



The Benson (Experiment in Terror 2.5)

Author: *Karina Halle*

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Description: An Experiment in Terror Novella (#2.5).

This short story/novella sees amateur Youtube ghost-hunters, Perry Palomino and Dex Foray, investigating the real-life hauntings of Portland's infamous Benson Hotel. It occurs between books #2 (Red Fox) and #3 (Dead Sky Morning) and is the perfect primer for anyone interested in the EIT series.

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The Benson

I have never been inside The Benson hotel before. Looking back, it's kind of weird since I've lived in Portland for my whole life, but I guess there are a lot of things in your city you never see. Not the way the tourists do.

Tonight though, I decided I would be a tourist. Having a camera at my side would certainly help in that pretense. I smile up at the doorman as I make my way up the sidewalk, pausing briefly at the bronze plaque on the ground as I have many times before when walking throughout downtown, and then timidly walk up the steps inside.

"Good evening and welcome to The Benson ma'am," the doorman says to me, cheery enough in his fancy, gold-gilded uniform. Still, I feel like he's judging me and what I'm wearing; my Doc Martens still muddy from the morning's rainfall, my maroon leggings with a hole in them and a scuffed leather jacket. I'm obviously not a guest here, not at one of the most prestigious hotels in the state of Oregon.

I give him a tight smile and walk past him into the revolving doors which sweep me inside. The lobby is surprisingly busy for nine p.m. as there's a line at the vast checkout counter a few people deep, and the bar/lounge to the right of me is crammed full of swanky patrons swilling martinis. I barely have time to take in the understated grandeur and opulence of the lobby – which totally reminds me of the golden age of Hollywood – before a waving movement brings my attention to the bar again.

In the corner, swilling what can only be a Jack Daniels and Coke is Dex. Actually, he's not swilling it. Rather, downing it in fast gulps and as soon as he sees he's

caught my attention, he waves the prim waitress over and orders another one.

I swallow hard, feeling all sorts of strange feelings rush up in my body. I'm nervous, I already was, but I'm excited too and though my breath catches slightly when I see him, it eventually flows out all hot, ragged and sparkling with nerves.

I haven't seen Dex since we parted ways at the airport in Albuquerque. It wasn't long ago, but it still makes me feel like I'm going on a first date all over again. Not that we ever were dating and not that (with his girlfriend Jenn) we ever would. But I can't help the way I feel. Stupid. And in love with my partner.

I smile, broad and completely natural for him, and make my way to where he is sitting, at a small, white clothed table just big enough for two. Before I reach his side, I wonder if he's going to hug me and before I can finish the thought, he stands up, stepping around the table. I am quickly enveloped into his arms. He smells like Old Spice and a bit like the hand-rolled cigarettes he picked up in New Mexico. His arms are strong and firm around my back. The hug is close, tight and genuine. I relax slightly, wishing we were somewhere else and not this busy lounge where people watch us with disinterest.

I am the first to pull apart, though I could have stayed in his arms all night. I give him the once over now that I am up close.

He looks pretty much as he did in New Mexico. The cuts on his face from the shapeshifter's attack are faded; his moustache has been trimmed, almost gone, as is the scruff beard under his chin. His eyebrow ring glints from his black brow. His cheekbones are high, perhaps higher than before. I take another step back and see that he's lost a little bit of weight. It shows in his face most of all.

"Checking me out again?" he says, his voice low, his lips snaking to the side in a smirk. There's something off about him, but I don't know what it is. Maybe it's

because, despite the closeness of the hug, there's an awkward distance between us, like we aren't sure how to act around each other now that the skinwalkers and Maximus and sharing a bed for a few nights are gone. We both almost died in New Mexico – I know it had an impact on us, but it doesn't seem to have any bearing here in the swanky Benson hotel.

And then there are his eyes. Dex's eyes are his focal point, the part of him that wins people over or drives them away. Dark chocolate, enigmatic and emotive. Sometimes they are ruthless, sometimes seductive. They are a mystery as much as he is and the one thing I can't help from drowning in over and over again.

But here, tonight, they are clouded. No, that's not quite it. Not clouded but subdued. The sparkle and zest that roam in them, no matter what his mood, are gone. They are handsome, beguiling eyes but not his.

I think back to Red Fox and how he had gone so long without his anti-psychotic medication that he began to actually feel again. It was scary for him, no doubt (and for me, let's not kid ourselves) but in the end...he was free. Or so I thought. Now it seems that sparkle and life, the manic highs and lows, are gone. As destructive as they were, they are an important part of him.

"Sorry," I mutter to myself, dropping my eyes quickly to the table just as the waitress comes by and puts down his drink.

"What would you like, Perry?" he asks me. I look up at him and the waitress. Her name tag states her as Prudence. She has white hair and a friendly smile but a stance that says I better be quick with an answer.

I don't drink normally, especially not on the job – which is what I am doing here tonight with Dex – but I say, "A glass of the house red, thanks."

It's the cheapest and will relax my nerves. Prudence leaves with my order after Dex gives her a quick wink. He then turns to me as we sit down.

"So how are you, kiddo?" he asks, peering at my face, trying to read me before I say anything. "Is it nice having me in your neck of the woods again?"

"It's just nice to see you again," I say honestly. With Dex living in Seattle and me in Portland, I only ever see him when we film. And in the between time, I miss him.

A blush starts to creep up my neck. I can feel it.

He gives me a smile that reaches his eyes and shows perfect teeth that are quite white for a smoker. "Well, it's nice to see you. Too bad you're not bunking with me tonight at my motel."

I give him a sharp look, not sure if he's kidding or not.

He smiles again, almost leering. "I'll probably be shaking in my boots after tonight with only my pillow to hug."

The waitress comes back and gives me my wine. He gives her the same kind of smirk. This is how I know he's messing with me.

I roll my eyes. "So what is our plan for tonight anyway? Are we just going to sit here and drink and wait for the ghosts to show up?"

"Patience, Perry," he says and takes another gulp of his drink. He gestures to the wine and nods at it. "Have some of that and relax."

I take a sip of the acidic merlot and look around me. As gorgeous and old-fashioned as the hotel is, there are so many people about, and I can't imagine how on earth the

place could be haunted. But apparently it is. In fact, Portland has a few ghost tours that come around and poke their heads in the hotel a few times a week. I doubt anybody ever sees anything, though.

“Are we the first ghost hunting show to come inside here?” I ask Dex.

He coughs on his drink and shakes his head. “Fuck no. We’re a bit behind on this one. I think just about every ghost hunter has been in this hotel at some point or another.”

“Do they ever find anything?”

He gives me a wry look. “What do you think? Of course not.”

“What makes you think we will?”

He smiles again and reaches over with his hand to pat me softly on the head. “Because I’ve got you, kiddo. You’re my little ghost bait.”

I think back to Red Fox, to a moment when Dex said I might be offered up as bait to the skinwalkers. The idea bothered me then and it bothers me now. I take a longer sip of the wine this time.

He’s watching my face closely, as usual, and he still keeps his hand there. I’m not sure if he’s trying to comfort me or what. I shoot him a deadly look from the side of my eyes.

“I’m joking you know,” he finally says, his voice less rough, less gravely. “I just mean, well, you know there’s something about you, something that attracts these things. You’re like a secret weapon.”

“Some weapon,” I scoff and look down into the glass, my vision becoming a blur of deep reds. “What’s the point of just attracting these...things? These people? If I could use this...power...whatever it is, for good...that would be a different story.”

He shrugs and takes his hand away, his attention back to his own drink. The back of my head feels vulnerable without his hand there. “You never know. There’s supposed to be a shitload of ghosts in this hotel, maybe you can help one of them.”

I raise my brows at him.

“A shitload?” I repeat. “Where do you get your information, Mr. Foray?”

“Wikipedia. That thing is never wrong,” he says without irony. He looks around him and takes in the scene. “We’re supposed to meet the night manager, Pam, in a couple of minutes. She said she’d find us. She’ll give us a tour of the place; hopefully give us the real story. I want that on film.”

“And what do you want me to do?” I ask. Once again, we’re going into a film shoot more or less blind. And by we, I mean I. Dex always knows what’s going on and I’m always in the dark. I did research The Benson before biking over here and all that, but I have no clue what to do or say. There is no storyboard, no script. We just wing it and I usually end up looking like an idiot.

“Just be yourself. Ask her questions. I’ll film both of you. We’ll wander around the hotel. Then we’ll probably be allowed to go off on our own and do some exploring. I’ll give you the infrared camera this time so we can see if we pick up any hot or cold spots.”

I shiver at that thought. Using the infrared meant we’d be wandering around in the dark. Whether I’m in a lighthouse on the coast or in the New Mexican desert, the darkness still gives me the creeps. Especially now that I know there are things out

there that want to hurt me. That know I'm a sort of "bait."

By the time Pam shows up, I have finished my glass of wine. It has only left me anxious, not relaxed.

Pam is on the overweight side, similar to the way I was in high school, but unlike me, she seems to bustle with confidence. Or bustle with something. Her wide, cheery face gives her the appearance of being younger than she probably is and she speaks a mile a minute.

"You must be Perry and Dex, I recognized you!" she exclaims, beaming at us and holding out her hand. We both give it a quick shake. She points to the name tag on her black suit. "As you can see, my name is Pam. Pam Gupta. I'm the night manager here at The Benson."

"Thanks for having us," Dex tells her sincerely, reaching under the table and bringing out a backpack and a camera bag.

"No, thank you," she says putting extra emphasis on the words. "As soon as you told me who you were, I looked up your ghost show and immediately fell in love with you guys."

Dex and I exchange a quick look.

"I mean," she corrects herself and lets out an awkward clip of a laugh, "I was scared witless at the Darkhouse episode and the one in Red Fox but I was so drawn in by you two. You're just so...so..."

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“Handsome?” Dex asks, flashing her a smile and stroking his chin scruff.

She blushes and giggles. “Well, yeah I guess you are.”

I roll my eyes. Dex doesn’t need any more encouragement.

“But,” she continues, “you’re both just so...lucky!”

We look at each other again, even more confused.

“Lucky?” I ask.

“How about I explain as we walk? I don’t have much time to show you around before I start my shift.”

We get up, Dex giving the backpack of equipment to me, and we follow Pam through the lobby. For a larger woman she walks like a sprite, moving quickly between people and showering her big smile on all of them. The guests eye Dex and I curiously, intrigued by the camera he has placed up on his shoulder.

We stop before a grand staircase leading up to the second floor. I eye myself quickly in the mirror on the landing. My floral dress is sticking to my leggings in static cling, and my black hair is a mess from my motorbike helmet (and Dex’s hand). I don’t look camera worthy at all. I shrug helplessly at my reflection and look to Pam who is pointing up at the stairs.

“There’s been many sightings of one of ghostly guests walking up and down this very

staircase,” she says, sounding like a chipper tour guide talking about museum pieces and not dead people.

I look at Dex beside me and see the camera is going, picking up everything Pam is saying. Sensing I’m staring at him, he reaches out and pushes me toward Pam, into the frame. I know he wants me to start acting like the host I am.

I smooth down my hair and clear my throat, stepping into the shot. “Have you seen any ghosts, Pam?”

She shakes her head quickly and looks wistful. “No, I haven’t. Come on, let’s go to the next floor.”

Not exactly the answer I was hoping for.

She scurries up the stairs and we follow, my short legs straining to keep up with her quick busybody motion.

We walk toward the elevators and as we are waiting she says, “I think you two are lucky because I’ve always wanted to see a ghost. I believe in them. So badly. But I’ve never seen one. Weird, right, considering that I run The Benson. At night.”

The elevator dings and the doors open. There’s a couple inside who eye the camera with trepidation, but we step inside with them anyway. Pam makes small talk with them as she pushes the button for the 8th floor and doesn’t mention ghosts again until the couple get out at the 5th floor.

She tilts her head at us. “I don’t like to discuss the ghosts around the guests though. People can be pretty strange about things like that.”

“I don’t blame them,” I find myself saying.

“I guess you’d know,” Pam says as the elevator stops at the floor, and she leads us out into the hallway, past a rotary phone resting on top of an antique table.

She notices me eyeing it and gives it a quick wave with her hand. Her bracelets jingle with the motion.

“We try to keep all the original furnishings from the hotel. Adds to the class and elegance of the place, don’t you think?”

I nod, not really needing to be sold on the hotel as a whole.

Pam takes us to the right, and we walk past the rooms down to the very end of the hall. Dex keeps filming, even though he takes his head away from the camera.

“So, if we show The Benson in a good way,” Dex says to Pam, “any chance we can score a free hotel room for the night? I’m staying at a roach motel outside of the city, and I’m getting itchy just thinking about it.”

Pam turns around briefly and smiles at him but then spins around and keeps walking without missing a beat.

“We’ll see. Would you two be sharing the room?”

Dex automatically grins and looks down at me as we walk. I shake my head, not amused.

“No, Perry snores and kicks in her sleep,” he says.

I smack him on the shoulder and the camera shakes.

“I do not!” I protest.

“Oh, and drools,” he adds quickly.

“So you two are a couple?” Pam asks, not looking at us this time but slowing down as she nears the end of the hall.

“Only in certain situations,” I mutter under my breath.

“No, we are not. Perry is far too good for me and I am forced to make do with my Wine Babe girlfriend.”

Finally Pam stops walking and looks at him. “Wine Babe? You’re with someone from that show?”

“You’ve seen it?” Dex asks, his eyes wide and hopeful.

“Yes,” she says slowly, and for once her chipper look is gone. Her cheeks sag a bit. “My ex boyfriend used to drool all over that skinny, exotic one.”

“Yeah, that’s his girlfriend. Jennifer Rodriguez,” I inform her. She eyes me and sees that I’m none too thrilled about it either. Nothing like a hot woman to make two chubby girls feel like they’re having a bonding moment.

“Well, I’m just glad some women watch it,” Dex says, turning his attention the camera, perhaps feeling the animosity and low self-esteem just reeking from our pores.

Pam laughs and the cheery façade returns. “Don’t be silly. I don’t watch that dreadful show. They pair shiraz with Kraft Dinner. Only an idiot would watch that. Like my ex-boyfriend.”

Dex opens his mouth to say something, but I know he completely agrees. That’s the

reason he quit doing camera work on Wine Babes and started up Experiment in Terror with me instead.

“Anyway,” she continues, “here we are.”

I look at the door we’ve stopped in front of: Room 818.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“This was Parker’s room,” she says ominously.

“Who is Parker?” Dex asks. I’m surprised that he doesn’t know something for once.

“Parker...” Pam starts and then trails off. She takes her keys out from her pocket; the noise of them rattling fills the hallway. It suddenly seems very empty and hollow and a weird, familiar feeling washes over me, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up.

The lock turns, and the door slowly creaks open. Only blackness and dust come billowing out of the room.

“After you,” Pam says.

Dex shrugs and then nudges me in front of the camera, indicating that I am to go first. Of course. I always have to be the first to walk into everything when I’m on camera. And sometimes when I’m not on camera. It depends on how sadistic Dex is feeling.

I take in a deep breath and push the door aside. It slowly swings open with a low groan, and I walk blindly into the swirling dark.

“Should I be putting on the night vision?” Dex asks no one in particular. I hear him

fiddle with the camera settings but before anything happens, I am blind. Pam has walked in beside me and switched on the lights.

“No sense in scaring ourselves yet,” she chirps, and I can barely make out her round face.

Dex comes in and Pam shuts the door behind him. Once my eyes adjust to the light, I see that we are in a hotel room that probably looks the same as any other hotel room, albeit a large and very pricey one. Aside from a heavy chill that seems to hang in the air, there’s nothing too off-putting about the place. The bed is made, there seems to be a separate room with a living area, divided only by a Japanese-type paper partition, and I can just see a rather opulent looking bathroom jutting out to the right.

“As I said, this is Parker’s room,” she says. “Well, it was his room. I say this because some guests who stay in here say they still see him. But it happens very rarely.”

“And once again,” Dex repeats, sounding bored, “who is Parker?”

Pam walks over to the king-sized bed and sits down on it. It sags a little from her weight; the mattress is not as springy as it was back in the day.

“We have a lot of ghosts in this hotel. Parker isn’t the most well known of them, but he is the most real. Because he was a real person and his story is terribly tragic. Tragic, but all too common.”

I go over to the bed and sit down beside Pam. Suddenly, that slightly see-through partition between the bedroom and the living area is giving me the creeps, like I can sense someone standing behind it.

Dex looks like he picks up on the vibe too. Although he is standing in front of Pam and I, with the camera in our faces, his eyes keep flitting over there and his head is

cocked slightly as if he is listening. I stifle the urge to shiver—I don't want to look like an amateur—and keep my attention on Pam.

“What happened?” I ask, trying to keep my voice light, trying to ignore the goosebumps I can feel rising underneath my jacket.

“Parker, Parker Hayden, was a ship owner in the '30s. Back then, Portland was a very different city. The ships were its lively hood. There was a lot of money, a lot of crime, a lot of... well, scandals, I guess. Think Vegas, but on a river. Anyway, Parker was just one of the many wealthy ship owners. He spent half his time here, half somewhere on the east coast. He rented a room, this room, spending an obscene amount of money every night. He was a ladies man too, no surprise there! He was also a bit nuts. But because he was rich, you called him eccentric. There were rumors he was having an affair with a maid or two; sometimes he'd be caught stealing tons of toiletries and hording them in his closet. In this day and age we'd call him a weirdo but back then, he was just rich and powerful and you let him do what he wanted.”

“Doesn't sound too much different from nowadays,” Dex says softly, keeping the camera focused on Pam. He's paying less attention now to the other room, which makes me feel a smidge better.

Pam laughs. “You're right about that. And it was the same kind of outcome. Back in 1934, Portland was hit hard—really hard—with this strike. I think it was called the West Coast Waterfront Strike? Anyway, there was the strike, his ship was basically inoperable, and he lost a lot of money. Really fast. According to the records, he was kicked out of the hotel because he couldn't pay his bills. Not for this room, not for any room here.”

“And what happened?” I push.

She sighs and rubs her face quickly, looking uneasy for the first time tonight. Lines

appear on her youthful face.

“He wouldn’t leave. He was kicked out several times, out on the street even. Publicly humiliated. All unshaven and messy, like a vagrant. He said people were after him, wanting money and that he was afraid for his life. Then the hotel staff found him. Dead. Hanging in the maid’s laundry room, from a noose made out of towels. The strike ended two days later. How is that for irony?”

She smiles at me, but it is forced and I can’t be bothered to return it. The story stirs something in my gut.

I look up at Dex and see that his attention is back on the other room again.

“What is it?” I ask him. I can’t help myself.

Pam’s attention goes to him, and we all look over but see nothing.

“The guests who have seen him,” she puts in, her voice low, her eyes on the partition, “they say they see a man pacing anxiously in the other room there, muttering to himself. Once he notices you, he tries to say something or write something down. But no words come out and as the guests get more scared and confused, the ghost gets frustrated. Sometimes he disappears, sometimes he rushes at the guests and then... poof.”

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“Well doesn’t that make for a memorable stay,” Dex comments underneath his breath.

Pam giggles nervously at his lame joke and then gets up. “I’m afraid I will have to leave you two now. Duty calls.”

Dex lowers the camera and touches her arm lightly, causing her to pause mid-bustle. It’s obvious she wants nothing more than to get out of the room. I have half a mind to join her.

“Where is the laundry room?” he asks.

Pam looks down at her feet quickly. “The laundry room? Why?”

“Well, we aren’t ignoring the place where the man hung himself. With towels, mind you. I mean, I can make a swan out of towels, but a noose?”

“I’d show you, but I really must—”

She looks at me for support as he reaches forward and plucks the keys out of her hand.

He holds up the keys in front of her face. “Just tell us which key will get us into the laundry room and we’ll have no problem finding it on our own.”

“Dex,” I begin, not wanting him to step out of bounds. He can be relentless sometimes.

He ignores me and flashes Pam a smile that usually makes me weak at the knees. “Come on, Pammy, you know you want our little show to succeed here. Parker would want us there. Give the man some closure.”

Her mouth twitches while she thinks it over. Dex gives her a quick wink and she blushes slightly. I can’t help but roll my eyes again.

“All right,” Pam mumbles and takes the keys from him. She goes through them in a blur and pops one off the ring and into his outstretched hand. “It’s in the basement. This will open the freight elevator at the end of the hall and take you right there. But I want this back, OK?”

“But of course.” He grins and closes his hand over the key before she has a chance to change her mind.

She looks at me and I give a little shrug.

“We won’t wreck anything or scare the guests,” I say. I want to add, “We promise,” but I know we can’t promise anything. Destruction and fear seem to follow Dex and I wherever we go. That is the nature of the ghost hunting business, even one that’s only on the Internet.

I can see Pam isn’t comfortable with the situation, but she doesn’t say anything else. She just leaves the room and shuts the door behind her. The movement causes the dust to fly off of the nearby lamps.

I slowly let out my breath and look at Dex. He’s watching me carefully.

“What?” I ask.

“Do you want the lights on or off?”

He raises his camera a bit and I get it. Are we going to shoot this in the dark or in the light? I know what I'm going to say, and I know what he's going to say.

"Leave the lights on," I tell him.

"I think we should have them off."

I knew it. "Why do you even bother consulting me if you're just going to do what you want anyway?"

"I like you to feel like this a partnership," he says, and sounds strangely sincere. He tucks the key into his cargo pants and gives me a quick smile. "And you know that shooting in the dark adds to the tension."

"It also adds to my ever-building threat of dying young," I point out.

"Twenty-two ain't so young anymore, kiddo. I mean, you've almost surpassed James Dean. If you kick it now—"

I raise my hand in the air. "That's enough. Let's just get this over with."

"Perry's famous last words."

"Dex. Shut up."

It's his turn to roll his eyes. I feel a cold waft come in from the living room area, and I automatically rub my hands up and down my arms. There's definitely something going on in this place, and I am in no hurry to find out. But of course, it's my job to find out.

"What if we just leave this light on here?" I say, pointing at the lamp. The rest of

hotel room, including the bathroom and the living area, are only lit by residual light. It's just dark enough to be spooky over there, but it's not so black that I'd be having a panic attack.

"If you wish," Dex says and I hate how unafraid he sounds. Then again, he always gets to view things through the lens. He never has to be the one seeing the horrors face-to-face.

It's a catch-22 with my job. On one hand, I'm often scared shitless at the slightest thing and pray that I don't bump into a ghost (or a skinwalker, now that I know those things exist). On the other hand, if I don't run into anything, it makes for a pretty bad episode. I mean, most ghost hunting shows don't have much to show for themselves, anyway, but that's also the point: We don't want to be like most of those shows. We are above and beyond that, at least that's what Dex rattles off half the time. I don't even know if he believes what he says, but the fact is that when we do capture some unexplainable stuff on film, the views go up and we look good.

It's too bad our looking good comes at the cost of me nearly peeing my pants every time.

"So..." I begin.

"So, just come here." He places his strong hands on the sides of my arms and physically moves me over so I'm right in front of him and the camera. I don't want him to let go but he does. "I'll roll it, you give a quick spiel based on whatever Pam just said and then walk into the other room. I'll be right behind you."

"Don't I get a flashlight?"

"I'll be your eyes. Ready?"

I nod, square my shoulders and take a deep breath. We usually go in just one take and I give a very quick overview of what we are doing in The Benson hotel and what we hope to find in room 818.

Then I turn around and face the darkness of the living room. I don't know how it's possible, but it seems to have grown darker in the last few minutes. Before I could make out a couch and a table, as well as the entrance to the fancy bathroom. Now, I can't see anything at all. Just the partition with its slightly transparent sheets of fabric paper and that terrible feeling that there is something, or someone, just beyond it, waiting for me to enter its clutches.

Dex clears his throat, a signal that I need to move. I feel frozen on the spot but will my legs to step forward, even though every part of me is screaming not to.

Somehow, I do it. I step into the void and feel a rush of frigid air flow around me. No, flow is too gentle of a word. It slams into me like an invisible hand.

I pause and take another step, trying to pick up where the bed should be. I still can't see anything, but Dex says in a low voice, "Move to the right a little. The bed is right in front of you."

I do as he says and stop. Dex sucks in his breath in one sharp motion.

"What is it?" I whisper uneasily. I wish I could see what he is seeing.

"Do you not see it?"

I turn around and see his silhouette against the light. "See what?" I feel the symptoms of a panic attack poking around my spine.

He doesn't say anything but keeps the camera trained on me while reaching into his

backpack. He pulls out what looks like the small infrared camera.

“Here, turn the switch on, it’s on the side,” he says and hands it to me. I fumble for it, feeling around for the button.

It comes on and then I can see again. Well, kind of. It’s aimed at the floor and I can see the shape of my feet and legs glowing a hot red against the blackness. I feel a lot like I’m in Predator.

“Now turn around and aim it straight in front of you.”

I hesitate for a second, afraid of what I’m going to witness. Then I turn on the spot so I’m facing the black room and look through the infrared camera.

I nearly drop it.

Right in front of me, to the side of the bed, is a tall, long shape of pale blue light. A hazy silhouette. The outline of a man who isn’t there.

“That’s unbelievable,” I hear Dex say from behind me. I can’t form the words to agree. The fear is overpowering my fascination. There is someone standing right in front of me. Parker Hayden.

“Talk to it.”

“What?” I whisper hoarsely, my eyes flitting from the screen to the blackness in front of me. If I walk forward, will my hands grab onto a desperate dead man? Or will they pass through them, like no one is there at all? Do I even want to know?

“Mr. Hayden,” Dex speaks in a gentle voice, void of any self-consciousness. “Mr. Hayden, we can see you. Would you like to talk to us? Would you like to tell us

something?”

The shape on the camera shakes vigorously on the spot, like the picture on a television that’s being hit from the side. Then it stops and in a blink of an eye it bursts out of the screen, screaming past us in a blur of cold, miserable energy.

And just like that, all the lights in the room come on and it’s just Dex and I left staring at each other, cameras in hand, feeling cold and dumbfounded at what we just encountered.

I manage to shut my mouth so I don’t look like a drooling fool on camera and look back down at the infrared.

“We need to follow him.”

I look up at Dex with the most incredulous stinkeye I can muster.

“We need to follow him? We don’t even know what that was. Or who that was. Or where he went. Or if he wants us to follow him...”

Dex turns around and heads to the door.

“Dex!” I yell after him and grab onto his sleeve. I look up at his eyes but I can see he’s already gone, thinking in the mind of a ghost, plotting where Parker would have gone next.

“Perry, we can’t just leave it at that.”

“I don’t know, I think what we just captured is some pretty awesome stuff. Maybe that’s all we’ll get for tonight. Maybe it’s time to go home.”

The side of his mouth twitches and before I know it, he's grinning at me. "Why Perry, I thought you'd turned into quite the little fearless ghost hunter back in Red Fox. Getting cold feet, are we?"

I wish I had a snappy rebuttal for that, but I don't. The truth is, I'm scared. It doesn't matter how many times you've seen a ghost; it's still scary. And considering how often these supernatural beings have tried to kill me in the past, I think I have every right to fear each one I encounter. Every chance I get to get out of the shoot alive is a chance I want to take. I mean, deep down inside, I'm just an ordinary, 22-year-old girl who likes to listen to metal and dreams about chocolate on a nightly basis. Just because I'm ghost bait, doesn't mean I have to exploit it.

But I don't say any of this to Dex. Even though he's just my partner (and I'm usually the sane one), I can't bear the thought of losing face with him. He took a risk by creating this show and by putting me in it. I took a risk by giving up my old job to make something of my life. I want to be the person that he thinks I am, that fearless, brave girl—woman, even—who laughs in the face of danger. Something more than ordinary.

"Cold feet?" I repeat, my voice hard. "You're the one who is showing up all icy on my infrared."

He studies me for a second, sucking slowly on his full lower lip, trying to read me. I hate it when he does that. But instead of looking away as I often do, I hold his gaze, challenging him.

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“OK, kiddo. Glad to see you’re still up for the challenge,” he finally says.

“I deal with you every weekend, don’t I? Anything after that is a piece of cake.”

He flashes me a quick smile and opens the door. I follow him into the hallway, take in a deep breath and try to calm my nerves, which are firing all over the place and causing me to shake internally. My bluff worked. Now all I need to do is keep up appearances.

As we walk down the hallway to the freight elevator, I already know where Dex is planning on taking us: the laundry room. I don’t want to think about the horrors that might lie there, so I ask him, “You told me you saw something, before I turned on the infrared... what was it?”

We stop in front of the elevator and Dex inserts the key, giving it a turn and pressing the down button. The elevator purrs loudly, as if it hasn’t been turned on in decades. I’m reminded of *The Shining* for a brief instance and hope a river of blood doesn’t come flowing out of it.

“Just some really weird lights dancing around. You know how you can get those orbs on screen, like the ones we saw at the lighthouse? Same kind of thing but they were jumping up and down, like balls in a lotto machine or something.”

The elevator button light goes off, and with a loud metallic groan, the doors slide open to expose a larger than average elevator behind them.

“Ladies first,” Dex says, but I shove him forward. Not this time.

We get in and press the button for the laundry level, which is marked, thankfully. It's also below the first floor and the first two parking levels, which is a slight cause for concern. Just how far down are we going?

I give Dex a nervous smile, which he returns with a mischievous one. An agonizing minute later, we lurch to a stop on the laundry level.

The doors shudder slightly, then open as if being pried by invisible hands. In front of us lies a long hallway, poorly lit by buzzing overhead lights, casting shadows on the few doors that lie along the way. Not the most welcoming place.

Dex steps out first. He grabs my hand, his grasp on mine firm and warm, and I let myself feel the momentary wash of comfort that only he can provide for me. I let him lead me into the hallway. The elevator doors remain open and waiting for the next passenger, only on this empty, quiet floor, there is none to be found.

Dex hoists the camera onto his shoulder again and motions for me to turn on the infrared.

"Might as well start filming this now."

"Where is everyone?" I ask. "I mean, the hotel runs around the clock, doesn't it?"

"But which clock?" he answers in a statement, not a question.

I sigh and flip on the infrared again. My body glows a vibrant red but when I aim it over at Dex, he only comes up orange.

"What?" he asks as I purse my lips, thinking.

"Seems I'm a lot more hot-blooded than you are," I say and quickly show him the

screen, placing his hand in front of the lens.

He chews on his lip briefly and then places his hand against my forehead. It feels cool.

“Well you’re not hot...”

I shoot him a wry look.

“I mean, not internally hot. Outside is another matter.” He winks at me.

“Are you flirting with me again, Mr. Foray?”

“Again? Whatever do you—”

He’s interrupted by a wall of sound as all doors down the hallway suddenly swing open and bang against their walls. Simultaneously, the elevator behind us powers up with a thunderous whir, the doors closing quickly.

“It’s go time,” he says and we’re off down the hallway to the first door.

Dex is just about to enter the room when the door slams shut in his face, almost smashing his nose back into his skull. He gives me a scared look I don’t see on him too often. Probably the thought of having to get a nose job.

He goes for the handle and I’m right there at his side as he jangles it back and forth vigorously. It’s locked.

We dash for the next door and the same thing happens. Same with the last door after that. All doors locked. Nothing to explore.

“Now what?” I mumble, feeling a familiar wave of cold snake around my feet and ankles. I point the infrared down at it, but it doesn’t register anything out of the ordinary.

Dex doesn’t say anything for awhile so I look up at him. His eyes are focused above him, at a loose-looking vent on the ceiling.

“Perry,” he says slowly, carefully.

I shake my head. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

He looks back at me and shrugs. “What’s the harm? I’ll just boost you up there. If you crawl around for a bit, you’ll probably end up in one of the other rooms and then you can open the door from the inside.”

“I...don’t even know what to say to that.”

“No? You usually have some sort of witty one-liner.”

“You go up there, Dex. There’s no way in hell I’m going.”

“You can’t hold me up and it’s too far for me to jump. Short man syndrome, remember?”

“You can’t hold me up.”

“Perry, for the last time, stop acting like you weigh one million pounds. You don’t. You’re as light as a feather.”

I let out a laugh. I can’t help myself.

“I’m not...anyway, even if you could push me up there, do you think I’d fit?”

“Again, Perry– ”

“And if I do get up there, do you think that aging duct would hold me? I’d come crashing through like a bag of bricks.”

“Stop using your non-existent weight problem as an excuse, just because you’re too chickenshit,” he challenges.

My mouth drops slightly. I am not chickenshit. And my weight problem isn’t non-existent.

“Fine,” I say and walk toward him. “If you don’t think it’s an issue, then away I go.”

He steadies his gaze at me, sussing me out. I cross my arms and give him an impatient stare.

He nods quickly and lowers his hands joined together. I step on them unsteadily and before I can even question just what the hell I am doing, I’m boosted into the air, one hand on the camera, the other reaching for the vent.

Once Dex has me steadied and I can stand, albeit wobbly, on his hands, I climb to his shoulders and push the vent aside. It pops up and slides out to the side with an easy clatter that rattles down the hallway. Up close, it is big enough for me to fit through. But it’s also black and fathomless and hides a wealth of things that could frighten me to death. It’s a vent, for crying out loud. Since when did this show turn into Mission Impossible?

“You OK, kiddo?” he asks from beneath me, his voice shaking slightly, either from apprehension or from the strain.

“Not really. Have you ever been in a dark vent before?”

“Several times,” he answers seamlessly. “Once you get up in there, I’ll hand you the flashlight so you don’t have to be in the dark.”

“How thoughtful of you,” I mutter and reach for my hands into the vent. It’s cold and I fear it will be icky inside but the bottom of the duct feels mercifully dry.

“On the count of three,” he says and once we count down, he pushes me up further and I’m waist deep. I feel his hands slip away and with a groan I pull myself forward until everything except my calves are inside the dark air duct.

I’m scared as hell. The sides of the duct have me unable to turn around and I can’t see what’s in front of me. For all I know, there could be a giant rat in front of my face, ready to gnaw it off, starting with the little tip of my nose. I am starting to panic and an attack in this tight of a spot would be a dangerous thing indeed.

“Uh, Perry,” I hear Dex say. His voice is comforting but the tone isn’t.

“What?” I say as quietly as I can. My words reverberate around me.

“I guess you can’t turn around and reach for the flashlight...can you?”

I close my eyes and let my head thud against the cold bottom. “No.”

“That’s OK, I’m just going to stick the flashlight inside your boot. That way, when you get a chance to move around a bit more, you can grab it.”

I feel him grab my leg, undo the laces on my left Doc Marten and shove the flashlight inside.

This has to be the stupidest idea ever. Some ghost hunters we are.

I sigh and then cough loudly from all the dust.

“Perry, I’m going to try and talk you through it. Just move forward until I tell you to stop. And when I tell you to stop, see if there’s an opening off to your right. If there is, go down that way and it should place you in the laundry room. At least, I hope it’s the laundry room.”

“OK!” I yell, hoping my voice will scare off any hideous creatures that are waiting for me up ahead.

You can do this, I tell myself. One movement at a time, like a snake. Remember if you need to escape, you just need to back up and you’ll be free.

I repeat this to myself as I slink forward, feeling more and more like Tom Cruise. Or Garth from Wayne’s World when he keeps landing on his keys.

After what feels like a lifetime of wiggling and trying to refrain from vomiting on the infrared, Dex yells for me to look for a space going off to the right. I feel for it but though I still touch the same cold metal walls, there’s a bit of a breeze up ahead, flowing down the right side of me.

I continue, hearing Dex’s babbling from below becoming more and more muffled, until my hand doesn’t slam against the side as normal. I found the opening.

I take it, maneuvering like a rat in a maze and wiggle down in a new direction. After a few beats, I can’t hear Dex at all anymore and that realization fills me with dread. If I need to get out, I’ll have to not only back up but make a turn going backwards as well. In the pitch dark, the idea is terrifying and disorienting.

But I continue because I'm determined to see this through. And soon enough, my eyes start to pick up something ahead of me. There's just a little difference of light up ahead and then my hands come across cool air and a vent covering.

My fingers wrap around the metallic grate and pull it up with ease. It rattles as I push it to the side and I stick my head down below, taking in deep breaths of fresher, non-contained air through my nose. I don't know what's below me, all I can see are a few red lights, which I guess are the on-off buttons of machines. There is some other light, though, spilling in from under a doorframe and with hope I realize that Dex and the hallway must be on the other side of that.

I carefully slide across the opening, distributing my weight on each side until I'm just past it, then I lower myself down, my legs dangling helplessly. I have no idea what the hell is below me but I'm just going to have to hope for the best. I take a deep breath, wiggle myself out until I'm hanging what must be a good few feet off the ground, and let go.

I land on solid ground, though the impact makes me stumble to the side and my body goes flying against a desk that makes an impression in my hip.

"Fuck!" I yell. That's going to leave a giant bruise.

"Perry?" I hear Dex call out from the hallway. I scurry over to the door, careful not to trip over anything in my way, and feel for the doorknob. I yank at it to open, but nothing happens. It appears to be locked from the inside and the outside.

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“Are you OK?” he asks and I can hear the worry in his voice. He likes to surprise me by acting human from time to time.

“I’m fine,” I say, rubbing my hip where the desk went into me. “But I can’t open this fucking thing.”

“Are you getting any reception on your phone?”

I tuck the infrared under my arm and bring my iPhone out of my jacket pocket, while reaching down for the flashlight in my boot. It works but the bars are gone. No service.

“No, are you?”

“No,” he answers with a sigh. “Look, I’ve been trying the key she gave me and it won’t open any of the doors here. I can’t call her either. There are some stairs at the end beside the elevator. I’m just going to run up to the lobby and grab Pam.”

“Dex, don’t you dare leave me!” I yell and pound on the door for impact.

“Well what the hell do you suppose we do then? Hang out like this until a maid shows up? What if they are done for the night? Do you really want to spend a night locked in there?”

No. I don’t. But I don’t want him taking off and leaving me alone in this scary, dark room either.

“Look,” he continues, “I’ll be right back. And I mean, right back. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

That’s kind of hard to do when you aren’t here, I think but I know I have no choice. Either he goes or I’m locked in here all night. That thought is too terrifying to fathom.

“OK,” I say hesitantly.

He taps the door lightly. “I’ll be right back.”

I hear his feet scurry off and a door at the end of the hall open. And then silence again.

I put my back against the door and face the darkness of the foreign room. I flick the flashlight on and slowly graze it across the black.

In a creepy, fleeting light it illuminates a few laundry bins, laundry machines, a makeshift office consisting of a whiteboard, a file cabinet and the desk I ran into.

And a dead man hanging from the ceiling.

I scream bloody murder, dropping the flashlight and camera in the process.

They fall to my feet in an outburst as loud as my wail, and as I quickly fumble for them, the light in the room goes on.

I raise my hand to my eyes to shield them from the light and try to get a glimpse of what’s going on. The image of that dead, bloated man hanging by his neck is seared into my brain.

The laundry hampers, machines and office are all still here.

The hanging man is gone.

There is an African-American woman who stands to my far left, her hand on a light fixture, giving me a quizzical stare. She's young and thin with large eyes and is wearing a plain grey dress with a white ruffled apron across it. A very classic-looking maid.

"Good heavens, child," she exclaims in a thick Southern accent. "What on earth are you doing in here?"

I blink hard, trying to make sense of the situation. The maid looks at my hands and what I'm holding.

"Are you filming me? Who are you? What is this?" she demands, her voice growing higher with each question.

"I...I'm Perry Palomino," I stammer, my voice squeaking.

"Am I supposed to know who you are?" she asks and puts her hands on her hips.

"Uh, no," I say and give her an awkward smile. "I'm here with my partner Dex. Dex Foray. We are, uh, we doing a project here. We have permission of the night manager. Pam...something. She said we could come down here and film."

"Just what are you filming. Charlie Chaplin?"

Hmmmm. How to explain the next part without seeming batshit crazy.

"Well..." I begin.

She cocks her brow at me and folds her arms. She's in no hurry.

I let out a burst of air through my nose and say, “We’re ghost hunters.”

She smiles, her teeth blindingly white. She doesn’t sound as amused as she looks. “You’re pulling my chain.”

“No, no sadly I’m not. We have a show, Experiment in Terror. It’s on the Internet.”

“The Internet?”

“I know, it sounds lame but we’ve been doing quite well. I mean, we have advertisers and people actually tune into watch us. Well, watch me. Since I’m the host. Just not a very good one. Actually I think people tune into laugh at me, but whatever gets me a pay check.” I’m rambling now.

“This is a radio show?” she asks.

“No, just on the web.”

She frowns and walks toward me, eying my hands. “What kind of camera is that?”

Though there is nothing menacing at all in her voice, I flinch a little and back up into the door. She pauses and gives me another disbelieving look.

“You never seen a black woman before?”

“Huh?”

“I know we aren’t too common out West here but you best be getting used to us.”

Now it’s my turn to frown. I study her more closely. She’s at least in her early thirties, her pretty face is unlined but she has this authoritative air about her.

Everything sounds like an accusation but one that's filled with a hint of doubt. Though she's trying hard to hide it, I can see she's as afraid of me as I am afraid of her.

I raise the infrared to her, slowly, as if she is a skittish cat, and show her the screen, flicking it on.

She looks at it and shakes her head, not getting it.

"It's infrared," I explain. "It picks up heat energy."

"Well my oh my," she says. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. You trying to make a motion picture?"

"No m'am," I can't help but say. "Much less than that."

"And you what? You hunt ghosts?"

"It sounds ridiculous when you put it that way," I admit.

She snorts and turns around, heading back to the machines. "It sounds ridiculous anyway you put it, child."

"We've just been told the ghost of Parker Hayden is known to haunt this room."

She stops in mid-stride. Her whole body is tensed up. It makes me tense up too. I must have hit a nerve.

"Have you seen him?" I whisper, making sure the camera is running but not pointing it in her direction just yet. I don't want to scare her and just getting our dialog recorded would be more than enough for the show.

“Seen who?” she repeats slowly. She still doesn’t turn around.

“Parker Hayden. The ship millionaire. He lost all of his money during the strike and then killed himself–”

“Don’t you dare speak ill of him,” she threatens in a low voice so raspy and ragged that it almost sounds demonic. “He would never kill himself.”

I bite my lip, unsure of how to proceed. I have no idea what is going on but those hairs are standing up on the back of my neck again.

“Do you know who he was?” I ask carefully.

Finally, she turns around and looks at me with tear-filled eyes.

“He was...my friend.”

I don’t know what to make of that. “Pardon me?”

“He was...my lover. I haven’t seen him for days, not since they threw him out.”

Oh. Dear. God.

“He wouldn’t have killed himself though,” she continues, her voice warbling with emotion. A tear spills down her cheek, leaving a dark trail. “He has troubles but he wouldn’t have done that. Not Parker. Not my Parker.”

“Ummmm,” is all I can say to that. I slowly raise the infrared camera and aim it at her.

“You’re filming me now?”

Yes, I sure am, I think and look at the screen. My breath freezes in my throat. Through the infrared, I can see my own hand in front of me burning a deep red. The shape of the maid though is coming out a steely blue, like the blue I saw in the hotel room.

I look back at her. And I realize I'm talking to a ghost.

"I said, are you filming me? Answer me, child," she says, her voice angry. She wipes away a tear with a rough swipe of her hand.

"No," I say quickly and lower the camera. "Sorry, I...what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. It's May," she answers. "I'd say I'm pleased to meet you Miss Perry Palomino, but I'm afraid I'm a victim of some terrible joke."

There's one thing I've learned about the dead: they don't like to learn they are dead. Things kind of go crazy when they do, like their entire existence is shattered and they go along with it. I mean, imagine you think you're alive and someone tells you you're dead. Then you start putting together all the pieces and BLAM! Your entire world is ripped apart. The very realization can make most ghosts simply disappear. The acceptance pushes them on into the afterlife, or whatever the next step is.

But for selfish reasons, I don't want to lose May. I don't want her to realize she's dead. Because while I've got her here, in this room, I can use her. I can use her to get to Parker.

"When was the last time you saw Parker?" I ask her innocently enough. I still keep the camera aimed at the floor.

"Five days ago," she says. "He said he'd come by the next day. I was here waiting.

He never did. I reckoned...I don't know. I feared the worst. The very worst."

"Which was?"

"That he was dead, Miss Palomino. But not by his own hand. No, he that was murdered."

"By who?"

"The sharks. Who else?"

My face must have contorted into a look of pure confusion because she continues, her voice and demeanor more impassioned by the second.

"The sharks are the fellas who he owed money to. You just don't lose a boat without losing a few friends. These fellas meant business and I seen them threaten him more than a few times. Parker went and told the police but they do nothing. They don't have no control. Parker would tell me he was scared. So scared. He's a man who don't get scared, you hear that. So if he's scared, I reckon there's a reason for it. They are after his life."

The idea of Parker being murdered by men he owed money to is just as believable as suicide. I don't know what to believe but I choose to give the ghost the benefit of the doubt.

"Did Parker leave any proof, any records, that these men were after him?"

She closes her eyes for a second and it's then that I notice a strange transparency about her.

"There was his diary," she tells me. Her eyes open slowly. "It's his checkbook. But

he would keep a log on the back of the checks he couldn't write anymore. Most of it doesn't make much sense to me...if I could talk to him, hear from him, he could tell you himself. I just need to talk to him. Can you find him for me? You said you knew the manager?"

"Yes...but I don't think it will make much difference."

"Why is that?"

"Do you know where he would have kept the checkbook?"

"On his person. Where else? What aren't you telling me? What are you really doing here?"

I look down at the screen and aim it at her. She glows a translucent blue. It's beautiful, for once, and not scary.

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“What happened to Parker?” she goes on, her voice cracking over his name. I don’t say anything but I meet her eye and I know, in one look, that she knows the truth. Maybe not that she’s dead. But that he is.

Her face crumbles. She puts her hand to her head and stumbles backward.

Out of instinct, I go after her, my arms outstretched, hoping to reach her in time before she goes over.

I almost reach her when she smashes against the floor with a sickening thud. The world goes black. The lights go off and I find myself on my knees, my leggings ripping open on the cold hard floor.

“May?” I cry out and raise the camera, hoping to see her blue form through the darkness. I only read my own heat and no one else’s.

I slowly get to my feet and try to flick on the flashlight with my own hand.

Cold fingers reach over my elbow in a stealthy grasp. I can feel the ice through my jacket.

I am yanked harshly to the side until I crash into a wheeled laundry bin and another hand grabs me by the face and pulls me over the side and into it.

All I can think about is the painful cold that comes from the grasp, as if permafrost is entering my veins and creating a sheet of ice on my face. And then I find myself face first in a laundry bin, smothered by a million towels and pulled deeper and deeper

into them until I can't breathe and I can't scream and I can't move. I can only drown here.

The blackness behind my eyes grows darker somehow, as if the dark has a million different shades and nuances and I was only scratching the surface. It's a different kind of obsidian, one that signals the end, finality. I don't want to succumb to it, but all I can see is this blackness, and all I can feel are these hands that won't stop pulling me deeper, that won't let go, and my thoughts become less...and less...and less...

"Perry!"

I think I hear my name but it sounds too far away to be real. I think of May and wonder where she came from.

"Perry!"

My name again. It sounds familiar.

There is a rush of noise and light and commotion and I feel more hands grabbing me. Only these ones are warm and though they are strong, I can feel the care seeping through them.

I think of Dex. And remember where I am.

I put my hands at the bottom of the bin, and push myself off. As I do so, they come in contact with something beneath one of the towels. I'm afraid it's the remains of whoever was pulling me down before, but I still close my fingers around it as Dex yanks me out of the bin and into the harsh fluorescent light of the room.

I cough wildly, trying to find my breath as Dex keeps his hands on either side of my shoulders, steadying me. As the air hits my lungs and my wincing subsides, I notice Pam standing beside the door, a key in hand, her face in a look of absolute terror.

“Perry,” Dex says. “Perry look at me.”

I manage to look at him. His dark eyes are searching mine relentlessly, his brow furrowed, his stance tense.

“Are you OK?” he asks.

I nod, feeling relieved and embarrassed all at the same time.

“Was I sticking out of the laundry bin?” I ask with trepidation.

He nods and I see a hint of a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. It would have been a comical sight, my giant ass in the air and all.

“I leave you alone for five seconds...” His tone is light but he knows there is more to the story. And that I’ll fill him in on it later.

“What’s in your hands?” Pam asks, looking at them with curiosity.

I glance down and see I am holding a rectangular cover of well-worn leather. I open it carefully and see what I thought I would see. A checkbook filled with writing. The possible proof that Parker Hayden was murdered and not a victim of suicide.

I walk over to Pam and place the item in her hands. She looks up at me surprised and confused.

“You may want to run this by a historian. Or even the police,” I say. “There’s a chance that Parker Hayden didn’t commit suicide after all. It could be a cold case file. A very cold case.”

I feel extremely cheesy as I tell Pam that. No surprise, Dex says, “Wow, I leave you for one minute and suddenly you’re CSI: Portland.”

I give him a tired smile. I'm ready to go home.

A few days pass when I get a call from Dex. We're not at the point where we call each other just to talk, but every contact I have with him is still important and I still get stupid butterflies every time I see his name pop up on the call display. This time, he's calling to talk about our episode at The Benson.

"How's it all looking?" I ask as I sit on my bed, listening to my younger sister Ada argue with my dad downstairs.

"Oh it's looking fucking fantastic, kiddo," Dex says, his voice coming in low and smooth over the line. "I just want to hug you for keeping that camera rolling while May was talking. I'll have to run it over some other footage and do that little subtitle thing underneath but it really helps our case, especially when you get that blue shit on screen. That really is something."

"Best show ever?" I ask, amused at his praise.

"Well," he says slowly, "it probably would have helped had I been around but you did OK on your own."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"There's something else, too, you should take as a compliment."

My eyes perk up and I sit up a bit straighter, putting down my Spin magazine. "What's that?"

"Pam just called me. She said she handed over the checkbook to the police who are having a division look into it or something. Anyway, the point is ever since our visit,

all the haunting in the hotel has stopped.”

“What do you mean, all hauntings?”

“Well she says she usually gets some sort of feedback each day. Since our shoot, there hasn’t been any. I don’t know what that means but she seems to think that whatever you did down in that laundry room...well, I guess you cleared the place.”

“So I’m an exorcist now?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, kiddo. You’re miles away from being Father Merrin and for all we know the haunting could start up again. I’m just saying...next time you feel like being hard on yourself because we aren’t making a difference and there’s no point to any of this...I dunno. Don’t. Because you did good here. You did good.”

I let Dex ramble on a bit more to please my ego and then we hang up. Like the other times before, I still don’t know what to make of my ghost hunting. I don’t know how I got roped into doing the show, how I ended up being a magnet for the supernatural and what on earth it has in store for me. The only thing I do know is that it’s dangerous and I’m compelled to keep doing it.

But I also know that even though someone is dead, it doesn’t mean they’re beyond help. And for every ten ghosts that try and kill me, if I end up saving one of them, it might be worth it after all.

Though you may want to remind me of that, next time I’m locked in a coffin or something.

The End. For now.