could, mostly with hiking up her skirt as high as it would go, but plane seats—even luxury planes with wide, comfortable chairs—were not designed for sex. A blatant engineering flaw.

She knelt, her knees squeezed on either side of his hips, and he scooted forward a little to give her more room to maneuver. He would have offered to hang upside-down from the ceiling if that would have helped.

When she slid down onto his erection, his brain clicked off and his eyes rolled back in sheer bliss. Jo walloped him on the shoulder.

"Wyatt! The ghosts! Focus."

Focus. Right. He'd tried baseball statistics and thinking of Margaret Thatcher before to delay an orgasm, but this was the first time he'd tried thinking of ghosts while a gorgeous, stacked woman was bouncing up and down on his dick.

Jo clutched his shoulders. Her hips pulsed rhythmically against his and she began making small, sexy sounds in her throat. Wyatt ran his hands up over the still-covered territory of her breasts, then up her legs, across every inch of bare skin he could reach. Her cries changed pitch, higher and more urgent now. Wyatt, for his part, felt like he might black out from ecstasy at any moment, but he ground his teeth together and held back. He refused to think about how hot and wet, tight and eager she was.

Wyatt reached between them, unerringly finding her clit and pressing down. Jo's back arched and she gave a rough cry, her body tightening around him as her orgasm rocked

through her. Wyatt rolled his finger against her, milking her for every cry until the last shuddering ripples of her release passed. She fell against his chest, breathing heavily.

Wyatt braced his hands on her hips, trying to think of anything but how she felt, still seated on him. *Barry Bonds, seven hundred, sixty-two home runs. Hank Aaron, seven hundred, fifty-five home runs...*

Jo straightened and Wyatt's hips pulsed upward once in reflex at her shift in position. She brushed his lower lip with her index finger, then her tongue. Wyatt realized he'd bitten it bloody.

"I've got the ghosts now," she promised him, her inner muscles tightening around him in a way that made his vision blur. "It's your turn."

She began to ride him again. Wyatt let her do as she wanted, keeping the pace deliberate and slow, for approximately two seconds before he took control. His hands closed over her hips and he guided her faster, lifting her and slamming her back down on him. Jo quickly caught his rhythm, her enthusiasm undimmed by her own orgasm. She began making the noises in her throat again and Wyatt knew if he kept going she could come again, come with him, but he just couldn't wait.

The orgasm hit hard, taking the top of his head right off. He emptied himself into her, his shout drowned out by the roar of the jet's engines.

When he opened his eyes, Jo was looking at him as if he were the David, the Mona Lisa, and the Sistine Chapel all

rolled into one. "I loved watching that," she confessed in a whisper.

His cupped the back of her skull, pulling her into a kiss. "You can watch that again later," he promised her when he released her mouth. He idly traced a pattern on the back of her neck. He was discovering he was a big fan of hairstyles that gave him easy access to that particular body part. "We'll be landing in a few minutes."

She shifted away from him slightly as she raised her head to look around. "Holy shit. I completely forgot where we were."

Wyatt experienced a well-deserved surge of smug satisfaction at her words. "Don't worry. The flight crew are paid very well to be discreet. They stay out of the passenger cabin unless we call them in."

She arched a brow at him. "You often need this degree of privacy when you fly?"

Wyatt tucked her against him, pressing her head onto his shoulder, before he let himself smile. She didn't need to know how pleased he was by the jealous streak she was displaying. "I often do business when I fly," he explained. "I promise you are the first person I have even been tempted to be so unprofessional with."

She chuckled. "Poor Wyatt. I'm a bad influence on you."

He was starting to think she might be the best influence he had had in a long time, but he knew better than to say that. Jo wanted to be bad and he liked her that way. "Yeah," he said agreeably. "You're corrupting, all right."

Jo murmured happily and lay cuddled against him until the pilot came over the PA to announce that they would indeed be landing shortly.

As she slipped out of his arms to adjust her clothing and resume her seat, Wyatt realized how soon she would be slipping out of his life. After the ghosts were gone, and he had absolute faith in her ability to get rid of them now that she knew what she was dealing with, then what possible excuse would he have for keeping her in his life? Not forever, obviously, and not necessarily as part of his public persona, but he wasn't ready to let her go until he knew what it was about Jo Ellen Banks that made him feel so alive.

They were both silent, lost in their own thoughts, as the plane touched down.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight: Halloween at the Haunted House

Jo loved Halloween—the one night of the year when *everyone* was a freak—and spending the holiday at a Victorian mansion that positively writhed with ghostly energy was pretty close to her idea of nirvana. Especially if she got a chance to kick some big, bad, ghostly talisman ass. This year, Halloween night was also the night of the full moon, adding an extra layer of spooky goodness to the holiday.

Jo left a message with Karma to bring her up to speed, but on Samhain night, her boss would be dealing with a thousand different crises in the non-ghost-removal sides of the business, so Jo wasn't expecting the cavalry any time soon. Wyatt suggested waiting a few days, until they could bring in reinforcements, but Jo didn't want to think about how many ghosts the talisman would collect by then. Not to mention the whole Wyatt's soul detaching from his body if they didn't remove Angelica and Teddy pronto thing.

Besides, Jo was ready to act now. She knew she could do it. Alone, if she had to. She felt like Superwoman, revved up and ready to take down any monsters that crossed her path.

The plane ride had been liberating—and not just because Wyatt Haines was a one-man orgasm factory.

When Jo realized that she gave herself more grief for being a freak than anyone else ever had, a weight had lifted off her shoulders. She had spent her whole life begging for approval, but now she felt free. She didn't have to try to be normal any more. Who cared what the rest of the world thought?

Jo Banks was a powerful, badass ghost exterminator. No apologies. No excuses.

She smacked the crowbar she held against her palm. Ghosties beware.

"First stop, kitchen demolition." Jo strode up the front walk to the Victorian, slapping the crowbar lightly against her thigh.

After a few quick stops on the way to the house, Jo was back in black and denim, with her goodie bag slung over one shoulder, ready to take on the world. She felt like herself again—only more herself than she had ever allowed herself to be.

Wyatt, shockingly enough, emerged from his condo wearing *jeans* with his usual dress shirt. But even holding the other crowbar, he still looked like he should be negotiating a merger rather than ripping up tiles. You can take the uptight executive out of the boardroom...

Jo made a face.

If only she weren't three-quarters in love with a man who *tolerated* freaks remarkably well. For all that she felt bright and new and strong in terms of how she felt about herself, her feelings about Wyatt were even more jumbled than ever.

"This is depressing," Wyatt grumbled beside her.

Jo silently agreed with all her stupid heart. Then she realized Wyatt wasn't talking about their hopeless not-quite-love-affair. She stopped abruptly, spinning to face him.

"What?"

"We're about to rip apart the one part of the house that I actually managed to get fixed. I'm allowed to be depressed."

"We are about to fix your ghost problem once and for all. My excellent ghost exterminating skills are going to be put to most excellent use as soon as we get rid of the talisman. You should be thrilled. Go on. Be thrilled."

As she stood there, waiting for him to be thrilled, Wyatt just rolled his eyes and stepped around her, heading for the front door. "Let's get this over with, my most excellent ghost exterminator."

Jo decided to follow, but only because he had called her by the correct title.

She studied the house as they approached. The ghosts zipped around double time. Apparently they were a little hopped up on Halloween jollies, too. Or maybe the talisman really was stronger on Samhain. She glanced at Wyatt, looking for signs of strain. Angelica and Teddy flitted around inside him, but he wasn't jumping around, starting at voices this time.

"If you start to feel all wonky because of the talisman, go wait outside, okay? No heroics, Mr. Haines."

"That goes for you too, Ms. Banks. Or did you forget which one of us had to be carried out of here last time?"

She made a face at the reminder. "Strictly academic. I won't be trying to open a portal and shove ghosts through and fight off the talisman all at the same time. In fact, I won't be trying to do anything supernatural. I'm just the tile-removal expert tonight."

Jo waved her crowbar for emphasis and Wyatt ducked away from the flying blunt object. "You're an expert, all right," he said dryly.

Jo stepped up onto the porch, humming a stirring battle march.

Wyatt stopped. "Is that the Mighty Mouse theme music?" he asked incredulously.

She realized that she had, in fact, been humming "Here I come to save the day!" and decided to run with it. "Yeah. You got a problem with that?"

Wyatt snorted, then coughed and carefully blanked his expression when her crowbar wagged aggressively in his direction. "No, no problem. Lead on."

"That's what I thought."

Jo put an extra dollop of swagger into her walk, feeling like John Wayne at high noon as she faced the front door. It was bulging slightly, likely from the force of the ghosts packed inside. Jo glanced back over her shoulder at Wyatt.

"You doing okay? No weird voices? No ghosts being ripped from your body?"

"The voice is back and it's loud as hell, but I'm dealing with it. Let's finish this."

"Whatever you say, boss. Just promise me that you'll bail if the talisman starts controlling you."

"If the talisman starts controlling me, I probably won't be able to bail."

"Don't confuse me with logic. Just promise."

Wyatt grinned at her, the expression so endearing that, for a second, she thought his teeth sparkled like a matinee idol's. "I promise."

Jo nodded once. "Let's do this."

She kicked open the door and walked forward, leading with the crowbar so when the door swung back to smack her in the face, it thwacked against the iron and rebounded again. Wyatt snorted behind her. "Nice entrance."

The energy slapped her in the face as soon as she stepped across the threshold. The medallion must have been feeding off the energy of the ghosts somehow, because it was noticeably stronger now. She wasn't even in the kitchen yet and already she felt like a buoy being tossed around on rough waters.

She wondered if non-believer Wyatt had even noticed the turbulence. Then the thud of something heavy hitting the floor sounded behind her.

Jo turned. Wyatt lay sprawled halfway across the threshold. His body bowed and contorted as the twin ghost energies inside him struggled to break loose.

"Wyatt!" The crowbar slipped from Jo's fingers, clanking noisily to the ground as she rushed forward to kneel at his side. His eyes were wide open and staring, but he didn't seem to see her. "Wyatt? Wyatt, look at me. Wyatt!"

His body bucked and a gurgling noise came out of his throat.

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit." Jo grabbed his shoulders and began half-shoving, half-dragging him out of the house. The man weighed a ton and a half and he bucked and thrashed in her arms like a rodeo bull. "Hang on, Wyatt. You're gonna be okay," she murmured to him, the words tripping out of her mouth as much to reassure herself, since Wyatt didn't seem to hear her.

She braced her feet on the wooden planks of the porch and hauled him across it. At the steps, she hefted his torso up against her chest and pulled him quickly down. From the *thwack, thwack, thwack* of his legs hitting the steps, he was going to be bruised from the waist down, but Jo didn't care as long as she got him away from the talisman.

On the brick path, she stumbled, hissing as her weak ankle turned again. Wyatt's body fell to the side of the path. He was still for a moment. Jo bent over him—to check that she'd managed to get him far enough from the house to stop the seizures rather than accidentally dropping him on his head hard enough to do him real damage. "Wyatt?"

His body convulsed again. His head cracked against hers.

"Ouch! Dammit." Jo didn't waste the time rubbing her bashed skull. She wrapped her arms under Wyatt's and began hauling him farther from the house. "Come on, Wyatt, snap out of it," she urged quietly as she dragged him up the path. "Come on. You've gotta be out of range now. Say something."

She was panting from the effort of hauling him nearly all the way to the street when his convulsions suddenly eased. Jo settled him gently on the ground, leaning over him to peer into his face. "Wyatt? Are you okay?"

His eyes were closed, which was only somewhat less disconcerting than the blank-eyed stare. His breathing was shallow and periodically his body twitched and shivered in an echo of his earlier fits.

"Wyatt? Come on, babe. You're scaring me."

He remained unresponsive. Jo shrugged off her pack, digging into it for her cell phone and a stick of cleansing

incense. She hit the auto-dial for Karma even as she rummaged one-handed for a lighter for the incense.

"Pick up, pick up, pick up."

The ringing clicked over to voicemail and Jo swore viciously. Her hand closed around the lighter as she waited for Karma's purring voice to run through the familiar instructions. She hurriedly lit the incense, shoving it under Wyatt's nose. The tone beeped.

"Karma? Something's wrong. Like really, really, bat-shit wrong. Oh shit, I think it's happening. I think his soul is separating. We're at the house. Oh, Jesus, Karma, he isn't moving. The talisman is all amped up on ghost power and it's doing something to him. I don't know what to do. *What do I do?*"

Jo dropped the phone to the ground, not even sure she'd hit the End button. She patted Wyatt's cheek, waving the incense in his face. "Come *on*, Wyatt."

Jo scanned him with her second sight. The two ghost forms inside him were zipping frantically through his body. Jo tried to grasp them. She tried to quiet them or even just yank them out, but her focus was shattered by panic. "Dammit!" She was *not* going to let him die.

Jo looked back up the walk at the house. It panted and creaked, the ghostly energy giving it a sense of life. The damn house looked more alive than Wyatt did.

All at once, Jo's fiery panic cooled and hardened into an icy knot of resolve. "You do not know who you are messing with," she hissed at the house. Surging to her feet, Jo swept up her goodie bag and stalked toward the front door, collecting the

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pair of fallen crowbars as she went. "Ready or not, here I come."

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Chapter Twenty-Nine: Badass Showdown

The kitchen looked like a tornado had hit it. Or rather, like a tornado was hitting it over and over again while she watched. Jo ducked as the ancient refrigerator flew past her and smashed into the wall. She forcibly shut down her second sight, cutting off her vision of the green vortex of ghost energy that was spinning madly through the room.

Hefting the crowbar in her right hand, she ran to the center of the cyclone. The center tile was hexagonal. Jo swung the crowbar up over her head and attacked that tile, screaming like a martial artist in a bad Kung Fu movie as she whaled on the tile with all the force in her body. The center tile shattered instantly, along with several of the surrounding tiles, but the reinforced plywood beneath barely showed a chip.

Jo hacked away at the wood. It came away in jagged chunks, but only revealed another layer of wood beneath.

"Dammit!"

This was taking too long. For all she knew, Wyatt was lying on the front lawn dying and she couldn't get the damn floor up fast enough.

Jo flung aside the crowbar. The talisman may be growing stronger by the second, but it was feeding off ghosts and ghosts were *Jo's* power. They were hers to control. Hers to wield. *She* was the biggest badass in this house, not some piece of charmed metal.

She had tools in her goodie bag, protection candles, purifying incense, but there was no time to set them up now. There was *no time*.

Jo flung open her arms and her senses, throwing herself headlong into the bruising tide of a thousand ghosts crashing in on her. For a moment, she was lost, all thought obliterated by the thunder of sensation. The energy was drowning her, smothering her, battering her on all sides. She felt herself shrinking, pressing in on herself, curling down as small as she could under the impossible weight of the ghosts.

In a single flash of pain, she broke. The energy was suddenly not around her but *in* her. She was not small, but enormous. A goddess. She was made of energy, powerful beyond belief, drunk on the wild, seductive roar of it pulsing through her blood. For the too-loud drumming of two heartbeats, she was only power and instinct, then a thought, more emotion than words, slipped through the haze.

Wyatt.

Jo flung the ghost energy into the floor. It exploded. Plywood shrapnel cut into her arms and legs, but Jo didn't feel it. Using the ghost energy, she called to the talisman and it flew to her hand.

It was small, an innocent-looking Gordian knot of silver metal cradled in her palm. Cool to the touch, it didn't scorch or eat away at her flesh as malignant magics sometimes did. To her sight, it gave off a white light, the light of pure magic. Good magic. That light, she knew, was a lie.

Its maker had taken a single kernel of evil and wrapped it in a thousand good intentions until the evil was entirely obscured. Jo was not so easily deceived.

Somewhere inside this medallion, a flicker of ghost energy was trapped. Only then would a witch's spell be able to draw ghosts. Jo knew ghost energy. No one could match her when it came to manipulating it. Witches' ways were foreign to her, but she didn't have to unravel the enchantment to destroy the talisman. All she had to do was find that ghost energy and release it.

In theory.

Jo closed her physical eyes and focused her second sight. The white light was blinding, but she braced for it as best she could. The sucky thing about paranormal vision was that she couldn't squint. It was like staring directly into the sun with toothpicks propping her eyelids open. Jo tried to look past the white, tried to see the core of darker energy and the green that had to be wrapped around it, but the white light burned into her inner eyes, stinging and raw.

Going entirely by feel, she *reached* past the blinding white, letting the tendrils of energy flow over her, searching for one that felt familiar, one that felt like that ghostly after-impression of life that was somehow a part of *her* energy. She slid through the white, probing, and found herself mired by the sticky black tar of dark magic. It wrapped around her, suffocating and thick, an oozing pulse of oily muck. Words dripped from the black. The true words of the spell, not the key that Moonbeam had used to unlock it, but a hissing, dark voice speaking an unfamiliar phrase—*In turbo veritas*.

Jo knew better than to push at the dark energy, it would only feed on the resistance, drawing her in like quicksand. Instead, she stopped questing through the layers of energy and remained still, a piece of herself locked inside the medallion now. Panic teased the fringes of her mind, the fear that a sliver of her soul would stay trapped inside the talisman forever, but at her core she remained calm, breathing in and out, waiting.

Ghosts had been drawn to her from the time she was six years old. She never called them and they never needed a guide to find her. Her energy, her very being, called to theirs. So she waited, knowing that whatever fragment of ghostly energy that was trapped inside the talisman would find the piece of her locked there.

It didn't take long.

The first brush of green after-life energy teased her senses, just a whiff of the ghost. She didn't reach or pull, just waited and it came back, just like all the other ghostly pests throughout her life. When it twined itself around the sliver of her soul inside the medallion, Jo carefully drew it into herself. There was no way she could open a portal inside the medallion, but she didn't need one to transcend this small knot of ghost energy. She held the ghost—really just a fraction of one, siphoned off from the source and trapped now. Holding it tightly against her, Jo reached into the center of the green energy and slammed into it with energy of her own, punching a hole through to the tunnel, the white light, drawing on the force of the afterlife, the fierce, bright burn of transcendence. The ghost transcended in a burst of energy

and the power of the talisman snapped in on itself, imploding now that the key element had vanished.

The magic of the talisman burst inward, slamming down on the sliver of Jo still lodged inside. The bright white energy broke through her minimal defenses and ignited like a firecracker within her senses, throwing open her second sight and searing it blind. Jo screamed, her physical body thrown to the ground with the force of the blast.

The house shuddered and rolled, the foundations groaning under the force of another earthquake, but Jo didn't care. The white pain was a living thing, swallowing up her reality until the blackness came and drowned the pain and her along with it.

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Chapter Thirty: Insanity Loves Company

Wyatt's first conscious thought was to wonder which biker gang had jumped him and beat him with chains. His back hurt. His legs hurt. His forehead hurt.

His second conscious thought, after cataloguing the damage left by the biker gang, was to wonder where the hell Jo was and whether she had escaped unscathed.

"Jo?"

Wyatt opened his eyes and rolled to his side, then to his hands and knees. As he waited for the nausea the movement had caused to pass, he ascertained that Jo was not within a three-foot radius. As soon as he could raise his head without losing his lunch, he would widen the search.

The world felt like it was bucking and rolling beneath him. Wyatt shook his head once to clear it, but the sensation didn't pass. Then he heard the groaning rumble from the direction of the house and realized the shaking wasn't coming from inside his head.

"Jo!"

Wyatt stumbled to his feet and half-ran, half-staggered toward the house. He fell to his knees only once, when he looked up and saw the house shaking and pulsing a vivid green. Ghosts hung from every eave and he could see *every one of them*.

Either his sanity had officially cracked wide open or his reality had just blown up to double its original size, but Wyatt

wasted no time deciding which. He shoved himself to his feet again and took the steps up to the porch in a single leap.

The front door hung open. Wyatt raced through, straight for the kitchen. The quaking had stopped, but timbers still groaned and shifted around him.

A harbinger of the destruction within, the swinging door to the kitchen lay across the dining room table, blown clear off its hinges. Inside, the kitchen had been reduced to a pile of rubble, appliances melted down to misshapen hunks of metal.

A body lay unmoving in the midst of the debris.

"Jo." Wyatt's heart plummeted out of his chest and down through the demolished floorboards.

She lay heartbreakingly still, only the slight rise and fall of her chest reassuring him that she still breathed. He yanked his cell phone out of his pocket, already thumbing the numbers 9-1-1 before he noticed the battery was totally dead. He swore and threw the useless piece of plastic against the wall.

Jo didn't so much as twitch. He checked her pulse, more because he thought he was supposed to than because he had any idea what the hell her pulse was supposed to feel like. Her heart was beating. That much he ascertained.

"Wake up, Jo. Come on, honey." He brushed her hair away from her face, feeling more helpless than he'd ever felt before. She was breathing, so he didn't need to do CPR, did he? Was there something about pupils dilating? Should he check them?

The talisman. A small, silver, worked-metal charm lay in her right palm. Wyatt grabbed the charm and a crowbar. With one swift blow, he shattered it.

He fell to his knees at Jo's side, watching for her to blink awake, for those beautiful blue eyes to open, but nothing happened. Her breathing remained shallow, her eyes sealed shut. "Dammit."

Prince Charming has to kiss Sleeping Beauty.

Wyatt jumped up, spinning around, looking for the voice that had just spoken. "Hello?"

A soft, childlike giggle was the only reply.

"Who's there?"

Kiss her, the voice urged again.

Wyatt froze. He was haunted. He not only believed in ghosts, now he could see them. And he was hearing voices. This was just a banner week for him. Happy Acres better be getting a padded cell ready for him. He had a feeling he was going to need it before long.

Snow White, Sleeping Beauty...the magic spell is always broken by True Love's Kiss.

"Angelica?"

Well, if he was going to go around the bend, he might as well go all the way. It wouldn't be much fun being sane without Jo anyway.

Wyatt bent and brushed his lips against hers. When he drew back, he was almost surprised that she didn't open her eyes.

You have to mean it. True Love's Kiss doesn't count if you don't believe in magic.

Wyatt gritted his teeth, not particularly keen on being scolded by a know-it-all child who'd been dead for half a century or more. He wasn't sure what it meant that he could now hear the ghosts inside him and right now he didn't care. Jo could explain it to him, just as soon as he woke her up.

He cradled her jaw in his hand and bent to kiss her again, but this time he closed his eyes and put every ounce of faith he had—in Jo, in magic, and in love—into it. He put his soul into the touch of his mouth to hers. He made it a promise, a vow and a confession all in one, the opening of his heart and mind to her.

He kissed her until he felt her lips curve beneath his and she sighed against his mouth. Wyatt drew back slowly, still cradling her face. "Jo?"

She smiled groggily. "Happy Halloween, stranger."

"Halloween," he winced. "Shit."

"No. Halloween. Candy. Trick my treat."

Relief washed through him. She sounded like herself. "How do you feel?"

"Like I just got my ass kicked." She groaned and propped herself up on her elbows. "How 'bout you? Last time I saw you, you were doing a damn fine impression of an epileptic."

"My brains are a little rattled. I'm hearing things. And seeing things." He nodded toward the ceiling where a host of ghostly spectators hovered. "Green things. So much for not believing."

Her eyes popped wide. "Ghosts? You're seeing ghosts?"

"And hearing them," he grimaced. "I wouldn't have had a clue how to wake up Sleeping Beauty without the voices in my head."

Jo's stunned expression suddenly turned serious. "You can hear Angelica and Teddy? I don't think that's a good sign, Wyatt. We need to get them out of you. *Right now.*"

"No, no, no." He caught her shoulders when she tried to sit up all the way, easing her back down. "You've had a hell of a night already. You were unconscious. We'll get you to the hospital, get everything checked out."

"I'm not going to the hospital."

"Yes, you are. The E.R. doctors can take a break from X-raying candy and checking out kids with tummy aches to make sure you don't have any permanent—"

"No, Wyatt."

She was in no shape to be doing anything, especially not helping his sorry ass. "The ghosts are just going to have to wait a few days."

"They *can't* wait." She shoved his hands away, sitting up again, shaking her head. "You don't understand. The barrier that kept the ghosts separate from *you*, from your spirit, Angelica described it as clouds. She couldn't see or hear through the clouds."

"So?"

"So if she can see and hear and talk to you now, then the barrier between your spirit and theirs is getting thin. Soon, I won't be able to get them out of you, without taking part of your spirit out too. We can't wait, Wyatt. We need to do this *now.*"

Wyatt took in her serious expression. Serious and utterly drained. Heavy shadows surrounded her eyes, as if she'd been sucker-punched by a raccoon. Her face was too pale, her lips almost blue. He weighed the urgency in her voice against the strain in her eyes. It was no contest.

"No."

She blinked at the finality in his tone. "No?"

"We'll risk waiting. I don't want you pushing yourself any more tonight."

Jo's jaw dropped. "Excuse me. I don't believe I asked your *permission* to do my goddamn job."

"Yeah, well, I don't remember asking you to kill yourself on my behalf."

He couldn't let her take such a chance for him. His heart had all but stopped beating when he saw her lying there on the floor. He was in love with her. No two ways about it. The inn, all of the Haines Hideaways, his professional reputation—that was all just business. This was personal.

She'd slipped into every corner of his life and every dark, neglected cranny of his heart. He didn't care if the world thought he was just as crazy as he'd originally thought she was. Wyatt hadn't really lived until he met her. If anything happened to her now...

"No," he repeated emphatically. "Absolutely not."

Her eyes narrowed threateningly. "We are going to discuss this tendency you have to think you're in charge all the time. Later. Right now, you have a decision to make. You either walk up the stairs to the attic with me right now, or I will have the ghosts take over your body and you can get it back

when I've taken them out of you. Now, which would you prefer?"

"No one is going upstairs until I get a construction team in here. After that earthquake, I don't trust the stairs." Visions of the rotted boards collapsing beneath her sent a shudder through his body.

"That wasn't one of the options I gave you."

"Twenty-four hours, Jo," he insisted. "I'll have the house looked over. You'll be rested. It's so much more logical."

"Then isn't it lucky I'm not driven by logic. You have five seconds to decide."

"Jo. This is ridiculous—"

"Four."

"I'm not going to—"

"Three. Any last words?"

"Dammit, Jo."

"Two."

A wave of exhaustion hit him like a freight train. Wyatt was asleep before he heard, "One."

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Chapter Thirty-One: Toys in the Attic

At the top of the stairs, in the highest tower, lay a small, square room with bay windows on every wall. Jo followed Wyatt's body, steered by Angelica, up the rickety stairs. She wasn't entirely sure what she was going to do to get the ghosts out when she got to the top, but she knew from her conversation with the Bubblelicious brat that this was where it had to happen. This room was where they belonged.

Jo felt like she'd been flattened by a steamroller and her second sight was fuzzy and raw from the aftereffects of her duel with the talisman, but she wasn't willing to risk Wyatt's soul for another second.

The movements of the rest of the ghosts in the house were lazier now that the medallion had lost its power over them. They drifted in a more natural way, listlessly, as if they didn't quite know what to do or where to go anymore. A thousand lost children.

Jo knew she would have to take care of them, and soon, but at the moment she was more worried about the two children lost inside Wyatt Haines.

At the landing at the top of the stairs, Angelica hesitated. Jo slipped past her and opened the door then gasped in surprise.

For all the renovations in the rest of the house, this one hadn't been touched.

A thick layer of dust coated the hardwood floors and vintage toys crowded into the small space. Dollhouses and

porcelain-faced baby dolls fought for space beside hand-carved jack-in-the-boxes and toy soldiers. It was a time capsule, a treasure trove, painstakingly prepared by someone who had loved these two little children, these two little ghosts, very much.

Jo turned and beckoned to Angelica. Wyatt's eyes were filled with her tears. "Home," she whispered in his voice.

Angelica stepped across the threshold. As soon as the body broke the plane into the room, the green glow that was Angelica began to rise away from him, like steam. That simply, as Jo stood by and did nothing, Angelica was free of Wyatt's body, with Teddy not far behind. They floated across the room, their spectral bodies growing clearer as they roamed the room, brushing against their toys.

Wyatt shook his head sharply, swaying as he came to himself again. "Dammit, Jo!"

She beamed at him, ridiculously pleased to hear him sounding so much like himself, his spirit still safely attached to his body. "Look," she urged him quietly, pointing to his two former occupants.

Wyatt's tirade froze on his lips when he spotted the two children. "Is that them? It worked? What did you do?"

"I didn't have to do anything. This is where they're meant to be."

Wyatt frowned, coming farther into the room, careful not to disturb the ghosts as they reacquainted themselves with all their possessions. "What is this place?"

"Haven't you ever been up here? This is your house, after all."

He shook his head, running his fingers through the dust over an old train set. "The tower room is too small to be of any use. We planned to close it off and use it for storage. No refurbishment necessary. But it looks like someone put a lot of time and energy into this room."

"It's Angelica and Teddy's toy room," Jo explained.

"But who made it like this? Ghosts can't just walk into a toy store and buy things."

Jo looked around the room that had been arranged with such care and love. "It was their sister. Their little sister." When Wyatt just frowned at her, she clarified. "You know her as the little old lady who went to church and gave to charity. The previous owner of the house."

"But that means they've been here for decades."

"At least seven decades," Jo confirmed. "Maybe more."

"Why seven?"

"They didn't remember the second World War or the Great Depression. Those things have an impact, even on a nine-year-old. Angelica did remember The Great War, but it was far away and didn't affect her."

"How did they die?" Wyatt asked, his voice low and somber.

Jo figured he was probably experiencing the same epiphany she'd had at Bethie's house. These were real children once. Knowing that they had been loved, the center of someone's world, somehow made their ghostly state all the more tragic.

"They got sick," Jo explained quietly. "I think it was probably the influenza pandemic, but neither of them knew

what year it was or exactly how it happened. This was their summer house. Their spirits came here because they remember being happy here. The next summer, when the family came back to stay, their little sister could see them. Her parents thought it was a manifestation of her grief, being left an only child, playing all day with her invisible siblings, but she really did see them. She came to live in this house and even though she aged, they never did. She kept the toy room for them." Jo pointed to a projector screen that pulled down over one of the windows. "She even had a film projector installed and showed them Marx Brothers movies. She loved them."

"It really was their house." Wyatt grimaced. "No wonder they were trying to get rid of me."

"Don't worry," she reassured him. "I'll transcend them. I'll transcend all of them. No more Episodes."

"We don't want to go."

Jo looked over, startled by the sound of Angelica's voice. The young ghosts stood side by side, Angelica petulant and mischievous, Teddy solemn and silent.

"We want to stay here," Angelica insisted. "In our house."

"It isn't your house anymore," Jo said reasonably. "It's Wyatt's house now and soon it's going to be an inn, with strange people coming and going at all hours. You don't want to live in a place like that. Er, exist, rather."

Angelica frowned at her mistrustfully. "What happens? Where do we go?"

"I don't know exactly," Jo admitted. "You go *on*. It's where you're supposed to go. No child should be deprived of her afterlife. It's nice over there."

"How do you know?" Angelica countered aggressively. "You're not dead."

"You're right, but some things you just have to take on faith. This is the way it's supposed to be."

Angelica's lower lip shoved out in a pout as Teddy shoved his thumb into his mouth. "I don't like rules," she complained.

Jo smiled in spite of herself. "You and me both. But there are some rules even we can't get out of. Come on, Angelica. Be brave for Teddy."

That got her. The young ghost looked at her little brother and straightened her intangible spine. She caught her brother's hand, gave him a reassuring smile, and nodded her consent to Jo.

Jo took a deep breath and grounded herself. She reached out, easily finding a thin spot for the portal. The entire room felt thin, as if it were right on the edge between this world and the next, probably a side effect of housing ghosts for three-quarters of a century.

"Whoa, wait a second. No one is transcending anyone yet."

"Wyatt, I'm fine. I can do this. Stop being such a—" Jo caught herself before she said something inappropriate for young ears. "A, uh, doofus."

"I'm sorry if I'm being a doofus, Jo, but *this can wait*. It can all wait. You need to go to the hospital—"

"I'm fine!"

"And there is no way we are doing any more ghost sh—" He quickly modified what he was saying when he caught her glare. "—stuff. No more ghost *stuff* up in the attic with the creaky timbers all around us when every time you do something ghosty, it triggers an earthquake."

Jo frowned. She hated to admit it, but Mr. Uptight might actually have a point with that one. "I think the quakes were probably caused by the medallion, but you're right. We should probably go downstairs and stand in a doorway or something."

He blinked, visibly stunned by her capitulation. "I'm right?"

"Don't make a big thing of it. It happens. Rarely. Come on."

* * * *

Jo stood in the front hall, having had enough of the kitchen thank you very much, and tried not to waver on her feet. Wyatt didn't need any more fuel for his "you are too exhausted to do this tonight" argument. She refused to show weakness.

He glowered at her from his post at the front door, poised to yank her from the house at the first sign that it was coming down around their heads.

"This is stupid and masochistic."

So was her being in love with him, but she did that anyway. Why should this be any different? "Shut up, Wyatt, or I'll put more ghosts into you."

"You'll probably do it by accident anyway," he insisted. "You don't have the energy to do this."

"As inspiring as your vote of confidence is, I'm doing this whether you want me to or not. Since you have such a problem with this, why don't you wait outside?"

"Did asking me to wait outside work last time?"

"No, but I was hoping you'd learned your lesson."

Jo thought that would be the last word on the subject, but apparently Wyatt wasn't done pleading his case. He shoved away from the doorway and came to face her, capturing her face between his hands.

"Jo. I'm not trying to control you or saying this just to be contrary. I'm worried about you. These ghosts. What difference does it make whether you transcend them today or tomorrow? Who cares? You don't have to prove anything to anyone."

She laughed at herself a little. No wonder he thought she was a masochist. She hadn't bothered to tell him why it was important to do it now. "I'm going to have to work on my communication skills," she muttered.

"What?"

"I'm not used to having people worry about me or try to look out for me. It's going to take some getting used to."

This being in love business wasn't as easy as it looked. Of course, it wasn't likely to be a problem much longer. Wyatt would probably walk out of her life five minutes after she got the ghosts out of his. He should *want* her to do it tonight. But whether he wanted her to or not, she needed to.

"Remember what I said about Samhain being a night of power?" she asked, and then continued without waiting for an answer. "That means everyone who is sensitive to

supernatural power is out tonight, most of them making mischief. Ghost energy isn't as appealing to witches and demons as some other forms, but this much energy, no matter what kind, is going to draw attention. And odds are, it isn't going to be the kind of attention we want."

Wyatt frowned, but it was a mild tremor on the Pissed-Off-CEO Richter scale. "So you need to get rid of it before it gets into the wrong hands."

"Exactly."

He nodded slowly, taking a step back. "Be careful." Then he turned without another word and went back to his post at the door. Jo blinked in shock as he waited there, absolutely silent, absolutely motionless, for her to get on with it.

The man could be reasonable. Who knew?

Jo took a deep breath, grounding herself and preparing to search for a portal. With so much ghost energy in the house, it was child's play to find a space where the living plane had been worn thin and give it a tiny tug.

The portal sprang open, clean and white and inviting.

Without prompting, the ghosts began to flow toward the open portal, vanishing through it faster than Jo could count them. The room quickly emptied. Ghosts from other parts of the house must have sensed the open portal, because they began to flow down through the ceiling and through the walls. They disappeared into the next plane like bubbles down a drain.

There were so many of them, they flowed together, wisps of green energy, but when she looked closer, she saw figures in the energy now. Children of all ages swarmed around her.

Jo watched the show, relaxed and in control. *This* was what her job was supposed to be like. She got a rewarding little rush with each spirit that moved on to its proper place. Actually she was feeling pretty damn good. The residual ghost energy in the house was giving her a bit of a buzz now that it wasn't being manipulated by the spell.

After a matter of minutes, the room emptied and ghosts stopped flying through the walls and ceiling. Jo let the portal fall closed.

She turned to the door to find Wyatt watching, his expression rapt and almost awed.

"Wow."

Jo blushed and gave a little curtsy, delighted by the light of admiration in his eyes. She thought, on the plane, that she had convinced herself not to care what other people thought, but seeing his acceptance of her gifts written all over his face made her want to hug herself tight to hold onto the warmth of that feeling. Maybe she didn't need to be admired the world over. Maybe just Wyatt looking at her like this was enough.

"Are they all gone?" he asked, and her warm fuzzies froze solid in record time.

If they were all gone, so was she.

A screech of tires in the street outside saved her from answering.

"Jo!" It was Karma's voice, urgent and frantic.

Jo and Wyatt came out onto the porch as Karma sprinted up the walk, somehow looking perfectly balanced and elegant while running in three-inch-heels. "Karma?"

Her boss stopped abruptly. "You look fine," she accused. "You both look fine."

"Oh, shit. I forgot to call you back."

Karma nodded tightly. "Why didn't you answer your phone?"

Jo looked past Karma to the front lawn where she could see her phone in the grass, blinking frantically at the volume of missed calls. Now did not seem the best time to go retrieve it. "I dropped it."

Karma turned her gimlet gaze on Wyatt. "And you? You have a reason for not answering your phone?"

"I threw it against a wall," he explained. Jo turned her head to stare at him questioningly and he shrugged. "The battery was dead."

Karma didn't appear overly surprised by that revelation. "The ghost energy in your body was probably disrupting electronics that were too close to you for extended periods." She looked them both over from head to toe, taking in the grass stains, kitchen rubble, and attic dust at a single glance. "Busy night?"

"We destroyed the talisman that was drawing the ghosts, released the ghosts from Wyatt's body, and transcended a houseful."

"Good." All about the lavish praise, her boss.

Jo shrugged, tossing Karma a cheeky grin. "You know how Halloween is."

"This day is the bane of my existence. Have you scanned the house?"

"I was just about to." Jo extended her awareness, searching through the house for any stragglers. Basement, kitchen, dining room—all clear. Second floor, third floor—clear. Then she came to the attic room. The toy room. Where two small ghost energies lingered. Angelica and Teddy.

"What the hell?" Was something wrong with her mojo?

"Not hell," Karma said calmly, clearly having no appreciation for Jo's faulty-mojo panic. "Not heaven either, apparently. At least, not yet. It appears it isn't their time."

"They're dead," Jo protested. "How can it not be their time?"

Karma merely shrugged. "They are not ready. Perhaps some other day."

"That's it?" Jo exclaimed, her gaze shuttling back and forth between the irritatingly calm Karma and the house where two ghosts were still alarmingly present on the mortal plane.

"Perhaps some other day? That's your response?"

"I'm afraid I have a busy night still ahead of me, Jo. My response will have to suffice for now." She turned and walked back toward her car.

Jo turned to Wyatt for reinforcements, but he just shrugged.

"I don't see what harm it could do to leave them in the house tonight. Two little ghosts probably don't have enough energy to attract bad witches." He shot her a grin. "It is Halloween, after all. I heard somewhere that ghosts in a house on Halloween are festive."

"There? You see," Karma called, already climbing into her car, clearly unperturbed by Jo's elevated stress-levels. "It's festive. Have a good night, Jo. Mr. Haines."

"Karma, wait!" Jo ran down the path after her, grabbing the edge of Karma's partially rolled-down window before she could pull away. "Moonbeam got the talisman from Prometheus. It was triggered by a Latin phrase about luck, but the power of the spell was wrapped around the words *In turbo veritas*. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Loosely translated, I believe it means 'In disorder, truth'."

"He sold it to her knowing what it would do. He might even have been the creator—"

Karma held up a hand to stop her. "Let me handle Prometheus." She looked past Jo to the house and the grass-stained, bedraggled CEO. "You have your own worries tonight."

Jo was grateful it was too dark for Karma to see her blush. "What do you mean?"

"You two have a lot to talk about. Just try to go easy on him about the powder blue suit." Jo's jaw dropped as Karma put the car into drive. "Oh, and Jo? Next time? Answer your damn phone."

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Chapter Thirty-Two: Trick My Treat

She found Wyatt among the remains of the kitchen, picking through the rubble. As she watched, he crouched and picked up a small, shiny object, slipping it into his pocket. Her first thought was that he was saving a piece of the talisman, but she quickly discarded that idea.

That troublesome little bauble was responsible for a lot of things over the last week, but not all of them were horrible. It had brought her to Wyatt, and even knowing that what they had was about to end, which could only be bad for her heart, Jo was still grateful for that.

Saving a souvenir was the type of thing she would do, but Mr. Big Business wasn't the sentimental type.

He straightened and a small sound escaped Jo's throat. His white button-up shirt, torn and grass-stained, stretched across his shoulders as he moved. Jo's mouth watered at the play of denim over his ass. Did he have to be so damn gorgeous?

If only the only thing she liked about him was the way those jeans fit. It would be so much easier to walk away if this was just sex. Why did he have to be stubborn and surprisingly fun to be with? Why did he have to be uncompromising and honorable, loyal and hard working? Why did he have to have so many admirable traits? Life was so much simpler a week ago, when Wyatt Haines was just another prejudiced, uptight, corporate asshole she despised.

When had his frown become so endearing? When had his laugh become as necessary to her as oxygen? Somewhere between the bubble gum and the handcuffs, she'd fallen head over heels for the worst possible man in the world for her.

He looked over at her, standing in the doorway watching him. His smile lit up as if in reflex to her presence. "Hey."

Jo's heart thudded like a teenager at a *Twilight* premiere. "Hey back. Sorry about your kitchen."

He shrugged. "We needed to remodel anyway. You saved me a mint on demolition costs."

A memory sprang into Jo's mind as she saw her goodie bag, half-buried in the rubble. She picked her way over to it, kicking away a piece of metal that had once been part of the stove. "The first time you saw me, you thought I had explosives in here."

"What *is* in there?" he asked, not denying her accusation.

Jo shrugged and flipped the pack onto her back. "Incense, candles, that sort of thing. It's more for the clients than for me. Some people really get off on the paraphernalia." She carefully navigated a path back to where he waited near the door. "So, what do you do now?"

She wanted him to announce that he was walking out that door and back to his normal, everyday life. She had to hear him say it. Jo held her breath, anticipating the words. *Well, it's been fun...*

"I was thinking of Trick or Treating."

"What?" That wasn't what she'd been expecting.

"Trick or treating. You know, get in touch with my inner child."

Jo snorted. "I thought we just got the inner child out of you."

"Come on, Jo. Live a little."

He couldn't be serious. She started to turn away from him, but he caught her arm. He stepped toward her, catching her other shoulder and pulling her flush against him. The movement was so quick and unexpected, Jo didn't have time to do more than gasp. Then his mouth was there, holding hers, coaxing her. His arms came around her, his hands spread on her back, pressing her into him. One hand ran up her spine to cup the back of her neck as the other slid down to skate over her ass.

"So what'll it be, Jo?" he asked against her mouth. "Trick?" His hand squeezed her ass. "Or treat?" He kissed her, sweet and drugging.

It was just sex to him. She *knew* it was just sex, but was that really so terrible? Jo *liked* sex. And her feelings regarding sex with Wyatt were even more favorable. Even if he was just using her. She could use him too. Even if he did just want her body. She wanted his right back.

Trick or treat?

"Can't we do both?" she mumbled into his mouth. Wyatt answered her by tightening his hold on her and deepening the kiss.

Jo wrapped one arm over his shoulder and hooked her calf around his hip, needing to get closer, wanting nothing more than to melt right into his body.

He lifted her and Jo wound her legs around his waist, locking her ankles at the small of his back. Wyatt took two

steps and leaned her against a wall. Jo shivered, delighting in being trapped between a wall and a very hard place.

She plunged her fingers into his hair, holding his mouth steady for her to devour it. She couldn't help the edge of desperation to the kiss. Knowing that he might tire of her at any moment added an edge of panic to her desire, making it sharp enough to cut her.

He tasted so good, hot and spicy, temptation and sin and everything she'd never let herself want all wrapped into one.

Above their heads, the timbers creaked and moaned eerily.

Jo wrenched her mouth away from his. "Angelica and Teddy."

Wyatt glared at the ceiling. "I am really getting sick of those damned ghosts."

Jo licked her lips, wanting nothing more than Wyatt's back on hers. "I could try to transcend them again."

"No." He groaned and dropped his forehead against hers. "As much as I hate to delay this for another second, we should probably move to a venue that is less likely to come falling down around our ears." He set her back on her feet and stepped back, catching hold of her hand. "Come on. Let's get out of here. Let the ghosts have the house for tonight."

Jo fidgeted restlessly as the world flew past outside the window of the Bentley. She wanted to keep the banter light and flirty, as uncomplicated and frivolous as their relationship supposedly was, but her tongue had turned to lead as soon as she stepped foot outside the Victorian.

She couldn't think of a thing to say that wouldn't somehow turn into, "I love you," on the way out of her mouth. God, if

she said that, he'd probably throw her out of the car without even bothering to pull over first. *I love you* had never been part of the deal. Though, they hadn't ever specifically stated what the deal was between them, sexually speaking. The temptation to ask, to have him spell it out in the most basic terms, ate at her from the inside out.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Jo kept her eyes on the window. If she looked at him, she was going to blurt out the Unspeakable Truth. She forced a lightness she didn't feel into her voice and said, "These are expensive thoughts, buddy."

He laughed, low and easy. The bastard didn't seem even slightly aware of her traumatic battle over here in the passenger seat. "I'm good at negotiations," he said. "Make me an offer."

Love. Marriage. Babies. Jo flinched at her own thoughts. That wasn't her. That wasn't what she wanted—except maybe the love part. Love sounded pretty damn good. But marriage and babies? She was twenty-six years old! She wasn't ready to be responsible for another human being. Had some parasite in the water at Bethie's suburban paradise gotten into her brain and infected her? Jo shook her head. She wanted Wyatt. Not marriage.

"Jo? You okay?"

"Fine." Losing her mind, but just dandy.

Wyatt gave a chuckle. "The ghosts ruined the mood, eh?" He pulled the Bentley into the garage space reserved for his condo and cut the engine. He climbed out of the car, but Jo couldn't seem to make her limbs function properly. She was

still sitting there, arguing with herself over the wisdom of going inside with him, when he opened her door. She looked at the hand he held out to help her out of the car.

Jo kicked herself. What the hell was she waiting for? She was a risk taker. An adventurer. What was she so afraid of?

She put her hand into his.

"We could watch *Star Trek*," he suggested as he led the way into his building, waving casually to the night security guard as if he wandered in covered in kitchen debris and grass stains every night.

Jo rolled her eyes as the elevator doors slid shut behind them. "Wow. It's true. A man really will say anything to get a woman into bed. Sure, you'll watch *Star Trek* tonight, but it'll be *Sportscenter* again in the morning."

"I see myself buying a second television in the near future." When they arrived on his floor, Wyatt unlocked the condo and held the door for her.

Jo stopped in the foyer, dropping her dingy goodie bag onto the cream-colored carpet. Did he mean what she thought he meant? Was he thinking of them as more than a one-night stand?

Before she could think of how to ask him that without actually *asking* him, he was there in front of her, standing too close and looking at her in a way that made her skin feel two sizes too tight. She shivered under his blue-eyed gaze and he gave her the slow, dirty smile of a man who knew he was about to get laid.

A bolt of heat shot through her body. So much for second thoughts.

Jo answered that smile with one of her own. One that said she knew exactly what she did to him. She leaned her shoulder blades back against the wall and arched her back to show the Girls to their best advantage.

Wyatt crowded closer, his eyes locked on her breasts. He braced his arms on the wall on either side of her head, leaning over her. Jo brushed a light, teasing kiss across his lips. That was all the invitation he needed.

His mouth found hers, firm and commanding. It was the only point where they touched, but Jo felt it like a brand over every inch of her skin. She was *his*. His tongue forced its way into her mouth and she welcomed it, drawing it in and tangling it with hers. It wasn't enough. At this moment, she felt like nothing would ever be enough. He was heat and lust, but he wasn't *close enough*.

Jo looped her arms around his neck and twined one of her legs around his. He pressed his body into hers, his hands finding the Girls and letting them know they were about to get to come out and play.

Jo stopped thinking, stopped doing anything other than feeling and reacting. He grabbed the backs of her thighs and lifted her until she hooked her legs around his hips. She clung to him, their kiss never breaking, as he walked to his bedroom. They fell together onto the king-sized bed that dominated the room.

She loved his weight pressing her into the soft mattress and tangled her arms and legs around him when he tried to lift his body away from her.

"Minx." He caught her hands and pinned them above her head, but he didn't move the luscious weight of his body off of her.

Jo cradled him between her thighs, rocking up against him as the firm weight of his erection pressed against her through the layers of their clothing.

He tried to kiss her into submission, but she would not be subdued, pushing against him, her legs wrapped around his waist, her body arching against his until her breasts flattened against his chest.

"Jesus, Jo," he gasped into her ear, the broken words sending another jolt of want through her. He trapped both of her wrists in one of his hands and slid the other down her arm, teasing over her collarbone to palm one of her breasts. His grip would have been too rough if she wasn't already panting with need. Her nipple hardened in a rush, stabbing against his palm as he buried his mouth against the curve of her neck and pulsed his hips against hers. The pressure between her legs bowed her spine, her mouth falling open on a strangled gasp.

Wyatt's hands yanked at her shirt, ripping it off over her head before she'd even noticed he'd freed her hands. Her bra quickly followed. Wyatt muttered something that sounded like "Fuck *me*" at the sight of the Girls, his mouth closing tight over one taut nipple as his hands fumbled frantically with the buttons on her jeans. Jo didn't bother to tell him that was exactly her plan.

Wyatt lifted his head to glare at the fastening of her jeans, swearing fervently. "Why don't you wear jeans with a zipper like a normal person?" he growled.

"Why are you wearing so many clothes?" Jo countered, her fingers working at the buttons on his shirt.

Wyatt leapt off her, yanking his shirt over his head with a careless jerk that sent buttons flying. The accompanying sound of ripping fabric was heady evidence of his need for her. He threw aside pants and boxers almost as quickly as the shirt, another frantic yank. He was back on top of her before she could appreciate the view, but she could sure appreciate the feel of hard, hot male pressing her down into the mattress.

"Wyatt, my jeans," she reminded him, a bubble of laughter pushing at the back of her throat. God, she felt so *good*. Who knew sex with Wyatt would be so fierce and frantic and *fun*?

"I'm on it."

She thought, given his wild urgency, that he would yank them off her as fiercely as he had his own clothing, but he continued to surprise her. He savored every inch, lips, teeth, and tongue sampling her skin as it was revealed. Her eyes were as lust-clouded and urgent as his by the time he nipped at her ankles, throwing her jeans over his shoulder.

He wrapped one hand around each ankle, and bent her legs, opening them until she was sprawled before him like an offering, naked save the skimpy scrap of pink lace that was her panties.

"Pink." He caught the lace at her hipbone with his teeth and gently tugged at it as his fingers glided up the insides of

her thighs. "Tonight you wear underwear, and underneath all that badass posturing, is pink lace."

Jo sank her fingers into his hair, shifting restlessly beneath him. "I like pretty things next to my skin," she admitted, fighting a blush.

"That's too bad."

Jo fisted her hands in his hair and pulled his head up, forcing him to meet her eyes. "Too bad?"

He slid his fingers under the lace. "These are going to have to come off. No more pretty things against your skin."

She laughed. "I'll have you against my skin. You'll do, pretty boy."

He grinned and arched a brow at her questioningly, his fingers tugging at the lace.

"Tear them," she ordered. His pupils dilated until his eyes were wholly black with just a rim of bright blue. He complied with one hard yank that lifted her hips. He balled up the scraps and tossed them aside, bending to bite her softly just beneath her belly button.

She gave his hair another soft tug, just to get his attention. "Get a move on, Wyatt. You're making me crazy, here."

He laughed against her skin, rubbing his cheek, slightly rough with stubble, against the sensitive skin of her belly. "That's the idea, baby."

She urged him up until his shoulders loomed over her and his hips were trapped beneath her thighs. "If you're going to make me crazy, do it from the inside out."

His eyes blackened and fogged. He moved to fit himself to her, but she stopped him, giving his shoulder a shove.

"Lie back. I wanna be on top."

"You were on top last time," he protested, but Jo ran her hands up over the Girls, reminding him what was different about this time.

"Trust me, Wyatt. You'll like me on top."

He rolled onto his back without another word, taking her with him.

She sat up, straddling his stomach, and faced him with her I-am-the-goddess-of-the-universe grin. She slid her hands up his shaft, teasing until his eyes crossed. His hands gripped the sheets. He was trying so hard to push back his instinct to take control, to dominate. Trying so hard not to grab her and ram her down onto him.

Jo rewarded his Herculean effort by fitting him against her and pressing down onto him in a slow, liquid slide that elicited twin groans from their throats. She seated herself fully and let her head fall back, wallowing in the feel of him stretching her, filling her.

She rocked against him, just the minutest flex of her hips, and another chorus of groans filled the room. She braced her knees and rose up, each movement slow and torturously controlled. Wyatt, poor baby, didn't appear to appreciate her control. Veins popped out on his arms and neck as he fought to restrain himself. Jo appreciated the effort, but the last thing she wanted right now was restraint.

"Put your hands on me," she commanded, grabbing his wrists and slapping his hands onto her hips. His fingers sank

into the flesh there, digging deep enough that she knew he would leave marks, but she didn't care. The muscles in his arms flexed deliciously as he lifted her and brought her slamming back down, quickly setting a rhythm that battered all thoughts other than him out of her brain.

He shifted his grip, grabbing the Girls with both hands. She panted his name, rushing forward on a tidal wave of sensation, building and tightening toward release. Jo braced herself, trying to find a fixed point in a world that was melting around her. She went over with a scream, dissolving into a million points of light.

As she was floating back down, she wondered, irrelevantly, if that was what the white light of transcending felt like, but she didn't spare much time for the thought. Wyatt wasn't done yet.

"My turn." He flipped her onto her back, slipping out of her in the process, but driving himself back into her so quickly, her gasp at the loss was overrun by her moan at his return. He pushed high into her and all of the retreating sensations of her orgasm rushed back in a dizzying flood. She was wild again in seconds. He caught her knee and raised it higher to give himself a better angle as he worked into her, his mouth hot on hers as his hips drove against hers relentlessly. She lost all thoughts but *yes* and *more* as he brought her up, higher and harder. Her body coiled like a spring tightening around him.

She wanted to wait for him this time, wanted to hit that peak together, but she couldn't hold off much longer. She

pressed back against the urge to rush forward into madness, managing to pant, "Now, Wyatt, I'm going to come."

He groaned her name, grabbing her hands and interlocking their fingers together, his hips pistoning into hers uncontrollably. "Jo," he grunted, his eyes black and wild as they locked on hers, holding her gaze as he moaned, "*Now*" and went over. His orgasm set a spark to the explosion waiting to rip her apart and she came with him, the force of her release unbearable in its intensity. She couldn't close her eyes, couldn't look away from the searing possession she saw in his and knew was reflected in her own. She could only cling to him, shuddering with ecstasy, and ride out the storm.

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Chapter Thirty-Three: Morning-After Negotiations

Jo woke in the softest bed she had ever slept in, to the feeling of someone with a scruffy morning beard nibbling on her shoulder blade. She blinked in the direction of the clock, and when it wasn't where she expected it to be, raised her hand to rub sleepily at her eyes.

Her hand. Which was attached to her wrist. Which still had a pair of fuzzy pink handcuffs dangling from it.

"Good morning," Wyatt mumbled against her back, his tongue soothing the beard burn he had left on her shoulder blade.

It was hard to be modest when you woke up with an enthusiastic man and a pair of handcuffs. Jo decided not to bother trying.

"G'morning," she replied, rolling to face her lover.

His eyes immediately locked on the Girls. "Good morning, ladies," he cooed to them.

"What time is it?"

Her uptight businessman just shrugged. "It's early and I don't have any meetings until this afternoon. Why don't you call in sick to work?"

"I don't need to call in. I don't have any other clients at the moment," Jo reminded him.

"Excellent." Wyatt settled in to greet the Girls properly. "Remind me to send a glowing letter of thanks to Karmic Consultants for the personalized service I have received."

Jo smacked him on the shoulder. "This is not part of the service."

Wyatt chuckled, the vibration traveling through her where they were pressed together. "I should hope not. If Karma gives you shit, you can tell her that you didn't officially go to *bed* with me until I was no longer a client."

She threaded her fingers into his hair. "Technically, you are still a client. At least until I can get rid of Angelica and Teddy." She sighed, enjoying the silky slide of his hair through her fingers. "We should probably discuss what you'd like me to do with them if I can't figure out a way to transcend them."

There were other things they should be discussing, but Jo was no more eager to delve into the relationship business than she had been last night. Angelica and Teddy seemed a safe topic.

Wyatt just shrugged again, his attention still apparently devoted to the Girls. "Why don't we just leave them where they are? I have to confess, I've gotten pretty attached to the obnoxious little pranksters."

"Leave them where they are? In the attic of one of your famous Hideaways?"

He abandoned the Girls—leaving the little hussies whining about his absence—and propped himself up on his elbow beside her. "I've been thinking maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea. We could market it as the Haunted Hideaway. I'm betting people would come from all over the world if they were guaranteed a ghost sighting."

"And how would you guarantee that? Do you think that Angelica and Teddy are just some wind-up dolls that will perform for you on cue? They deserve better than to be a tourist attraction, Wyatt."

"Of course we wouldn't actually guarantee a ghost sighting, just spread judicious rumors. Generate a buzz. It's all about marketing."

"Wyatt..."

"If the kids don't want to, we won't do it. We'll figure something else out," he assured her. "But I'm betting the opportunity to play as many practical jokes as they want on a bunch of tourists—within reason, of course—will be more than they can resist. We'll leave the toy room set up just for them, so they have someplace to go when they want to get away from all the ghost seekers, but I have a feeling they'll like all the attention."

"People who go on vacation specifically to get bubble-gum stuck in their hair by a bunch of juvenile ghosts are masochists."

Wyatt grinned. "Whatever turns a profit, baby."

"Greedy bastard," she accused him without heat. Frankly, she thought his plan was pretty brilliant. Angelica and Teddy probably would, too.

He stroked a hand down her side. "Of course," he began suggestively, "I'll need a ghost consultant on the payroll. Just to keep an eye on things."

Just what she needed—to be on Wyatt's payroll. He'd have her in a powder blue suit in no time.

"No."

He laughed at her curt response. "I haven't even asked you yet."

Jo rolled out from under his arm and out of bed, scanning the room for her clothes.

Wyatt sat up at her sudden departure, working a solid 5.0 Pissed-Off-CEO-Richter-scale frown. "What are you doing?"

"I need clothes. I refuse to have this conversation naked." She grabbed her jeans and yanked them over her hips—going commando today since Wyatt had made free with her underwear.

Okay, fine, she had *told* him to tear them off, but still. It was *someone's* fault that she didn't have anything to wear this morning and she wasn't in the mood to take credit. The first shirt she came to was his, but she pulled it on anyway, knotting it across the Girls where the buttons had been ripped off.

"What conversation?" He sat naked on the bed, frowning at her.

"I'm not an employee, Wyatt." She grabbed his pants and threw them at him. Wyatt caught them against his chest then reluctantly stood and began pulling them on.

"I never thought you were an employee," he said irritably, still wearing his most intimidating frown. "I sure as hell don't treat you like a fucking employee."

Jo thought the mention of a "fucking" employee was rather telling, but that wasn't the argument she wanted to have right now. "I won't become a powder blue suit woman for you, Wyatt."

"You aren't wearing a suit!" he exclaimed, exasperated. "Blue or otherwise."

"It isn't about the color," she snapped back. "It's about subverting my personality to please you. That little color-coordinated peach ensemble from yesterday? Did that seem like the kind of thing I wear?"

"Who cares what you wear?" he shouted. "It was your goddamn idea to dress up like that. You could have gone to the opening wearing jeans and I wouldn't have cared."

"But you wouldn't have wanted people to know I was there with you," Jo insisted. "Your image is too important to you. If I want to be with you, I have to be *normal*."

"You *are* with me and I don't give a rat's ass if you're normal."

"You're with me now, where no one can see us. I'll bet you sing a different song in public."

"I try to avoid singing in public whenever possible."

"Wyatt! This isn't a joke."

"I know. Believe me, I know." He glowered at her.

Jo sniffed and looked down at the floor. She was *not* going to cry. She wasn't that pathetic. "Maybe I should just go."

Suddenly, he was looming over her. "You aren't going anywhere." He pulled her over to the bed and sat her down on the edge of it. "I'm making a mess of this," he muttered, taking a step back to face her, his arms folded across his bare chest. "Listen, I know I was a dick before and I shouldn't have said half the things I said, but do you think you could do me a favor and just forget all that? I'm trying to make amends here."

"I thought you'd like the ghost consultant job *because* it would be so public. Everyone would know that Wyatt Haines's girlfriend was a ghost wrangler."

She sat up straighter. "Girlfriend?"

His frown moved up a few points on the Richter scale. "You're mercenary, aren't you? You want it all. It can't just be mind-bending sex and more fun than I've ever had with anyone in my life. It has to be official."

"I want it all." The words came out as little more than whisper, forced past the nerves that clogged her throat.

He narrowed his eyes, weighing his options. "What would it take to get you to move in with me?"

Jo gritted her teeth against the urge to shout, "Take me, darling, I'm yours!" and instead, tilted her head back proudly. "This isn't a negotiation, Wyatt."

He nodded once, acknowledging her words. His eyes were narrowed, considering. Jo waited, the fear digging its teeth in deep as the silence stretched. She knew it was unreasonable to ask it of him. They'd known each other for less than a week, but in that week, she had spent nearly every second with him and now she couldn't imagine her days without him.

"I don't see why I have to say it first," he grouched, and her nerves evaporated in a blink.

Jo smiled blindingly. *He loves me*, she thought dizzily, the world suddenly rosy and bright. "You are such a wuss," she accused. "You want me to say it first? Fine. I love you. Ha."

Not the most mature declaration ever, but it did the trick. Wyatt grinned at her, the Pissed-Off-CEO-Richter-scale frown disappearing without a single aftershock. "I love you too."

Public, private, normal, insane, ghosts, whatever. The whole package. This means you have to move in with me, right?"

Jo bounced off the bed and strutted the two feet to her love, an extra I-am-a-sex-goddess swagger in her walk. She couldn't remember ever feeling so light and happy and free.

She looped her arms around his waist and tipped her face up for his kiss. "We'll negotiate terms," she promised, a fraction of a second before his lips touched hers.

As she fell into the touch and taste and feel of him, Jo marveled at the world that had thrown them together until they couldn't imagine being torn apart. The Goth ghost girl and the anal-retentive mercenary businessman. She giggled against his mouth and Wyatt raised his head.

"What's so funny?"

Jo twined her arms around his neck and pulled him back in for another kiss. She couldn't tell him what she had just been thinking...

And Pamela Anderson and Bill Gates lived happily ever after.

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About the Author

To learn more about Vivi Andrews, please visit www.viviandrews.com. Send an email to Vivi at vivi@viviandrews.com or visit her blog at viviandrews.blogspot.com.

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It's not smart to piss off a poltergeist

The Ghost Shrink, the Accidental Gigolo & the Poltergeist
Accountant

2009 Vivi Andrews

A Tickle My Fantasy story

It's bad enough to be sexually frustrated. But as a medium, it means until Lucy Cartwright gets some, she's doomed. Oh no, not to death. Worse. To nightly visitations by recently deceased, wanna-be Cassanovas without the bodies to back it up. Then a living, breathing fantasy arrives on her doorstep, and Lucy thinks her dry spell is at an end.

Much as he would like to be Lucy's personal gigolo, PI Jake Cox has a job to do. He's been sent to prevent her from getting laid until a particular horny phantom—and key witness in his mob investigation—pays her a visit. The real challenge? Keeping his own hands off Lucy long enough to get the job done.

Or the lonely, geeky ghost of a murdered mob accountant could rip a hole in the fabric of the universe...

Warning: This book contains cheesy pick-up lines, amateur stripteases, and voyeuristic intentions—all by dead men. And the living behave just as badly...

Enjoy the following excerpt from *The Ghost Shrink, the Accidental Gigolo & the Poltergeist Accountant*:

Lucy slipped past the eye-candy in her kitchen, set the timer and shoved the muffin tray into the oven. Then she heard him breathing. *He's allowed to breathe, dammit*, she told her hormones, but they weren't listening. They were already summoning up fantasies involving breathing. And panting. And gasping.

So Lucy gasped, and swore, as her hand brushed the hot oven rack. She snatched her hand out of the oven, mentally cursing her stupidity, and slammed the door closed.

"Did you burn yourself?" Jake demanded, stepping forward and immediately taking control.

He caught her wrist and held it up for inspection. Seeing the vivid red welt rising on the back her hand, he tugged her over to the sink and turned on the faucet with a single-minded economy of movement that was somehow indescribably hot.

Dear God, I'm doomed. Even his first aid is sexy.

He temperature-tested the tap with his own hand before thrusting her burn beneath the cool, running water. "Keep it there," he ordered, already on his way to the freezer. He was back a moment later, a clean dishtowel wrapped around a bundle of ice. "Here, let me see."

He gently took her wrist and drew her hand out of the water, cautiously inspecting the burn. His attention was so focused, so intent, as he brushed the soft skin around the burn with his fingertips, careful not to touch the wound itself. He bent and blew cool air on her hand before gently pressing the ice pack over it, his concentration complete. Lucy couldn't

help but wonder if he would bring that focus and intensity to everything he did. A delicious shiver ran down her spine.

"I know it's cold," he said, and Lucy was relieved he didn't suspect the real reason for her shivering—she was embarrassed enough already. "You need to keep it on there for twenty minutes or so."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

Jake shook his head abruptly, rejecting her gratitude. "My fault. I shouldn't have been distracting you while you were cooking."

"You weren't distracting me," Lucy lied, knowing she was blushing. Again.

"No?" He arched his eyebrows skeptically then reached up to brush the back of one finger against her cheek. "You have flour all over your face."

Lucy winced internally. Great. Now, not only was she as red as a turnip, she had the distinction of being a blotchy, flour-coated turnip with a propensity for burning herself. Oh yeah, he wasn't going to be able to keep his hands off her now.

She waited for him to laugh at her. She waited for him to turn away, writing her off as ridiculous. She waited...until he tipped her chin up, forcing her to meet his eyes. Eyes that didn't look mocking or superior, but rather curiously intent.

Oh my.

He brushed at the clinging flour on her cheeks, his calloused hands tentatively caressing. Lucy gazed up at him, trying to remember how to breathe, or think, or do anything other than stare at him with her heart in her throat and her

stomach down around her toes. They were standing near the oven, but Lucy had a feeling the burning sensation rippling along her skin had more to do with the mountain of solid muscle in front of her than the oven behind. He smiled gently, his hands still cradling her face. "Even without the flour, you look pretty damn edible," he murmured, his voice low and intimate.

The world slowed and tightened until they were the only two people in it, and time was frozen in that thick moment when she *knew* he was about to kiss her. She stood paralyzed, hopeful, but not allowing herself to hope.

He bent toward her slowly, his gorgeous black eyes shuttered by thick black lashes. Lucy's eyes fell closed and she held herself perfectly still, desperate, waiting. When his lips finally touched hers, it was like putting a spark to a fast-burning fuse. A fuse attached to a stick of dynamite.

Lucy dove recklessly into the kiss, arching against him shamelessly. The first tentative brush of his mouth instantly became an urgent, open-mouthed exchange. She wound her arms around his shoulders and he gripped her butt in both hands, lifting her to get a better angle on her mouth, a better angle of her body pressed against his.

As soon as her feet left the floor, Lucy looped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles at the small of his back. Jake took two steps across the kitchen and pinned her against the refrigerator, the cool, smooth surface teasing her exposed shoulder blades where the spaghetti straps of her sundress left them bare. Lucy gave a little groan of pure, unadulterated

lust, her hormones throwing an orgiastic party when Jake immediately echoed it. *Now, this is how a gigolo behaves.*

Jake grabbed the knees squeezing his waist with both hands and shifted her slightly for better access. The combination of his fingers teasing the sensitive skin at the backs of her knees and the sudden, grinding friction of his jeans where she wanted it the most was nearly enough to send her off right there. Lucy let her head fall back against the refrigerator, her eyes closing in anticipation of bliss as she sent a little prayer of thanks to the gods of nookie.

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A lesson in seduction that releases lightning in a bottle...

All Bottled Up

2009 Christine d'Abo

Call center worker Viola White makes a living selling dream vacations. Too bad her own life is a litany of unfilled fantasies. Prime example—the boss she pines for barely knows she exists. Now that she's won a trip to a Mexican beach resort, though, she vows to shake things up. Instead she winds up alone, empty handed and with a sore toe from the beautiful bottle she's tripped over.

A bottle that's purple, gold—and stuffed with over six feet of blue-eyed, black-haired hunk. If anyone could teach her how to seduce her boss, it's this sexy genie.

Jerod can't believe his bad luck. Three thousand years of granting frivolous wishes, and now he's stuck playing matchmaker. A series of sensual lessons later, he finds there's something different about this shy Viola. Something that tempts him to try to break free of his curse and make a life for himself—with her.

All he has to do is convince Viola that the man of her dreams is a dud. And the right man for the job of loving her is a genie.

Warning: May cause spontaneous wish fulfillment, eye rolls, and a bad case of the giggles. No bottles were harmed in the writing of this novel.

Enjoy the following excerpt from *All Bottled Up*:

"He thinks we're in love."

Jerod chuckled as she fought not to choke on her drink a second time.

"What?" she asked, half coughing.

"The two of us, in a secluded booth. It's a natural assumption."

Viola felt her face warm, though she wasn't sure if it was from his words, or from the second glass of wine she'd finished. Her head tingled as the alcohol began to work its way through her food-deprived body. What it did was give her courage to play along.

She dipped her finger into the wine, brought it to her lips, and sucked the drop off. She then lazily drew a line down her lips, along her neck, to rest on her chest at the dip of cleavage.

"So, teacher, what would Bill want to do at this point?"

It somehow felt wrong to bring up Bill's name. But he was the reason she was here with Jerod after all. And Jerod didn't seem to mind. His eyes were currently following her finger on its sensual journey of her neck.

"Bill would want your finger to go lower," he said, his accent sounding heavier.

She got a chill of pleasure from listening to him. The exotic sound of his voice was an unexpected turn on. Something she'd never known about herself before.

"Viola."

Her eyes flicked over his shoulder to see where the waiter was.

"No one can see you." He sounded urgent. "Undo the button."

Who was she to argue with a genie? It only took a little pressure for her finger to release the button from its confines. Her skin was warm, her nail felt good as she grazed the sensitive skin. She felt bold. She never felt bold. Viola continued on and undid the third button.

Jerod sucked in a short breath and watched as she played with the top of her breast. Her finger felt foreign and thrilling at once.

"Bill would like that." His whisper held a raw edge to it.

"Do you?"

Her question clearly caught him off guard as he straightened in his chair. With graceful speed, he moved his chair beside hers before she knew what was going on. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and pulled it underneath the table. She found her hand in direct contact with his engorged cock.

"Does that answer your question?"

She flexed her fingers around him, but was at a loss for what to do next. They were in a restaurant, for God's sake.

"You're..."

"When I am in your world, I take human form. My body functions as it did before I was cursed. I always could appreciate beauty when I saw it."

And how can a lady argue against that?

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You do that often. It makes you different from my previous masters."

"Do what?"

"Show gratitude."

She felt his cock swell, pulse with blood under her touch. When he released her wrist, she pulled her hand away, but didn't remove it completely, resting it on his knee. He felt so warm, inviting, it was a temptation she'd never been faced with before. One she definitely wanted to explore.

Viola bit on her bottom lip as she tried to find the right words. "How can I not show gratitude for what you are doing for me? You've given me so much in such a short period of time. I look different, I even feel different. It's amazing."

"The waiter is coming," he said, but didn't move. "I should return to my seat to give you more room to eat."

"Okay."

He still didn't move. Instead he picked up her hand and kissed it. In a flash he was back in his original spot.

"Drink your wine, darling."

Viola couldn't keep up. He had her so worked up, she thought she would burst. Before she could say anything else, Jerod flicked his finger and the buttons on her shirt redid themselves.

"No sense in giving him a show."

With the steaming meal placed before them, their conversation died down. Viola concentrated on her fish and hoped she could sort out her emotions before the meal was done. She loved Bill. It was only natural that she'd project some of those emotions onto Jerod. He was, after all, showing her how to seduce the man. It would stand to reason she'd

feel something for him as a result of all they were going through. *Wouldn't it?*

After supper, Jerod waved his fingers and made a sizable stack of bills appear on the table.

"That should cover things nicely."

Viola gasped. She's never seen that much money in any one place at the same time.

"Ah...yeah. Nice tip."

"He earned it. He didn't flirt with you once."

She giggled as they left the restaurant together. As soon as they reached the night air, Viola shivered. "I didn't think it got this cold here at night."

She heard him snap his fingers and out of nowhere a white knit shawl appeared in his hands. He took great care to drape it over her shoulders.

"We should get you back to your room. I would hate for you to get a summer cold."

"Is that what Bill would do? Walk me back?" She couldn't resist the urge to tease him.

Unfortunately, Jerod didn't look amused.

"Not exactly. He would drive you home in his Ford and make advances toward you the entire time. Which reminds me of another lesson I need to teach you."

"Rebuking his advances?"

He spun her around so fast she had to throw her arm up against his chest to prevent her from losing her balance.

He leaned in and whispered in her ear, "No. Lesson five."

Her mind was a whirlwind trying to remember the order of the lessons he'd outline at dinner. "Attitude?"

The Ghost Exterminator [A Karmic Consultants story]
by Vivi Andrews

"Kissing."

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Love haunts...

Another Time Around

(C) 2009 Catherine Wade

Brin Maxwell once lived the ultimate rock-n-roll fantasy as the wife of the frontman for Hell's Fury. It all ended in a flash—literally—with a lightning bolt that took Max's life and left hers in suspended animation.

Two years later she's ready to move on, but there's a stumbling block: her sanity. Max's ghost has decided to haunt her, and he's got a bad habit of showing up at the most inconvenient moments. Like when she's about to plant a long wet one on event planner David Lyle, the man she hopes will resurrect her love life.

David is real, solid, and makes her heart do the tango. He's also curiously inept at his job—yet he has certain other talents that leave her wondering just what he's hiding in his shadowy past.

Then there are the death threats. As they escalate from notes slipped under her door to full-scale, Kodak-moment terror, Brin realizes Max's return is no coincidence. And that the only one she can turn to is David.

The man with the skills to save her life—unless he's there to take it...

Warning: Contains strong language, violence, bad fake accents, and a fearless dog. May cause an overwhelming desire to put a lock on your underwear drawer.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Another Time Around:

"Do you always ask so many questions?"

"I warned you. I'm solving your mysteries." David looked up at her and smiled, his hands working independently to split a vanilla bean and drop it into the cream. "I'm a curious person. If it annoys you, just say so."

"It doesn't exactly annoy me." But she was still hesitant. "I guess I did tell you that if you had any questions to just ask."

David winked. "I guess you didn't expect me to take you so literally, did you?"

Brin sighed softly and smiled. What was her problem, anyway? Why the hell was she running so damned hot and cold? "That's okay. But let's talk about you for a while."

"Fair enough. Quid pro quo."

"Something like that. Hank tells me you were once a cop."

David nearly scalded himself with hot cream. "Wow. And I thought I was the one with all the sources."

"Didn't I tell you that Hank's really a spy? The FBI's been trying to recruit him for years, but he's holding out for the *New York Times* gossip-columnist spot." Brin looked him over. "From your reaction, I take it that being a cop wasn't the most pleasant experience of your life."

He shook his head, going back to the cream. "Nah, nothing like that. It's just that not many people in New York know about it."

"Maybe because you ask too many questions and don't answer any."

David stopped stirring the cream long enough to return her grin. "Touche."

He pulled the bananas out of the oven and the aroma hit Brin's nose. Despite being full of steak and umpteen tons of bread, she was ravenous. "Man, that smells good."

"Told you it'd get better." He walked around to the table and pulled out the chair for her. "We'll eat and I'll tell you anything you want to know."

He sat beside her as she took her first bite. It was like banana heaven. "Oh my God, this is fabulous," she mumbled around the flaky pastry.

"I'm glad you like it." He made a sweeping bow even as he sat. "So quid pro quo, then? Shoot."

Brin looked him over as she nibbled on a tender banana. Why start being delicate now? "Tell me about being a cop."

He dug into his own plate and chewed thoughtfully. "I was on the force once upon a lifetime. Down in Arlington, Virginia."

"Nice town. What made you leave it? And what made a cop turn into a party planner?"

"Event planner," David corrected with a crooked grin.

"Sorry. *Event* planner."

David flashed a smile that made her toes curl. "I see I'm not the only one solving mysteries here. Why beat around the bush when you can burn straight through it, right?"

"Right."

His gaze shifted and he put down his fork. He laced his fingers and drew a breath. "I'd been on the force for about ten years when I was assigned a new partner. She was straight out of the academy, but she knew what she was doing. A good cop. A good friend."

Brin chewed slowly, letting his intensity settle over her. "What happened?"

"There was an incident. There had been a break-in. Two perps. I went after one, my partner went after the other. I got my guy, but the other pulled a gun on my partner. Or so it seemed at the time. Turned out he was trying to empty his pockets of the drugs he had on him. In the end, my partner went down for shooting an unarmed suspect."

She felt a sudden urge to reach out to him, but resisted it. "Did they think—I mean, were you—"

"Implicated? No. I was a block away at the time." He took another bite of his tart, taking out his frustration while he chewed. "But after that I just couldn't be a cop anymore. I needed out."

Brin swallowed hard. "So you came here."

He nodded. "There wasn't much to stay in Virginia for. My partner was gone. Reputations were ruined. It would never be the same for me and I knew it."

Brin swallowed again, trying to get rid of the lump that was lodged in her throat. "Was the guy killed?"

"The suspect? Yeah." David focused on his plate again.

Way to step on a landmine, Brin. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pried."

David shrugged and smiled. "Well, like you said, when in Rome..."

She closed her eyes and allowed herself a small chuckle. Opening them again, she saw him staring at her. His eyes shimmered with intensity. Her body tingled and her belly did a flip-flop. She tried to smile and jolted out of her seat. "I'm sorry, but I really must use the powder room—"

"Of course." David rose and pointed across the room. "Just through that door."

She made her way across the generous space, ending up where the high ceiling gave way to the loft. She could only assume she was directly under his bedroom, but refused to let her mind wander further than that. In front of her were two doors beside one another. She looked back at David for guidance, but he was busy clearing the table. Taking a chance, she picked the door on the right.

When she entered the room, she searched for the light switch. She flipped it on, and was bathed in a glowing red light. Adjusting her eyes, she looked around to find photographs hanging from wires strung like clotheslines across the room. Some photos were of people, some of places and buildings. All seemed very artistic, though she'd be the first to admit she knew nothing about art.

A framed picture hung on the far wall drew her attention. It grabbed her and made her step closer and closer until she was standing right at the base of it. It was a close-up of a woman's jawline, warm and dewy and glowing red in the light from the bare bulb that swung above it. Her lips were full and wet, barely parted to reveal a row of sparkling teeth. Though

she couldn't see her entire face, Brin could tell she was an extremely beautiful woman.

"You found Claudia."

Brin jumped, startled by David's entrance. "I'm sorry. I must have taken a wrong turn."

"Quite all right. Easy to do."

She pointed around the room. "I take it you're a photographer."

"Picked up the hobby at the academy. When we were training in forensic photography."

"I take it you never went digital."

David shook his head. "Nah. Film is much more vibrant to me. More personal." He stepped up behind her to look at the photograph. "I took that while we were on vacation in Cabo."

"Who is she?"

David grew very still. "Claudia Moran. She was my partner on the force in Virginia. The one I was telling you about."

Brin's mouth went dry. "Oh God. I'm sorry. I had no idea your partner was a woman." She looked at the photograph again and noticed the raw emotion of it. "Were you...involved with her?"

"Yes." He didn't even bother to hedge. "We were very much in love once."

"But this picture..." She turned back to it and saw it with a new appreciation. "You keep this picture up to remind you of her."

He shook his head, moving between Brin and the photograph. "No. I keep it around to show me that I have a talent for art. To remind me that there are other things in life

besides waste and crime and ugliness. I keep it because it stirs something in me and because it's hard in my line of work to remember that I have an emotion other than disgust."

Brin swallowed hard. She hadn't seen this side of David before, and part of her wanted to turn around and run out of the place as fast as she could. But she was frozen to the spot. Only frozen wasn't the word that was coming to her mind. It was heat. Blazing heat.

"Disgust?" she asked, her voice a mere whisper. "Planning parties?"

David's eyes shifted suddenly. A smile came to his face, but Brin knew it was forced. And it made her heart pound.

"I simply meant the extravagance of it. Rich people will throw money at a cause, but it has to make them look good. They want their names on plaques acknowledging their supposed generosity. They don't want to help. They want to be looked upon as benefactors."

Brin had to swallow again. "Not all of them—us—are like that."

David's gaze fell, but it didn't seem to break the tension. "No, you're not. That's not what I meant." He brought his eyes to catch hers in a relentless hold. She just stared back, unable to even blink. "You're different, aren't you? You're soft around the edges. Caring. You have a passion in your soul, but it seems to be dying."

He reached up and brushed her cheek with his rough palm, making her shiver. The chill ran down her spine and up again, and her knees went weak. Parts of her she'd thought would

never stir again went wild as his hand wound in her hair. Soon his lips were millimeters away from hers.

"Why is that fire dying, Brin? What could put a damper on that passion? And what could fuel it?"

Her eyes closed, but she had no control over her own body anymore. She was completely on autopilot. Baser instincts had taken over, and she was at his mercy now.

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