



Fatal Storm: A Cormac and Amelia Story

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Category: Urban

Description: Cormac and Amelia take a job at a quaint Victorian mountain lodge: keep an eye on the famous psychic there to judge whether the place is haunted. Simple, right? Three problems: the blizzard that snows everyone in for the weekend, the murdered body that shows up in the morning, and the fact that everyone is sure Cormac did it.

So much for the nice mountain getaway.

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The problem wasn't how often Cormac ended up in proximity to brutally murdered bodies. The problem was how often everyone else assumed he was the one responsible.

The guests who'd gathered at Wright House, a Victorian-era lodge in the mountains outside of Buena Vista, Colorado, were crammed in the kitchen, staring at the body of Monty Connor, which was lying face down on a steel prep table. Blood had dripped off the table and gathered in a wide, sticky pool on the floor. The blood was cool now, which meant the man had been dead for hours. That much blood, he'd probably been stabbed. They wouldn't know for sure without turning him over.

Beck Anderson, the house's owner, was a steel-haired woman in her sixties. She had been a friend of Cormac's father back in the day. Normally active and bustling, she was now frozen, with her arms around Frannie Ng, who had her face pressed to Beck's shoulder. Frannie, the young woman who was cooking for the guests, discovered the body when she came into the kitchen that morning to start coffee. Her scream had awakened the rest of the house and brought them stumbling in to see what was wrong: Cormac and Beck; Vane, just Vane, a professional psychic hired to assess whether the house was haunted; Lora Mirelli, the online personality Vane had brought to document his assessment; Monty Connor's wife June, hand over her mouth, pressed to the door frame after trying to stumble out the doorway and missing. And Glyn Farrow, another friend of Beck's, who was here because Cormac hadn't quite figured out why. He was near forty, British, neat in slacks and a pressed shirt—the only one of them not in pajamas and robes.

They were pressed to the edges of the room, in a half circle around the body. Cormac looked at each of them, noting whose eyes were wide and shocked and whose were

more studious, curious. He and Glyn had somehow ended up on either end of the row, closest to the body. Both of them ready to step forward to touch it, to learn more about what had happened.

Amelia? Cormac asked the question at the back of his mind, to the not-quite-a-ghost who lived there. His constant companion, his trusted conscience. She was being unusually quiet.

I'm horrified. I... don't know what to think.

She retreated, full of anxiety that found its way into Cormac's nerves. He wanted to get out of here, to punch something.

"What do we do?" Beck asked in a thin, reedy voice. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Call the police, one should think," Glyn said.

"There's three feet of snow outside," Cormac said. "Police aren't coming." He glanced out the window over the kitchen sink. The blizzard that had made his drive up here last night harrowing was still on, thick snow pattering against the glass in the muted morning light. Nobody was going anywhere.

Likewise, no one could have arrived here in the middle of the night. Whoever killed Monty Connor was standing in this room.

"I'll call. I can at least call," Beck said, but didn't move. As if time had stuck, none of them moved.

"How did this happen?" Lora murmured. She was one of those twenty-somethings who'd managed to build a career off of Instagram and YouTube videos on paranormal topics. In flannel pajamas and an oversize sweater, she looked very

different than her public persona, which involved lots of eye makeup, miniskirts, and black tights with spiderweb patterns.

“I’m guessing stab wound through the front of the ribs,” Glyn said. “With that amount of blood, it had to be an artery pouring right out. We’ll have to look to be sure, of course.”

There was a big carving knife missing from the knife block on the back counter. The gap among the other polished brown handles was a glaring void.

“So where’s the knife?” Cormac said, circling the table, careful to keep his socked feet out of the blood. He knelt, looking under the table, along the edges of the nearby cabinets. No knife. Monty’s face was tilted to the right. He was a big man in his sixties, a musician and performer, an old-school cowboy poet in a snap-front plaid shirt, with a fringe of white hair brushing his neck, just like Buffalo Bill. His eyes were half open. He must have bled out in seconds.

“He could be lying on top of it,” Glyn said. He glanced over at the knife block—he’d noticed it, too. “I rather think at this point the weapon itself is less important than the person who wielded it. As Mr. Bennett observed, there’s enough snow outside that no one could have come up the mountain during the night.”

“What are you saying?” Vane said, which was almost laughable for a psychic. Like Lora, his public persona—all black, showy jewelry and lots of glaring—was gone. He wore a gray T-shirt and sweatpants, and without eyeliner his face seemed plain and tired.

“It had to have been one of us,” Cormac answered.

“Indeed,” Glyn said, studying him with a calculating furrow to his brow. “Tell us, Mr. Bennett. What did you spend time in prison for?”

They all turned their gazes from the body to Cormac. The mysterious man who'd come in from the snow, who didn't say much, who didn't smile, who couldn't talk about his job. And who it turned out was a convicted felon.

He met Glyn's gaze and chuckled. "You know the answer to that or you wouldn't have asked."

Another long pause drew out, and Lora finally burst, "So what was it? What did you do?"

It had been self-defense. He had been protecting his friends. "Manslaughter," Cormac said. "At least, that's what they tell me."

They all looked again at the body and the awful pool of blood.

Yeah, today was going to go just great.

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Cormac should have turned around and gone home when he had the chance.

He'd arrived last night, later than he'd intended, because the snow had been falling hard, reducing visibility to nothing and making the roads an ice rink. The headlights turned the snow into a shifting wall, so he dimmed them. He had to carefully steer the Jeep around switchbacks growing dangerously slippery.

"This is a bad idea," he muttered.

This is a paying job, Amelia noted.

"There'll be other jobs. We're going to be snowed in up here for days."

Ask for hazard pay. It will be lovely. I've never seen snow like this, it's marvelous.

"Yeah, wait 'til there's three feet of it and you can't open the doors."

Donner Pass, she murmured, recalling memories of an earlier case. They had explored the area around Truckee, California in high summer, wondering what the area must have looked like with the twenty feet of snow that had piled up on the ill-fated members of the Donner Party. Yeah, it might have looked a little like this. They must have felt something like this sense of foreboding, suspecting that they should have turned back only when it was far too late.

Even with chains on, the tires spun briefly on the next incline, and he grumbled.

Finally, the road leveled out, the pine forest thinned, and their destination appeared:

Wright House. The ornate hulk of a Victorian lodge occupied what in summer would be a wide meadow, hemmed in by a forest which loomed in the fading light. Now, snow blanketed the area, erasing details. The house itself was an artifact from the gold rush days, restored and turned into a vacation lodge. Three stories tall, it was full of gables and bay windows, scalloped trim, and painted shutters. A long porch with carved rails stretched across the front. Warm light glowed from several windows, and smoke rose up from one of a pair of chimneys. The whole scene was obscured by a lacework veil of immense snowflakes. Well, at least it would be warm and dry inside, though heat in these old houses could be tricky. He hoped for the best.

A collection of other cars already occupied the circular drive curving up to the front porch. Mostly SUVs and other four-wheel-drive vehicles but also, incongruously, a tiny Miata convertible. With a foot of new snow mounded on top of it, it looked like some kind of cute pastry next to the others. Clearly it had arrived early.

“We’re definitely getting snowed in,” he said, parking his Jeep at the end of the row, front end out. Forecast said this was going to keep up all night. He pulled his duffle bag out of the back, wincing as his shoulder twinged. The gunshot wound from last summer—acquired in Deadwood, South Dakota, of all places—might have healed, but it was feeling the cold now and stiffening up. He switched the bag to the other hand and bent his head against the weather.

A warm fire, a nice drink... really, Cormac, you need to be more positive.

Maybe if it was just him in the house, and not him and a bunch of strangers. Maybe if this wasn’t a job. He paused on the steps leading to the front door. Snow instantly collected on his hair, the shoulders of his leather jacket, and his bag.

“There’s still a chance to get back down the mountain before the snow socks us in.”

We’re here now. Might as well see what’s this is all about, yes?

He thumped up the remaining steps to the shelter of the porch, brushed the snow off, and knocked on the door. A murmur of voices within was audible. He watched the shadow of a figure appear beyond the frosted-glass decoration in the door. At last, the door opened, revealing an older woman smiling up at him.

“Cormac! Well, just look at you!”

“Mrs. Anderson,” he said politely, out of twenty-five-year-old habit.

“Oh, don’t Mrs. Anderson me, not when you’re all grown up now. Call me Beck. Come in, come in!”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said wryly as he followed her into the foyer.

“Thank you so much for coming out in this weather. Snow like this isn’t really surprising this time of year, but it’s still a hassle. Here, let’s get your coat off, just set your bag down for now. We were sitting down to dinner, you’re just in time.”

The jacket went on a hook on an already-filled coat tree. The decor here was warm, invitingly vintage, giving the place an authentic rather than ostentatious atmosphere. Dark wood paneling on the walls contrasted with the brass light fixtures. A couple of fancy side tables and an upholstered wingback chair stood watch, and he could imagine a gentleman in a bowler hat sitting there, reading a morning paper, a hundred years ago. In his jeans and plain T-shirt, Cormac felt out of place.

A gentleman doesn’t wear a hat indoors, Amelia observed. Well, good thing Cormac didn’t have a hat. He shook snow out of his hair.

A couple of paintings of western landscapes hung on the walls, and a copy of a Remington sculpture, the one of the horse and rider navigating a steep downward slope, had pride of place on one of the tables. A Persian rug softened the wood floor.

He was almost afraid to step on it.

“This is nice,” he said, for lack of anything more creative.

“It’s been a bear getting the place ready for paying guests.” She scowled, but her eyes gleamed with pride. “We’re almost there, I think. This weekend’s the dry run.”

“What exactly do you want me to be looking for?”

Her voice dropped, a soft conference between the two of them. “Keep an eye on my psychic. If he says the place is haunted—well, you’re my quality control. I’m hoping you can let me know if he’s the real deal or blowing smoke.”

Wright House was supposed to be haunted. A lurid tale of tragic murder and violence, the way these things usually were. Two brothers, an argument, a shootout... and now a ghost. Cormac and Amelia had examined a lot of haunted—and so-called haunted—houses. Investigating a medium on the sly? That was new, and now that he was here, Cormac discovered he was looking forward to the challenge. It felt a little like a hunt.

“This is just the kind of thing I would have called your father about, back in the day. When I heard you’d followed in his footsteps—”

“Not quite. Maybe followed him on the next wheel track over.”

“Good enough for me.” She took hold of his elbow companionably. “Let’s go meet everyone.”

She guided him through an inviting parlor with that blazing fire in the fireplace Amelia had been so looking forward to, through an archway to a formal dining room. With a long, polished table and a crystal chandelier over it, it looked like something

out of a British period TV series. Beck had really gone all out putting the house together. China place settings, high-backed mahogany chairs, a long sideboard with graceful, curving legs, and another Persian rug, all plush and glowing in warm light.

The five people sitting around the table turned to stare at him, which made his shoulders bunch up.

“Here he is, he made it after all. This is Cormac Bennett, friend of the family.”

Be polite, Amelia murmured, and Cormac managed a stiff, fleeting smile.

He spotted the hired psychic right off: Vane was a young punk to Cormac’s eyes, with spiky black hair, a slick goatee, a lot of jewelry, and a disdainful way of looking down his nose. Seated next to him, Lora Mirelli was just as image conscious, ostentatiously goth, with the tips of her brown hair dyed in fiery shades of orange. She sneered a bit at Cormac, who must have looked ancient and old-fashioned to her, with his mustache and western slouch.

On the other side of the table sat Monty and June Connor, in matching pearl-snap western shirts, blue jeans, and cowboy boots. They smiled broadly in the way of people used to being on stage. They were singers and storytellers, kitschy cowboy poets Beck was planning to bring in as entertainment. They were probably going to sing at some point this weekend, and Cormac thought that asking for hazard pay wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

Lastly, Beck introduced Glyn Farrow, seated at the end of the table. He gave Cormac a slight nod.

Monty Connor greeted him in a booming down-home voice. “Quite a storm, must have been a heck of a drive!”

Cormac agreed. “I wouldn’t have made it if I didn’t have the Jeep. Whoever’s got that Miata is lucky they got here early.”

“That would be me.” Glyn raised a glass, a tumbler with some amber liquid in it. “Seemed such a good idea to have a neat little convertible for a mountain drive. Ah well.” His accent was cultured, precise.

I wonder what part of England he’s from? You’ll be sure to ask, won’t you?

Before he could do so, a young Asian woman bustled in from the next room—the kitchen, by the glimpse of tile and stainless steel appliances visible through the swinging door. She was dressed in a practical T-shirt and jeans with a smudged apron over them, and her silky black hair was tied up in a sloppy bun.

“And that’s Frannie, she’s a friend helping out for the weekend,” Beck said.

Frannie donned a big smile. “Hi, nice to meet you. Food’ll be out in a sec; how is everyone doing for drinks? What can I get you, Cormac?”

“Club soda, thanks.”

It didn’t seem possible but her smile brightened even more, and she ducked back into the kitchen.

“What is it you do, son?” Monty asked Cormac, who smiled a little at the son. He pegged Monty as a certain kind of guy from a certain familiar demographic. One of his father’s several careers had been leading backcountry hunting parties. His clients were usually rich and full of themselves, wanting to play tough guy without the work necessary to back up the appearance. When teenage Cormac started going along on the trips to help, guys like this would ruffle his hair and call him son. What kept him from getting too mad about it was knowing they’d die out there without his father

holding their hands, figuratively speaking.

“Oh, this and that,” Cormac said, letting his own drawl thicken. “Dad was a hunting guide. Family business.”

Douglas Bennett had also been a bounty hunter specializing in supernatural creatures. Vampires, werewolves, and the like. That was the business Cormac had mostly kept up. His shooting days were behind him. He hoped.

“Well, how about that! Tell me, what’s the biggest moose you ever shot? You ever go for bear?”

Cormac suppressed a grumble, and Amelia murmured, Patience. He’d been here five minutes and he was already exhausted. “I never kept track,” he said. Now, if he’d asked how many vampires he’d staked...

Beck took a seat between Monty and Glyn, leaving Cormac at the opposite end of the table. Frannie swept in a moment later, somehow balancing three big platters in her arms. Glyn immediately rose to help her deposit them on the table. It turned out to be a great spread of southwest cooking: enchiladas, beans and rice, homemade tortillas, and all the fixings. Suddenly, Cormac was starving. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

“I was expecting you’d make chow mein or something like that,” Monty said, chuckling.

“Monty, hush,” June said, then pressed her lips together in an apology.

Frannie’s smile dropped for a second and she glared.

Vane’s lip curled. “Is this chicken? I’m sorry, I thought I made clear that I’m

vegan—”

Frannie held up a hand, stopping him mid-sentence. Turning on a heel, she retreated back to the kitchen and returned a moment later with an additional steaming-hot plate.

“Squash and quinoa-stuffed peppers. Organic.” She set the plate before him with a flourish.

“Oh, uh. Thanks. It’s because I have a deeper connection with the spiritual world if I don’t rely on death to sustain me.”

“You’re welcome,” she said pointedly, and took the last empty seat at the table.

Monty turned to Beck. “You let the help sit at the table with everyone else?”

“Oh my God, are you serious?” Lora exclaimed.

Beck said evenly, “As I’ve already told you, Frannie isn’t ‘the help,’ she’s a friend who agreed to come in for the weekend and help me take care of things.”

“Maybe you’d prefer it if she were in a uniform,” Glyn said. “Go for the full Downton Abbey experience, hmm?”

“Don’t get pissy with me,” Monty glared back.

Beck was determinedly scooping food on her plate and passing dishes around. “I think we should all enjoy our dinner and think good thoughts for the séance later. Right, Vane?”

Vane shrugged. “We’ll be channeling a murder victim, but sure. Good thoughts.”

“I hear you put on a pretty good show,” Monty said.

Cormac wished the guy would be quiet. Shovel some food into his mouth. Not that that would necessarily stop him talking.

“You can watch the videos on YouTube,” Vane said.

The man huffed. “An internet show is one thing, real life is something else.”

“He’s got a million subscribers,” Lora said. “How many do you have?”

“We don’t have a YouTube channel,” June said a bit stiffly. “Monty doesn’t think it’s worthwhile. We’ve had... discussions about it.”

Lora opened her mouth as if she might argue, then thought better of it. “I see.”

“We do just fine without the internet,” Monty said. “Keeps us honest.” June’s hand clenched on her fork.

“This is great, Frannie,” Cormac said, indicating his plate full of enchilada. Frannie smiled gratefully across the table.

June jumped in. “Glyn, I understand you’re a writer?”

“Cat’s out of the bag,” he said.

“Have you been published?” Vane asked, like he was expecting to catch him out in some deception.

“A bit.” He studied the pattern in the fork’s handle.

“Glyn writes bestselling mysteries,” Beck said. “Ten novels so far, is it?”

“Twelve.” He smiled wryly.

“They’re really good, you should try them,” Beck continued. “They’re about a detective who used to be in the army before joining the police in London. I feel like I’m actually there when I read them.”

“The invitation to come visit me in Brighton still stands,” Glyn told her.

“Oh, that would be nice. Once I get this place going, we’ll talk.”

“Are you going to write about the murder of Tobias?” Lora asked.

Glyn said, “It’s my understanding the trial concluded Tobias Wright’s brother Jacob killed him in self-defense. That there was an actual shootout. So perhaps technically not a murder.”

Cormac could almost sense Amelia leaning forward, intent on the conversation. A little bit frustrated that she couldn’t jump in herself, without his help.

“Whatever you call it, it’s a violent death,” Lora explained. “They were both in love with the same woman, and Tobias threatened Jacob if Clarice wouldn’t marry him.”

Beck shook her head. “The story Jim’s family passed down is that Clarice had agreed to marry Tobias, but then Jacob threatened to cut him off from the inheritance. That was what they had the shootout over.”

Vane said, “And these are the questions we hope to find answers to. This is the perfect subject for a séance.”

I'm looking forward to this séance. We'll see if he has any true abilities beyond showmanship.

All they had to do was get through dinner.

"It's a load of bunk," Monty muttered under his breath, but not really under his breath. Vane glared.

Mr. Connor doesn't seem much interested in making friends.

Cormac was feeling downright sociable in comparison, in fact.

In another valiant effort to haul the conversation to back to something resembling civility, Glyn said, "Jim was related to the Wrights, yes?"

"Their sister Alice was his great-great—I think it's just two greats—grandmother. She'd married and moved away by then so never really got the whole story. But that's Tobias's pocket watch sitting on the mantle. That's stayed with the house this whole time."

They all glanced through the archway to the parlor, where they could make out the mantle over the fireplace, and the antique watch displayed on a polished wooden stand right in the center, pride of place.

"Perfect," Vane murmured.

Frannie served flan for dessert, which inspired a round of very small talk about flans of dinners past, and finally the meal was over and the guests stood to make their way back to the parlor. Out of habit, Cormac started stacking plates and gathering silverware.

Beck moved to intercept him. “Oh Cormac, you don’t have to do that—”

“I’m happy to help.” Gave him something to do besides sit there not talking.

“Your father did raise you right, didn’t he?”

Cormac wasn’t so sure about that. His father had receded to memory, and most of those memories involved guns and a command to continue in the family business—hunting.

His first kill was the werewolf who had killed Douglas Bennett.

These days, he wanted to stay out of prison more than he wanted to continue his father’s monster-hunting legacy. He had a lingering sense that his father would have been disappointed, so he tried not to think about him at all.

Beck, Frannie, and he cleared the table, carrying plates and empty serving dishes to the kitchen. The rest of the house had preserved the late Victorian aesthetic, but the kitchen was modern, built for commercial use, with a wide three-section sink, stainless-steel appliances, lots of counter space, neat racks and shelves for pots, pans, professional-grade chef knives in a big wooden block, serving trays, dishes, glassware. The floor was classic black and white tile, with matching backsplashes behind the sink and stove.

A window over the sink looked out over the back of the house. The snow was still coming down hard. Large flakes beat against the glass.

“We’re going to be snowed in all weekend,” he muttered.

“Oh, it’ll be cozy!” Beck said, rather desperately.

Cormac had noticed a guitar case leaning on the wall in the parlor. Monty Connor's, presumably. A cozy weekend? Maybe, but definitely a long one.

He said, "Must have taken a lot to get this place up and running."

"I'm mortgaged to the hilt," she said softly, and her smile thinned. "If next summer's tourist season doesn't pan out, I might lose it all." She had presented such a cheerful, confident picture. She couldn't very well confess worries to the people she was trying to win over.

"I thought you inherited the place from your husband?"

"I did. But Jim sold off most of the land and the water rights that went with it—you know how screwed up those old water agreements get. Turns out Jim didn't keep up with his inheritance quite as well as he let on. Had a whole lot of business debt he never told me about. He was trying to do the right thing, pay it all off with what he got from the land. But, well... a house like this gets expensive." She waved a hand dismissively. "Never mind, nothing anybody can do about it now, is there? Let's just go and have a good time. Let me get you a drink." She bustled out.

Back in the dining room, Vane had taken over the table, spreading a black-on-black embroidered cloth over it and drawing a number of arcane items from a travel case.

Let's stay and watch, Amelia suggested eagerly. If he's going to be setting up wires or sound effects, now is when he'll do it.

Cormac leaned against the doorway, arms crossed. Vane arranged a couple of silver candlesticks, a trivet shaped like a pentagram—

"Please, I need privacy!" Vane insisted.

He's definitely setting up wires and sound effects.

Cormac could imagine her rubbing her hands together. He slouched away from the wall and continued on to the parlor...

Where Monty was in the big armchair by the fireplace, tuning his guitar. June sat nearby, beaming, looking friendly but coming across just as stiffly as she had through dinner. They made a calculated picture of archetypal folksiness. Cormac almost kept going, to the foyer and straight out of the house, to try to drive out of here despite the accumulating snow. Maybe there were more dishes to wash. Maybe he could go to bed, except there was still the séance to get through.

Sometimes he really hated people.

He settled into one of the wingback chairs as far away from the fireplace as he could get. Lora was on a sofa, checking her phone. Beck stood nearby, hands clasped nervously. Glyn was by one of the windows, tumbler in hand. Cormac couldn't recall him actually taking a drink from it, not even during dinner.

"What should I start with, darlin'?" Monty said to June in an affected drawl as he strummed.

"Oh, let's go with a classic!" She delivered the scripted response, and the random strumming turned into a series of chords—for "Home on the Range."

Cormac slumped back in the chair and sighed.

"Not a fan?" Glyn murmured.

Cormac wasn't a fan of easy sentimentality. "Around the time this was written, the Great Plains bison population was already crashing from overhunting. Buffalo

weren't roaming all that much, it turns out." The home the song talked about didn't exist, which might have been part of the point, but that wasn't how guys like this sang it.

"Well, that takes some of the romance out of it. I suppose people still expect the local color."

The song ended, and Monty segued into the next one. "'Oh bury me not on the lone prair-eeee...'"

Cormac wasn't getting paid enough for this.

A thin, wind-borne howling cut through a pause in the song, and the curtains by the nearby window rustled in a draft. The storm was worsening, beating snow against the sides of the house. Couldn't have been more atmospheric if the Connors had planned it.

Lora shook her phone and looked up. "Connection's down. Is anyone else getting a signal?"

Monty stopped mid-line and glared.

Beck said, "It's satellite internet way out here. Connection's dodgy at the best of times, and with this storm, well... nothing I can do about it." Lora heaved a frustrated sigh.

Then the lights flickered.

"And... maybe I'll get some candles out, just in case."

"Perfect weather for a séance, anyway," Glyn said with a grin.

“But if I can’t post about it what’s the point?” Lora replied.

Monty strummed harder, letting a discordant note twang out before settling back into the classic folk-western three-note rhythm. “This all reminds me of a story you might have heard, about a group of pioneers making the dangerous trek to California, and the storm that trapped in them in a place we now call Donner Pass—”

Oh no, Amelia said. You were right. We should have turned around and gone home when we had the chance.

Vane appeared in the doorway to the dining room and clapped once, loudly. June jumped, Beck gasped and dropped the handful of candles she’d brought in from the foyer, and another bad chord strummed out.

Vane had made a quick change of clothes, trading his plain long-sleeved shirt for a leather vest, revealing complex tattoos covering both arms. Amelia spotted a number of arcane symbols, alchemical notations, and figures in a dizzying spiral. Hard to be sure if it actually meant anything.

“If you’ll come join me, I believe the spirit plane is calling to us.” He glared menacingly from under arched eyebrows, and the rings he wore seemed to make his hands flash.

Well, he certainly had his shtick down.

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Amelia had never seen a setup like it, and Cormac trusted her experience more than his own with this sort of thing.

Along with the trivet, the candlesticks marked out a pentagram. The candles in them, all black, were lit, and the flames were each a different color: blue, red, yellow, green, and white. There had to be some trick to it, chemicals in the wick. The effect was unsettling. Apricot-sized quartz crystals sat at each place around the table. Incense burned in a ceramic bowl—sharp, with a bitter edge, not like what Amelia used, or the usual sage and sandalwood.

Rowan, with a bit of anise. Something else I'm not sure of, but I'd use those in a divination spell at least, I'll give him that.

A small gong marked with Chinese characters sat near the head of the table, where Vane stood, presiding. Lora, camera in hand, moved around the room snapping photos and taking video. She came in close to frame an artistic shot of thick gray smoke rising up from the incense, then moved to the back of the room to encompass the whole setting.

“Well, this is downright Satanic,” Monty said, frowning.

“The pentagram is an ancient symbol with many meanings,” Vane said. “It represents the four earthly elements, plus the ethereal plane. Now please, sit.”

Cormac. Try to sit next to Vane, if you can.

Amelia wanted to be able to tell if Vane was pulling strings under the table, or flexing

to activate hidden controls. However, Beck and Lora had already crowded in, while Cormac's tendency to linger in the back of rooms defeated them.

Glyn was also hanging back. He gestured to Cormac. "After you, Mr. Bennett."

"You go on."

They stared at one another, neither willing to have the other at his back.

Oh for God's sake, just go.

Frannie arrived last, and Monty glanced at her with what seemed like surprise, faintly sneering. Like he really couldn't see her as anything other than hired help. The singer started to say something, but June hushed him. For her part, Frannie seemed eager, leaning right up to the table and focusing on Vane. When the medium stepped back to turn off the lights, the room transformed. The cozy home-like setting was transformed by the uncertain glow of the spirit world. A couple of the others gasped, and Cormac was annoyed to notice the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

Lora attached the camera to a tabletop tripod and switched a button—setting to video, it looked like. With everyone in their chairs, an anticipatory silence settled over them. The candle flames wavered in an unfelt draft. Silently, Vane settled in the chair at the head of the table and spread his hands in an inviting gesture.

"My friends. Prepare yourselves. We are about to make a journey. There is the world we know. And then there is the one... beyond!"

There was a thump—just his fist against the table, making the candle flames jump and the gong rattle. Frannie gasped, June let out a small squeal. Monty chuckled, but the sound came out nervously.

“My friends, I need your help,” Vane continued. “Whether you believe or don’t doesn’t matter. I just need you to turn your thoughts... to the mysterious. Remain silent. Remain attentive. But most of all, whatever happens... remain calm. I beg you.” He met the gazes of each of them around the table, so it seemed as if he asked them personally for their help. Drawing them into the ritual. “If the spirits believe you are afraid...” He shook his head slowly, as if to say he couldn’t guess what would happen and wouldn’t be responsible for the consequences.

Quite the showman, Amelia said. In the dark, lit from below by the multicolored candles, Vane had a haunted expression, as if had seen terrible things and lived to tell.

What are we looking for? Cormac asked. Amelia’s attention had become sharp. His own vision went soft, as she stepped into his body, using his eyes, ears, nose.

I’m not even sure. In the old days it was all wires and toe cracking.

Toe cracking wasn’t a thing. It couldn’t be.

It worked for the Fox Sisters, apparently. I never saw them perform myself. Though in this modern day he might have recordings, smart speakers using voice-activated cues. I’d wager Lora is helping him.

Vane lifted his hands. “Entities on the ethereal plane, draw nigh. We are here to contact the unfortunate spirit that is said to inhabit this place, Tobias Wright. Tonight, we hope to hear his tragic story from his own spectral self. We will open a doorway to the shadow realm and ask Tobias to... step through.”

Cormac could almost believe that someone was breathing over his shoulder. He resisted an urge to look behind him.

Vane produced an object: the pocket watch from the mantle over the fireplace. It was

antique, tarnished to a dark shade. Holding it flat in his palm, he showed it around the table so all could see, then placed it on the pentagram in the middle of the table. A focus. A connection with the past. Assuming it had actually belonged to Tobias.

“Now, please take the hands of your neighbors,” Vane ordered.

“June, switch places with me,” Monty hissed.

“What? Monty, just sit—” But the singer was already fumbling out of his chair and pulling at June’s arm.

“I’m not holding hands with a man. No offense.” He nodded at Glyn in a way he probably thought was polite.

“And what if I do take offense?” Glyn said, leering a bit with an arch to his eyebrow.

“June!”

“All right, fine!”

A muscle in Vane’s jaw twitched.

The couple settled in their new seats, which placed Monty between June and Beck. This was apparently acceptable.

Glyn thickened his precise accent to say, “Really, Mr. Connor. I won’t bite. Unless you ask nicely.” It was an old joke, but nicely deployed. Monty’s eyes widened, as if in horror, and he refused to look at Glyn, who seemed to be enjoying himself.

Glyn now arched that same brow at Cormac, who was seated on his other side. “Will you take offense?”

“I’m tough, I can take it,” Cormac said, gripping his offered hand.

In fact, Amelia appeared to be delighted by their neighbor. Frannie took hold of his left hand, and the circle was complete.

“Friends,” Vane intoned a bit desperately. “We have a somber task before us! Let the light fill your vision, the air fill your senses. Steady your breathing. Focus on your breath, breath that Tobias Wright no longer has for himself. We must breathe for him if we wish him to speak!”

A reliable meditation technique. In spite of themselves, they all began to match their breaths to the rhythm of Vane’s steady speech, until they were all breathing together, and even the flickering of the candle flames seemed to settle into the rhythm.

“The veil is thin... the spirits are close...”

The smell in the room changed, the incense abruptly shifting to a sharper, sweeter odor. Cinnamon maybe?

Oh, very nice. Timed release, so once the rowan burned down the next scent is ready. Excellent timing, good showmanship there.

“Is that pot?” Monty exclaimed. June hushed him.

“No,” Vane hissed. “It’s my secret blend of divinatory herbs.”

“He sells it on his website if you like it,” Lora added in a loud whisper.

Vane closed his eyes for a moment and seemed to be gritting his teeth. “Please, I’m begging you to be quiet. The spirits are very close. But you have to focus!”

The air grew warm, heady. Frannie's hand in Cormac's was shaking slightly. She was squeezing just a little too tightly, and Cormac couldn't get her to loosen her grip without disrupting the proceedings. Her eyes were half-lidded, her lips parted. Falling easily into the half trance Vane was attempting to induce in them.

In a slow, haunted voice, Vane asked, "Tobias Wright. Are you here with us this evening? Can you give us a sign? Tobias Wright, we have opened the door, and we humbly ask for a small sign of your presence."

"I think I heard something!" June hissed.

There had been no sound apart from the room's ambient noise. The wind gusting against the windows was the same as it had been.

The more of a show Vane put on, the less inclined Cormac was to take him seriously. Still, he hadn't sensed any odd movements. No hiss of speakers, no sign of electronics. He watched Lora; she'd remained sitting still.

If nothing happens, that doesn't particularly mean he isn't psychic.

Vane continued, undaunted. He took a deep breath... and suddenly tilted his head. His brow furrowed. "I'm sensing... a spirit presence is here. A soul from another realm has joined us."

The tension around the table ratcheted up a notch. Even Monty held his breath. Somehow, Frannie's grip on Cormac's hand tightened even more.

"It's very strong!" Vane said, his demeanor of control slipping in his excitement. "I am sensing... sensing..." Vane straightened, his shoulders stiffening. "There is a spirit here," he said softly, and now he sounded confused. Wondering. He was off script.

“Is it Tobias?” Beck murmured.

“Shh,” Vane said. “There’s... someone... Died and not dead? Not the murderer but the murdered...”

“That’s not my ghost,” Beck said, blinking.

“No. It’s... a woman, maybe?” Vane said, pleading, “Spirit. Can you give me a sign? Reach out, and I’ll listen!”

Cormac sat very still.

Cormac. Is he talking about me? Can he sense me?

He asked Amelia, Are there any ghosts here? Is there anything else?

I can’t tell, not without working some sort of scrying spell.

Vane shook his head in evident bafflement. He wasn’t the only one. “The signs here are jumbled, confusing. Some spirit has come to communicate with us. I need all of your energies to help illuminate the unreal. Your life energy can give power to this otherworldly voice!”

Should I say something? I don’t want to be illuminated. Not here, like this.

Although it might give everyone a big shock if Cormac suddenly started channeling the spirit realm.

“There’s definitely a presence here,” Vane insisted. “But she’s not forthcoming. We must make her feel welcome. This is a safe space. Spirit, we ask nothing of you! But if you feel moved to give us a sign. One small sign.”

Oh, he sounds sad...

Cormac shifted a foot and cracked a toe. In the breath-held stillness, the noise sounded a lot louder than he expected, especially given his heavy boots. Frannie nearly jumped out of her chair. Beck gasped. Monty muttered a small curse. Vane smiled, a devilish expression in the candlelight.

Cormac grinned a little. So did Glyn, sitting beside him and casting his gaze downward, under the table.

“Spirit, thank you,” Vane murmured. “You honor us. Do you have a message for us? Anything. At all.”

The moments dragged on, the wind outside kept blowing. The incense burned out, leaving the air smelling sooty. Candles wavered, and Vane let out a sigh.

“Sometimes, the spirits keep their secrets to themselves.” His showman’s voice of authority returned. “The veil closes. The other plane is out of reach. At least... until each of us in our turn makes that final, permanent journey to the other side. If we are lucky, our journeys will be less fraught than Tobias’s. Now raise your hands—” He raised his, along with Lora’s and Beck’s. The rest of them followed suit. “—and break the bonds, returning our own selves to—we hope!—the safety of the material plane!”

They dropped hands. It was like a rope had been cut, and a weight settled back into Cormac’s arms. The material world. Mundanity. Cormac sighed. There was a bit more business with blowing out candles and ringing the gong to “clear the energies.” The lights came on, and everyone blinked at each other like mice dragged out of their dens.

Beck leaned toward Vane. “Does that mean I have two ghosts?” Her eyes lit up,

excited.

“I really don’t know,” Vane said. “That was just... weird. That really didn’t go the way I expected.”

“It’s all a show,” Monty said, frowning. “That’s what I think.”

Lora said to Vane, “You got a sign, and you just let it go. Why didn’t you follow up? An unexpected ghost and you didn’t follow up?”

Vane tipped up his chin. “I do not command the spirits, I am merely their conduit. Hey, that would make a great clip. Can you film that?”

She held up the camera, found the angle, and Vane repeated the line, standing over the remains of his séance in a lordly manner. “I do not command the spirits...”

Glyn sidled up to Cormac and said softly, “Did you really have to crack your toe at right that moment?”

Cormac looked at him. “Maybe the spirit told me to do it.”

I did not. That was all you!

Some of the old spiritualists insisted that they really could communicate with the spirit world, that they really were passing along messages. But the bells and tricks and sleights of hand were the only way they could convince anyone else that what they could do was real. That was the problem—unless you had some kind of second sight of your own, how would you ever know they were telling the truth?

Cormac had second sight of a certain kind, he supposed. He just didn’t want to share.

Frannie stood, brushing her hands on her jeans; they might have still been trembling a little. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I could use a cup of coffee. Anyone?”

Vane and Lora yes, June yes but decaf, and Monty asked for whiskey. Frannie seemed happy to have a job to occupy her after the small adventure.

Beck approached Cormac, an eager glint in her eyes. Taking him by the arm, she pulled him to the parlor, out of sight and earshot of the others. “Well? What do you think?”

Cormac wasn’t sure how to assess Vane and his skills as a spiritualist. His performance was dramatic, but he didn’t seem to be using the classic tricks. No stunts, no funny noises. When he said he sensed the spirit of a woman who was dead but not dead... well, he wasn’t wrong.

“He puts on a good show. And...” Cormac had to give him credit. “I think he’s onto something. Not sure how good he is really, but he’s got sensitivity.” Not that he was ready to explain how he knew this. He didn’t know any of these people well enough to introduce Amelia to them.

He thought Beck would be happy to get an endorsement, but she tilted her head quizzically. “Then why didn’t he sense Tobias?”

“Maybe Tobias wasn’t talking tonight.”

“But then who’s the woman he mentioned? Do I have two ghosts?” Her voice lifted at this, as if two ghosts meant twice the marketing opportunities.

“Couldn’t say,” Cormac evaded.

“Maybe he’ll lead another séance tomorrow. Since it looks like we’re all going to be

here awhile.” She glanced out the window and sighed.

Beck went off to check on her other guests, leaving him with Glyn, who was leaning against the doorway, looking off toward the kitchen. And eavesdropping, apparently.

“You really believe in ghosts?” Glyn asked.

Cormac ducked his gaze. “Maybe not the way you’re thinking. Glowing shapes knocking things off bookshelves? No. But... there’s something out there.”

He expected Glyn to scoff. Make some wry British quip, quote a little Shakespeare, “more things in heaven and earth...” Instead, he got a faraway look in his eyes. “Yes. I suppose that’s one way of putting it. Something...”

Cormac wondered what the man had seen that he couldn’t explain. But Glyn shook off the expression and glanced at his tumbler, which he’d reclaimed. “Well then, time for a touch-up, I think.” He strolled to the sideboard with the decanters. The level of alcohol in the man’s glass seemed to have hardly diminished. Glyn wasn’t drinking, just holding the glass. A crutch.

Back in the dining room, Vane packed up his paraphernalia while Lora watched the video playback on her camera. Could the video have caught anything? Cormac wouldn’t have thought so, but he wouldn’t put money against it.

They were arguing. “I don’t know what it was,” Vane hissed loud enough to carry. “I need to sleep on it. Try again tomorrow. I don’t know.”

“You usually know.”

He angrily tugged closed the zipper on his case. “Anything?”

Lora continued glaring at the screen. “No. Just... candles. Not even an orb.”

“That’s because orbs are bullshit,” Vane said.

Cormac was liking him better and better.

The medium glanced up and caught Cormac watching. Cormac waved. “Don’t mind me, just heading to the kitchen.” He sauntered through to the next door.

“There’s something off about that guy...” Vane whispered to Lora.

We really ought to tell him about me, Amelia said. He knows there’s something here, centered on you, but because he isn’t expecting it he has no idea what to look for.

Later, Cormac would think about that later.

Monty stormed out of the kitchen just as Cormac reached the door, intending to go in and ask Frannie if she needed any help carrying out the drinks. They’d have crashed into each other if Cormac hadn’t deftly stepped aside. Monty drew up short, startled. Glaring, he seemed to be about to spit some insult. Faced with Cormac’s impassive response, he walked on by. The man was rubbing his chin and wincing.

In the kitchen, Frannie was leaning on the sink, gripping the edge, white knuckled. He almost backed right out again, uncertain what he’d walked into. But Frannie quickly straightened and wiped away a stray tear. Cormac put the pieces together.

Don’t you dare ignore it. Say something. Amelia’s fury boiled. She’d connected the pieces faster than Cormac had.

“Did he do something?” He pointed a thumb over his shoulder, where Monty Connor had fled. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” She chuckled nervously. “He’s just being old school. Thinking he can cross lines, you know? I decked him.”

“Good. But you should tell Beck,” Cormac said. “She’s not going to want him around if he’s being an ass.”

“No, it’s fine. Beck has enough to worry about.” She folded a towel, put it by the sink. Looked around the kitchen again. “But, you know, if you could keep an eye on him for me.”

“Sure thing,” he said, and held the door open for her as she carried out a tray of steaming mugs.

They gathered in the parlor, sipping their drinks and listening to the wind moan. Monty didn’t pick up the guitar again, thank goodness. Vane had replaced the pocket watch on its stand on the mantle, its place of honor. Everyone spread out to their own seats; the parlor was almost not quite big enough for all of them. Small talk went on around Cormac, who tuned it out as he looked out the window over the front drive. The snow was still falling hard and had drifted up to the Jeep’s front grill. The little Miata was nearly covered. He’d meant to just stay overnight, leave in the morning. But no one was leaving in the morning, not with this.

We’ll make the best of it, then. Amelia may not have had a body, but her sigh was evident.

“How?” Cormac murmured. He wasn’t sure he could manage being polite for an entire weekend.

We sleep in, she murmured. We eat a large breakfast. Sit by the fire and read a book. Surely this house has a library somewhere that we haven’t seen yet.

He sensed longing from her. She could have these experiences through him—indirectly, one step removed. Right now, she was thinking what it would be like to have her own body. To smell the old wood and feel the warmth of a wool blanket draped over her lap. He never knew what to say, to try to comfort her in these moments. Only that she needed comfort, which he wasn't very good at delivering. If she had her own body, he might hold her hand. Or scuff his foot on the rug, like he was doing now.

Vane was glancing at him across the room, surreptitiously studying him. Glyn was openly regarding him, as if he were a puzzle. Would it seem strange if Cormac spent the whole day in his room tomorrow?

You'll have to come out to eat sometime.

And Frannie was a good cook. There was that, at least.

Speaking of, Frannie bowed out first, claiming she had an early start, getting breakfast ready for the guests, and fled to her room on the ground floor, behind the parlor. That started the general retreat. Cormac was second. Soon the lights were out, and they'd all climbed the stairs to their rooms.

Cormac's was on the third floor. It was nice, with more of the cozy, Victorian cottage decor. Paintings of flowers on the walls, lace runners on the dresser and nightstand. Overstuffed chair by the window, brocade curtains. A little chilly maybe, like the house's heating system wasn't quite up to the task. The bed was nice. Brass fittings, what seemed to be a handmade quilt. But too soft. Cormac stretched out on it and felt like he was sinking.

The nightstand included a shelf with a handful of books. Including a few by Glyn Farrow, his name glaring along the spine in bold letters. Curious, Cormac picked one out, titled *Fatal Storm*, and opened to a random page to read.

Bryce Stone raced down the icy slope, hot on the heels of the masked gunman, who hesitated, glancing back, his dark eyes glittering malevolently through the holes of his balaclava as he once again raised his weapon—and fired. Bryce reacted instantly, ducking behind a stand of towering pines, feeling the hum of air as the bullet whipped past him...

“I hate this guy,” Cormac muttered. “I can already tell I hate him.”

It’s certainly... exciting?

Bryce Stone was apparently a police detective as well as a former military officer, and occasionally worked as a consultant for British intelligence. A wide enough range of skills and experience to ensure that Glyn could write about his adventures across dozens of books and never be bored. They might even have been good reads, but the problem was Cormac heard the words in Glyn’s voice. He decided he couldn’t stand that voice, and therefore couldn’t stand Bryce Stone, who didn’t even exist.

He shut the book and put it back on the shelf.

Really, I think he’s charming. I’d like to speak with him further. Hear about how Brighton is these days.

“I think he’s gay,” Cormac stated.

She paused a moment—he could just about see the quizzical tilt to her head. So? I said I wanted to speak with him, not have relations.

The bedrooms on this floor shared a bathroom. Cormac went out for one last stop, and as he returned to his room, he heard urgent voices from one floor down. He carefully stepped into the shadowed corner to listen. A man and a woman, speaking in a hushed whisper. Cormac just happened to be in exactly the right spot for the

sound to carry up the stairs.

“Monty Connor, you got five hundred acres of prime development land out of that deal.” That was Beck, her cheerful hostess personality completely replaced by rough tension.

“Not to mention mineral rights.” And that was Monty Connor, sounding smug as ever.

She hesitated. “What do you mean, mineral rights?”

“Turns out there’s a neat little copper deposit smack in the middle of the plot. Worth quite a lot, I reckon. Did Jim not tell you about that, either?”

“Then why do you need the house, too?”

“Don’t need anything, now, do I? But I have to say, it’s a nice house. You did a good job making it pretty.”

“You can’t,” Beck breathed. “You wouldn’t.”

“Already have, darlin’.”

Footsteps stormed off, and a door closed harder than necessary. Monty chuckled softly.

What was that about?

None of their business, was what. Jim had been Beck’s husband. Cormac vaguely remembered him from back when he was a kid, when his father knew the family. The house had been in his family, that was how Beck got hold of it. Sounded now like it

hadn't been that simple. But how did Monty Connor tie in?

He waited another minute before turning back to his room, and spotted movement at the other end of the hall. Glyn Farrow, standing at his open door. He must have heard the argument, too. Cormac met the man's gaze briefly. Glyn pressed his lips together in what might have been an apologetic smile before retreating into his room, shutting his door.

So much for the restful weekend.

Stripped down to sweats and a T-shirt, he shut off the light and climbed into bed. And lay there with his eyes wide open. Maybe he just wasn't used to being comfortable. He punched the fluffy pillows in a futile attempt to flatten them.

Cormac. For God's sake, rest.

He forced himself to take a couple of deep breaths and closed his eyes. Opened them again on a mountain meadow that existed only in his imagination. His and Amelia's.

Winter never came to the forest of his mind. He hadn't really thought about it before, but this mental construct almost always existed in high summer, with wild flowers blooming and a warm sun pouring over it. There had been storms, fog, uncertainty, but never snow. Cormac had to concede: he liked summer.

He lay back in the grass, hands pillowing his head, watching voluminous white clouds against the pristine blue sky. Here, his shoulder didn't ache at all. He could remember what it felt like to not have a gunshot wound, and so that was how he existed here. He listened to birdsong in the trees. Some unfamiliar calls had crept in—English birds, imagined there by Amelia. Made him smile. And this was an odd, uncomfortable feeling. He had income from interesting work, a warm place to sleep, reasons to smile. He might have been happy. Or at least contented. He hardly knew

what to do with the feeling.

Amelia was pacing. She always did this when she had some problem to mull, as if this imagined body's movement was enough to simulate the real thing. They had raised the question of how real this all was—if they imagined touching each other, and they felt the contact, was it real or imagined? And then they shied away from it. It was philosophy, and had no answer.

Real or not, she said that pacing helped her think. “Just because there's a story about a ghost does not mean that there really is a ghost.” Hesitating, she looked at him. He was not being helpful. She was about to point out that he was not being helpful.

“But,” he prompted.

Her expression pursed thoughtfully. “One must consider what is meant by the phrase ‘haunted house’ to begin with. There are the stories, cursed spectral forms gliding down the hallways, moaning and banging on doors and all that. Hampton Court Palace is supposed to be littered with ghosts. Catherine Howard's is said to run screaming down the gallery behind the chapel. But with so many tourists tromping through does anyone ever see them? Then there's the haunting of an old church that has seen services within its walls for a thousand years. Where all those prayers have seeped into the stone and given the building some weight. Some aura. Is that a haunting?”

Cormac generally left the existential questions to her. He was the muscle. She sighed, and here, in their minds, that finally had some meaning: her lips parted, her chest fell with the exhaled breath. He liked watching her.

“This house has been so remodeled, so done over, any aura it might have carried from its earlier days is lost, I fear,” she said. “Who's to say if any spirits linger?”

“You?” Cormac suggested. “Vane felt you because you were sitting right there. None of his séances are going to work as long as you’re there. You drown everything out.” Which meant Vane really was psychic. How about that?

“I might almost be insulted by that.” She crossed her arms, quirked her lips wryly.

Here, she had a body. Here, he could take her hand. “How about we worry about it in the morning? Maybe we can talk to him and let him know what went wrong.”

She settled onto the grass next to him, and he did it, took hold of her hand possessively and pressed it to his chest, just as he might have done if they were in that real too-soft bed together. Finally, she settled next to him, her head on his shoulder, and he could sleep.

The light of dawn woke him just before Frannie’s scream did, when she walked into the kitchen and discovered Monty Connor’s body.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:30 am

After the awkward gathering around the body, they fled to the dining room, and Frannie managed to bring out a pot of coffee and some day-old pastries. She didn't want to be in the kitchen alone with the body; Glyn stayed with her.

Cormac stood against the wall in a corner. The others kept their distance, which was normally how he liked it. But they all kept looking at him. Murdered body in the house, convicted felon standing right there. He had to figure out how to handle this.

Amelia?

She'd gone quiet. Very quiet, so that not even her presence lingered at the back of his mind, where he could almost always find her. His heart rate spiked, and sweat broke out on the back of his neck. Last summer, she'd been captured by a magician. He'd gone a few days without her constant presence and discovered that he needed her. If she vanished again, if the séance had somehow hurt her... Amelia... Amelia!

I'm here.

He tried not to let his relief show. He wouldn't be able to explain it, so he crossed his arms and kept his expression cold.

This has happened to me before.

It was how she had died, before. She'd been discovered kneeling next to the body of a young woman who'd been viciously murdered by a demon. Amelia had only been trying to learn what happened, but the authorities found her, surrounded by her arcane tools, and jumped to the most sensational conclusion. Amelia had been hanged for it.

Her spirit lived on; the trauma remained.

We're going to be fine.

How?

He didn't know.

The cell connection was still down, but the house had a land line. In the foyer, Beck finally got through to the police and was explaining the situation in a jumble. Her half of the conversation was maddening. "What do you mean... well yes, I know there's a blizzard... yes... are you sure? But what are we supposed to do? Okay... okay, fine." By her tone, things were clearly not fine.

The police were not coming, at least not right away. Cormac was partly relieved. He didn't want to talk to the police right now.

Beck came back in, looking despondent. "Snow's supposed to taper off this afternoon, but they're not going to get anyone out here until tomorrow morning."

June let out a sob. There were other general gasps of consternation.

"Am I going to have to cook with that in my kitchen?" Frannie exclaimed.

"That is my husband." June glared at her.

"No, of course not," Beck said quickly. "The sheriff says we can move him and clean up. Just... we need to take pictures if we can."

"Right," Glyn said. "Best take care of it, then. Ms. Mirelli, if we could trouble you for the use of your camera? And Mr. Bennett, you and I could do the heavy lifting, as it

were.”

“You trust me?” Cormac said pointedly. “The convicted murderer?”

“Convicted manslaughterer, you said.” The author’s smile had acid in it. “I’ll keep an eye on you.”

Manslaughterer? That’s not even a word.

Lora ran back to her room to retrieve her camera. They were all still in their night clothes, flannel pajamas and robes. Except for Glyn, who had somehow managed to dress in trousers and a clean shirt before appearing, even amidst all the excitement.

Cormac excused himself to go get dressed, and half expected Glyn to complain, but he didn’t.

We’ve got to figure out what happened, Cormac.

Yes, before everyone here decided on some story starring himself.

They returned to the kitchen door, now dressed in their usual. Glyn reached for the camera, but Lora pulled it close. “I’ll do it myself if that’s all right.”

“Sure you’re up for it?” Glyn asked.

She scowled. “Don’t be patronizing.”

The body lay right where they left it, of course, still jarring, sprawled on the prep table like an ill-prepared slab of meat. And there was Cormac’s appetite gone. Staring with obvious fascination, Lora started taking pictures, moving around the body, finding different angles, looking down, kneeling and looking up.

“Watch the blood,” Cormac told her. Gasping, she stepped back from the dark, sticky pool.

“I hope you’re not planning on posting any of those on your Insta-whatsit,” Glyn said.

“Of course not,” she said.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t kill someone just to get a flashy online story about it,” he added.

“What?”

Cormac glared. “You just going to go around accusing everybody?”

He shrugged, clearly unapologetic. “Just thinking of possible motives. Before last night, none of us knew Monty except for June and Beck. Why would anyone want to kill him? Turns out I can think of all kinds of reasons.”

“So what’s yours?” Cormac asked.

Lora looked back and forth between them, waiting. Glyn put his hand thoughtfully on his chin. “Maybe I’m a professional hit man, and Monty got on the wrong side of some bad people.”

That’s just fanciful, Amelia said with a huff.

Fanciful was all they had right now. “Sounds like one of your books.”

“Oh, you’ve read me? I’m flattered.”

Cormac nodded at the body. “We should probably turn him over.”

A door in the kitchen led to a detached carriage house turned garage, where Beck told him he could find a tarp—and where they could move the body until the coroner could get here. The path there was sheltered and had only a foot of snow instead of four-foot drifts. The stretch was pristine when Cormac went out into it. No one had come into the house this way. He cleared a path by stomping it flat, and found the tarp in the garage, along with two pairs of gardening gloves, stiff with cold but clean. When Cormac offered Glyn the second pair, the man nodded with approval.

“It’s almost as if you’ve done this sort of thing before,” Glyn observed.

“Will you stop.”

Monty Connor was a big man and there wasn’t a lot of room to maneuver. They laid the tarp on the counter, and only then started to shift him, to roll him onto it. The counter was also covered in blood; the entire front of the man’s shirt was soaked and growing sour.

“Oh, my God,” Lora murmured, continuing to snap pictures, which was annoying, but better too many than not enough.

Glyn’s expression never changed. He seemed unbothered by the gruesome job. Then again, Cormac’s expression never changed either. He really had moved blood-soaked bodies before; he was starting to wonder about Glyn.

“Hm, I thought the knife might still be under him, but I’m not seeing anything,” Glyn said.

“Then where is it?”

“If it were me, I would have gotten rid of it,” Glyn said.

“Dump it in a snowdrift outside, let fresh snow cover it up, and no one would find it till spring,” Cormac added.

“Indeed.” Glyn nodded appreciatively.

“You guys are freaking me out.” Lora took pictures of the bloody table, the ponderous body.

They worked the body onto the tarp. Monty Connor lay splayed out, eyes half-lidded, glassy.

“And... there we are. See that?” With the tip of his gloved finger Glyn drew apart a tear in Monty’s shirt, a clean slice an inch or so long right below the man’s heart. Underneath the fabric, a similar tear in his undershirt, once white but now a vivid red. And under that, the wound. A gap in the skin, blood clotted around the edges. “A clean stab, a good sharp knife. Went straight in and out, up under the ribs. He’d have tipped right over. Lora, make sure you get some pictures.”

“You see this sort of thing a lot?” Cormac couldn’t help but ask.

Glyn grinned. “We’re just going to keep asking each other that sort of question, aren’t we?”

Lora dutifully took photos but her face was looking a little drained and clammy. “It doesn’t even seem real,” she said. “I got my start in true-crime podcasting. But this is nothing like the pictures. It’s so much more... sticky.”

Cormac said, “Maybe you should go sit down.”

“Yeah. Just... I want to find out how this happened.”

“We will,” Glyn said, with confidence.

Lora fled to the next room.

“All right,” Glyn said. “Count of three, we lower him to the floor?”

Cormac nodded and took up two corners of the tarp. Glyn took the other two, and they lifted. Cormac winced and nearly dropped his side, but managed to pause with most of the body’s weight still on the counter.

“Everything all right?”

“Hurt my shoulder last summer. Still isn’t quite right.” No need to give Glyn even more to think about by telling him it was a gunshot that had hurt him.

“Should I ask someone else?”

“No, I’m fine.” He just needed reminding that this was going to hurt. Setting his grip more firmly, he nodded.

They got Monty to the floor, opened the door, and managed to maneuver their load through the kitchen, outside and to the garage. The wind had stopped; a few thin flakes were still falling from a uniformly gray sky. Glyn squinted into the storm with something like resignation.

A pickup truck was parked in the garage, and they lifted Monty into its bed, to keep it off the ground and away from vermin. They wrapped him up tight in the tarp, making sure all the corners were tucked in, all parts covered.

“It’s cold enough out here to store a body, at least,” Glyn said. He stepped back, taking one last look over the wrapped corpse. Folded his hands as if saying a prayer.

As they walked back to the house, Cormac felt the need to say, “I didn’t do it.”

“Everyone in the house is going to say that,” Glyn said. “Someone will be lying.”

“What about you?”

“Me?” Glyn glanced at him over his shoulder. Grinned. “Of course I didn’t do it. Why would I lie?”

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As it happened, Glyn also knew a lot about cleaning up blood. He took point, while gently talking Beck through soaking up the spilled blood, wiping the table and floor down with bleach, while wearing thick rubber dishwashing gloves. Frannie had nervously volunteered to help, but Beck overruled her. She'd been through enough, their host insisted. Cormac held open the garbage bag that the bleached and bloodied rags went into.

"You'll need to get someone in here to do a thorough cleaning, but we'll be able to use the kitchen for now," Glyn assured her.

"Thank God you're here," Beck said. "I don't know what I'd have done without you."

"Mr. Bennett would have been a help, I think." Glyn arched a brow at him.

Cormac tried to ignore the guy. Amelia? he prompted. She was still being very quiet, retreating to as small a space in his mind as she ever had. He worried, and he couldn't close his eyes and try to see her in their shared meadow. Not when he needed to keep track of what was happening here.

Frannie set up a more substantial buffet of breakfast items in the dining room, but no one was much hungry. Even the coffee smelled uninteresting.

Tea, Amelia murmured. Tea makes everything better.

So he drank a cup of tea for her, letting its warmth settle him.

Vane, his coffee cup abandoned on an end table, started pacing, gesturing broadly. “So, are we all just going to sit here staring at each other until the snow stops and the cops come?”

“I don’t think I want to let any of you out of my sight,” Beck said. “So yes, I think we should all just sit here.”

“None of us knew the guy, why would anyone want to kill him?” Lora said. She’d settled in an armchair, hugging herself. Vane came over and rested a hand on her shoulder.

“He wasn’t very likeable,” Frannie said quietly. Lora looked sharply at her, and Glyn raised a questioning brow. Cormac expected June to shoot back with a grief-stricken and defensive reply, but she didn’t, continuing to knead a handkerchief.

“What is it they do on TV?” Frannie said. “Do we know what time it happened? Then we find out where everyone was then.”

“Maybe it was the ghost,” Lora said. “That unknown spirit in the séance.”

They’re seriously accusing me? I can’t go through this again.

Glyn chuckled. “That would make a good story for your podcast, wouldn’t it? Frannie has the right idea, though. The lights went out about 11:30. The blood was already cool when Frannie went into the kitchen, when was it, around 7? So let’s say Monty was dead by 4.”

“You ask us where we were between 11:30 and 4, we’re just going to say ‘asleep,’” Vane said.

“Well, you see, I have to confess I have a terrible habit of eavesdropping. Can’t seem

to keep my nose out of it. I'd apologize, but it's often so useful."

Cormac tried to remember when he'd gone out to the bathroom and seen Glyn standing on the other end of the hall, after the argument between Beck and Monty. About midnight?

What if Monty hadn't gone back to his room after? And what if Glyn hadn't, either? He tried to remember how many doors he had heard closing. Was it just the one?

"So you were awake and out of your room after midnight, is what you're saying?" Cormac countered.

"Touché, sir. But then so was nearly everyone else. Mr. Vane left his room as well, if I'm not mistaken."

"Just Vane," he said testily. "And yes, I left my room. Just getting my toothbrush from the bathroom. Is that allowed?"

"Pardon me for being indelicate," Glyn said, "But you weren't near the bathroom. You went to Ms. Mirelli's room, yes?"

Beck huffed. "If you'd wanted to stay together I could have given you one of the queen-size rooms—"

"We're not—" Lora started, then looked away. Because Vane's gaze was downcast, and they clearly were. "We're not public about it," she finally said.

"We'd lose credibility," Vane said. "People wouldn't take the cross-promotion between our brands seriously if they knew we were together." He gave Lora a wan smile, which she returned. Clearly, there were feelings.

It's... adorable.

“Or you’re just waiting for the right moment to monetize the romance?” Glyn said. Both of them sat up in outrage, but Glyn waved them back before they could say anything. “At any rate, it seems that a number of us were up and about in the night. Beck and Monty argued at the top of the stairs at about midnight... June, when did Monty return to your room, and when did he leave again?”

“I... I don’t know. He said he was going to get a nightcap, and I went to bed. I’m a sound sleeper, I wouldn’t have heard him come back in. That scream woke me up, and... and that’s when I realized he’d never come to bed last night.” She let out a dramatic, cut-off sob and kneaded the handkerchief even more forcefully.

Cormac turned to Frannie. “Your room’s right next to the kitchen. You must have heard something.”

Unless she’s the murderer. A little revenge for Monty’s earlier transgression?

Was Cormac the only one who knew about that? Frannie was the last person here he’d peg as being capable of murder.

“I didn’t.” She sounded defensive. “I wear earplugs, because of the way the wind hits that side of the house. It’s loud. So I wouldn’t have heard anything.”

Convenient. Everyone in the room was thinking it.

Amelia had a spell. At least, she had once used a spell that could raise the dead. Not really raise the dead—recall their soul for a moment, to ask them questions. The knife had gone through Monty’s chest—he must have seen who his killer was.

That spell is so very difficult, Amelia said, as soon as Cormac thought of it. I’ve only

ever attempted it immediately after death, and even then... it's uncertain any answers would be forthcoming. Monty's been dead for hours.

It might be worth trying, to get some kind of answer.

She hesitated. We would have to explain the ritual to the others. Keep them out of the way while I draw the appropriate symbols. I'm not sure they would let us.

Even if it meant catching a murderer?

It would only increase their suspicion of you.

Glyn was still on his tear. "Mrs. Connor, I know this is difficult, but I wondered if you could go through your husband's things? Just to see if it will give us some idea that might indicate why this happened."

"I don't know, I can't think of anything at all—"

"It can't hurt to take a look."

"All right... just give me a minute to straighten up." June rushed up the stairs. Glyn exchanged a look with Beck, and the pair followed.

Cormac desperately wanted to chase after them. Dig through Monty's things himself, like he was some kind of TV detective. Maybe the room wasn't the only place to look. He set down the mug of tea and paced to the foyer, to the coat tree in the corner, mounded with all their coats and wraps.

He didn't have to work to figure out which coat was Monty's: the big, tan cowboy duster that looked like no drop of mud had ever come near it. Carefully moving aside the coats piled around it, Cormac felt along the side pockets for... he wasn't sure

what. A figurative smoking gun. Maybe Monty was blackmailing someone. Maybe he stole something. Maybe he pissed off one too many folk singers.

In the inside pocket of the coat, he felt the hard edge of an envelope, stuffed with folded paper. Crinkling, as he put pressure on it. It would just take a second for him to look at it—

Voices traveled down the stairs. Beck, June, and Glyn. Cormac drew away from the coat tree and waited by the banister. They hesitated on the landing when they saw Cormac standing there.

“Find anything good?” he asked.

“The Connors pack a lot of luggage for a weekend,” Glyn said.

June shrugged. “Monty liked his shirts folded just so. Takes up space. I... don’t even know what I’m going to do with all his things now.”

“You don’t need to worry about it, hon,” Beck assured her. “Take all the time you need.”

June Connor still seemed stunned. She shook her head vaguely, as if the reality of the situation was just now settling on her. “If he had enemies, I’m sure I don’t know. If he was keeping things from me—how would I ever know?”

“Why don’t you come sit by the fire and rest for now,” Glyn said kindly, guiding her into the parlor and steering her toward one of the sofas and not the big chair where Monty had been sitting the night before. His guitar was still propped against the wall.

Beck lingered near Cormac, crossing her arms and sighing. “It’s the saddest thing,” she said. “All the bags unpacked, his clothes everywhere, and she couldn’t seem to

bring herself to touch any of it.”

“You want to explain what the argument with Monty was about?” he asked.

Her eyes widened. “I didn’t kill him, I would never—”

“I’m just trying to understand.”

“Monty and Jim did a handshake deal on that big parcel of land, working off hundred-year-old deeds. Then Monty does a mineral survey and bingo, there’s a deposit. And I don’t get anything. Now, if he bought the land knowing about the mineral rights and didn’t disclose them, I could sue. I told him I would... and then he claimed the parcel he bought includes the land the house is on. He’d countersue, get the house, and I’d be skunked.”

“So you have a motive,” Cormac said wryly.

“With Monty dead, the pressure’s off. Oh Cormac, what am I going to do?”

Did she actually do it? Cormac didn’t feel like asking that bluntly. “Nothing, for now. Just maybe don’t say any of this to Glyn.”

“Oh, he already knows. That guy doesn’t miss anything.”

“Why’d you invite him, anyway?”

“Because he doesn’t miss anything.” She quirked a smile.

From the parlor, raised voices carried in a sudden argument. Beck went to intervene, and Cormac glanced back at the coat tree. He’d have to go digging for those papers later.

“I don’t care about the optics,” Vane said. He faced off with Lora in the middle of the room.

“No, I forbid it!” June countered. “Monty was right, you’re Satanic!”

“Seriously?” Lora exclaimed at her, then turned back to Vane. “Look, trying to summon spirits that have been dead for a hundred years is one thing, but I don’t think it’ll play very well trying to exploit a death that isn’t even a day old—”

“I don’t want to exploit anything, I just want to learn what really happened.”

Beck put her hands on her hips. “What are you yelling about in here?”

Flustered, June said, “Beck, you can’t let them do this, it’s... bohemian.”

“Bohemian? What are you talking about?”

Cormac looked to Glyn for an explanation.

Wearing a wry, unperturbed smile, Glyn said, “Mr. Vane is going to perform another séance. To try to speak to the spirit of Monty Connor.”

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Some many years previous...

To meet the most interesting people, one had only to alter one's setting. This wasn't the primary reason Lady Amelia Parker decided to travel the Nile by river boat, but it was certainly a benefit.

Most of the passengers were British or European, though an American couple and a gentleman from India were also present. All were wealthy enough to travel, of course, but some definitely appeared to be rather better off. The number of trunks each traveler brought seemed to be an accurate indication of status. The fine Englishwoman traveling with her son might as well have brought an entire estate with her. The son, set to managing the luggage—or rather managing the valet who had been brought along to manage the luggage—seemed to be eternally grumbling about the situation, but continued to accede to the woman's wishes in everything. By contrast, a young, simply dressed French couple seemed to have but one case between them, and gave the impression that they had scrimped and saved to be able to make the journey. The experience was all, and not the accoutrements. Amelia understood.

As a young woman traveling alone, Amelia attracted attention among the passengers. She did not reveal her own rank as minor aristocracy, to avoid tedious conversations. Nevertheless, she became the subject of much curiosity. From the women, she received interest and varying degrees of shock. One girl of about twelve decided to follow her everywhere and ask questions until her mother demanded her daughter to keep away from that woman. From the men—deep protective impulses. Was there anything they could do for her? She need only ask. They would leap to her aid, instantly, with great enthusiasm. Oppressive chivalry.

She managed to have normal conversations with a dapper gentleman from Belgium who was willing to speak with her about archeology and hieroglyphics, and not suggest that she must be in desperate need of assistance. She made sure to sit at his table for supper.

She had her own agenda. She spoke to the dining room attendants, the housekeeping staff, and the crew of the Nile Dream. What was it like growing up in Egypt? What stories did their grandparents tell? What meaning did the ancient monuments have for them in their modern lives? They seemed confused at her interest at first, but were kind.

Amelia was not here for Egyptian linen and photographs with the pyramids, camel rides and quaint marketplaces. She was here for Egyptian magic. Ancient lore. The secrets of the pharaohs and their high priests. The river cruise was meant for tourists, but it was also the best way for her to reach the temple complex at Luxor. What would she find there? She wasn't entirely sure but she planned to enjoy the quest.

Meanwhile, she had to deal with days of travel and a series of dull suppers during which she gave the blandest answers possible to the most obvious questions, spoke of other travels only in passing, and was polite rather than interested.

Then one morning, a body was discovered in the forward parlor. The fine Englishwoman's put-upon son was found sitting in a chair with a shot from a small-caliber pistol through his chest. Most of the passengers went into a series of small panics. The doctor on staff determined that the shot could not have been self-inflicted because of various details—no powder burns, wrong angle. The captain confined all to their quarters, and Amelia tried not to be annoyed that her trip to Luxor might be delayed. After all, a man had died and the mother was inconsolable.

Amelia gave an accounting of her whereabouts but seemed to have no suspicions directed toward her. The Belgian gentleman was on hand for all the interrogations.

He was calm but asked such pointed questions.

As far as the conventional investigation went, Amelia could do little to help. But she acquired the blood-spattered handkerchief that had been in the victim's pocket—his belongings had been put in a box on the doctor's desk and left unsupervised—and knew several good scrying spells. What information the mundane world could not disclose, perhaps the spirit realm would reveal. Closed in her cabin, she lit candles and made the appropriate circles and marks on the floor with chalk. Each symbol represented one of the people involved in the case. The Belgian gentleman, the wealthy Englishwoman, the valet, the American couple from Boston who had been next door, the French couple who had been on the deck below, and so on. She made sure the air was still and summoned whatever trace of spirit remained on the handkerchief to give a sign. Waited to discern some meaning in the patterns of smoke rising from the tin of burning incense.

The ancient Egyptians believed they held the secrets of the afterlife. That by certain processes they could send their elite to life everlasting in the next world. Amelia was drawn to these secrets, to the vast mystery of Shakespeare's Undiscovered Country. What if one could return? Or at least send a message. If the victim could tell who had killed him...

Nothing. The smoke did not lean purposefully toward any of the markings, thereby indicating a connection, some mortal thread of doom. She had asked a question of this solid piece of matter; it was not required to give her an answer.

While the handkerchief revealed no otherworldly information, it did have a monogram, initials embroidered in one corner. Not the victim's or his mother's. Rather, Amelia believed this handkerchief belonged to the woman from Boston.

This seemed important and she wondered why no one had had searched the victim's pockets before this. Carefully and secretly, she returned the handkerchief, hoping that

no one saw her and would try to implicate her in the crime.

The handkerchief was discovered and several alibis fell apart as the truth came out. In fact, the victim and the woman from Boston had arranged their itineraries to put them both on this cruise, and they planned to depart together before its end, from one of the other ports. They had carefully pretended that they did not know each other for days now, all the while waiting for the chance to escape together, after a long and secret affair. The woman had ruthlessly hidden her grief at her lover's death for days. Now, both the woman and her husband fell weeping, for entirely different reasons.

The victim's mother discovered his intention to abandon her. The person among them who had drawn the least suspicion because she had seemed like the last person to commit a murder was the one who had pulled the trigger of the gun provided her by her valet, who was also her lover. The son had told his mother that he would fire the man and have her committed to an institution for madness. So she took action. Both of them, the most dignified, respectable passengers on the ship, were led away by the authorities at the next port.

There was a lesson here.

The remaining days on the cruise felt muted and somber. The boat might not have been literally haunted, but the shadow of what had happened lingered. The stewards could not quite get all the blood up off the spot of the carpet where the man had died. They all avoided walking there, if they could.

Amelia reached Luxor at last. From a street vendor, she purchased some amulets shaped like little shabtis, figurines made of blue glaze, which if not authentic were at least charming. She wandered the ruins as long as she could. She could have spent weeks there, copying inscriptions and studying the inscrutable faces of dead pharaohs. She only had two days and tried to make the most of them.

The Belgian gentleman found her standing still, looking up at a wall full of writing, rows of hieroglyphs and images of kings etched into the stone. If she had a hundred years she would not understand it all. Certainly, the meaning of individual images could be deciphered. But the thoughts that went into composing the entire piece? The purpose felt by those who made this, imperfectly interpreted all these millennia later? One could never reach back like that.

“Mademoiselle, you seem pensive,” he observed. He somehow managed to keep his pale suit crisp and clean, even in the dust and heat. “I hope the unfortunate events on this journey have not made you disinclined to travel?”

“Oh no, not at all. I just...” She sighed, because she didn’t know what to say. Wasn’t sure she could even explain. She would sound maudlin. “I just wonder what they were thinking, is all. Why... people do what they do.”

“It is a mystery greater than the secrets of the ancients,” he agreed.

They stood together and studied the record of the ages.

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Beck and Frannie voted in favor of the new séance. Glyn expressed no opinion but regarded the situation with the air of a man watching the creek rise.

Amelia was disturbed. We can't let him carry on with this, not without telling him why the last one went wrong.

Cormac didn't trust any of these people enough to tell them about Amelia.

We need to tell him because if he knows, he can work around it, and might actually be able to contact Monty Connor's spirit.

Amelia believed in Vane, anyway. Maybe the guy could do it. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to try. And maybe a séance would keep everyone distracted enough for a little while to not keep pacing around the house like caged raccoons.

At some point, everyone managed to dress for the day, but they watched each other travel up and down the stairs with suspicion, as if no one wanted to let anyone else out of their sight. The others gave Cormac a wide berth, which he normally wouldn't notice, much less mind. But it was annoying, how easily they all assumed he'd done the deed.

We really do seem to encounter more than our fair share of murdered bodies.

Cormac didn't like thinking about it. He'd taken the number of dead bodies in his life for granted until recently. Might be nice, being the kind of person murders didn't happen around.

“Don’t you have to do a séance at night?” Frannie asked.

“That’s mostly for atmosphere.” Vane had retrieved his bag and was setting up in the dining room. The sense of mystery and showmanship he’d evoked the night before was gone. Now, he was practical and workmanlike, setting up the cloth and candles—plain white tapers this time, a dozen of them across the table. “Darkness helps—can you close the curtains, shut out the light as much as possible?” Frannie got to work doing so, both in the dining room and the parlor.

Cormac approached, trying to be casual and nonthreatening. He wasn’t very good at it. “I need to talk to you.”

Vane actually flinched back. “What? Why... what do you want?” He glanced at the doorway, prepared to bolt.

Like he was holding him up at a liquor store or something. “You think I have a garrote in my pocket? That I did in Connor and you’re next? Look, I know what happened during the séance yesterday. I know about the spirit you sensed.”

Vane grabbed his arm and drew him into the kitchen. “What?” he asked when the door was closed. “That was real? I wasn’t imagining it?”

Cormac wasn’t quite sure how to explain it. He could never make their situation sound reasonable.

“Well?” Vane urged.

“She’s a spirit... she was hanged a little over a hundred years ago and now she lives in my head... sort of.” Vane stared blankly. Yeah, this wasn’t in any of the books. “Maybe I’d better let Amelia explain.”

“Amelia?”

Cormac took a breath and stepped to the back of his own mind, letting Amelia slip forward, to occupy nerves and flesh. This had gotten easier over time, but it didn’t make the sensation of being simultaneously awake and sedated any stranger. Especially when she started speaking. His voice, her words.

“Yes, hello. Here we are then. My name is Amelia Parker, and over a hundred years ago I was wrongfully executed for a murder I did not commit. Not a murderer, but murdered, as you said last night. Delightfully accurate, I must say. I have been Mr. Bennett’s companion for a number of years now, since his time in the same prison where I... well, now, that’s quite a long story and not relevant. You called for a spirit to make its presence known, and you sensed me. I thought you should know before you attempt another séance and confront the same obstacle. Now, do you have any questions?”

The man stared. His mouth worked, as if he meant to say something, but the words didn’t come. Cormac—Amelia—waited expectantly.

“This... isn’t a trick?” Vane asked weakly.

“I can understand why you might think so, which is why we don’t advertise our... situation.”

“How... is it outright possession, or some kind of spirit transference?” His brow furrowed. Cormac could almost see the neurons firing behind his eyes, trying to work it out.

Amelia felt a thrill at meeting someone she could talk shop with. “Spirit transference of a kind, yes. Beyond that I’m unwilling to divulge details. Trade secret and all, you know how magicians are. I wasn’t ready to die yet. So... I didn’t.”

Vane finally seemed to collect himself, straightening with a little shiver. “Thank you for revealing yourself. I’m honored. So... Cormac didn’t do it, is what you’re saying? Or is this one of those situations where you don’t remember what he does and he doesn’t remember—”

“I’m right here, I remember everything, and no I didn’t,” Cormac said, and Vane once again flinched back, because it might have been the same voice but it was clear that Cormac had regained control.

“That is so weird,” Vane murmured.

“That’s kind of hilarious, coming from you.”

“So, you can channel her, just like that?”

“She needed a body, I needed to get out of jail. We came to an arrangement.”

You make it sound so mercenary.

Well, what else were they but mercenaries? She chuckled.

Suddenly, Vane reached out to touch his arm and it was Cormac’s turn to flinch. “Can you help? I can sense spirits sometimes, and I can usually fudge the difference. But this... solving a murder. Anything you can do.” His shrug conveyed helplessness.

“Amelia’s a magician. She isn’t psychic—”

I’ll do whatever I can.

“But she’ll try,” Cormac said, hedging. Vane’s expression brightened; he seemed so relieved. “You’ll need a focus. Something that belonged to Monty. His guitar,

maybe.”

“Of course. Perfect.” He raced out of the kitchen.

Cormac’s shoulders sagged. “I thought this weekend was supposed to be a vacation,” he muttered.

Let’s just concentrate on keeping you out of prison, shall we?

He left the kitchen, to see Vane striding into the dining room with Monty’s guitar, and June rushing after him.

“No! I won’t allow it! You put that down!” she said.

“I need something important that belonged to him, this is the best we’ve got.”

“This is a travesty—”

Lora stepped next to her and gently turned her aside while Vane arranged the guitar in the center of the table. “Mrs. Connor, please. Vane’s going to do this with or without your cooperation. Wouldn’t you rather be here and know what’s happening than sit it out and wonder? We need you for this. If Monty wants to speak to anyone, he’ll speak to you.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” June seemed torn, glaring with contempt at the new séance Vane was arranging, and looking at the others, pleading. “Beck?”

“I think he should try, hon. It can’t hurt, can it?”

“Not entirely sure that’s true,” Glyn murmured.

It would hurt whoever was the murderer, assuming the séance revealed anything.

“Glyn,” June said. “Is there anything else we ought to be doing?”

“Search all the rooms. See who argues against it the most. I still want to know where that knife went.”

Cormac didn’t repeat what he suspected: that the knife was outside, under a snowdrift, and wouldn’t reemerge until spring.

“I’m ready,” Vane said. “And I could really use all your help. I’m assuming we all want to know what happened.”

“All of us except the murderer,” Cormac said. Once again, they glanced suspiciously at him—but he wasn’t arguing against the séance. A point in his favor?

They gathered around the table.

The room was surprisingly dark with the curtains drawn. This time, the plain candles glowed with normal yellow flames. The blond wood of the guitar, resting in the middle of the table, gleamed buttery in the light.

Lora started setting up her video camera, but Vane put a hand on her arm. “Not now.”

She put the camera away. Just a séance, then. No show this time.

As they sat around the table, they were aware of the gap. The empty chair where Monty had sat the night before. Glyn got up to pull the chair away, but Vane said, “No, leave it. It’s an invitation.”

The gap remained. No moaning wind outside this time, at least. The stillness was

almost worse. The candle flames barely flickered. Vane lit incense, and the air's smell turned spicy.

“Friends, I have called you here to find answers. To seek what contact we may find beyond the veil.” His voice was somber and imploring. No banging fists, no ringing gongs. “Together, I believe we can call the spirits to us—and learn the truth of what happened here. Settle yourselves, please. Put away your grief and fear, and come with me on the journey ahead. Now, join hands.”

June and Beck had to reach across the gap where Monty had been. They did so nervously, as if the space was actually—or might soon be—occupied. Frannie was on Cormac's right again, and this time seemed reluctant to hold his hand, drawing away even as she reached out. On his other side, Glyn held on like he expected Cormac to try to flee.

Steady there. Focus on the task at hand.

Breathe. Open his mind. Let Amelia step forward.

Vane had placed Cormac across from him, so the two could look directly at one another. Their gazes met, and Cormac—Amelia—nodded.

Now you see me, Vane, don't you? Now, step past me. I'm just another soul sitting at the table. You are searching for someone else.

Vane flashed a thin, satisfied smile. Whatever she had done to put herself outside his awareness must have worked. Maybe it was like filtering white noise from a recording.

“If any spirits, any visitors from alternate planes linger here, we greet you and call on you to join us.”

A spike of worry came from Amelia: with such a broad invitation, one never knew what might decide to show up. The sense of anticipation grew heavy. Frannie's hand was trembling.

"The veil has grown thin," Vane murmured. "I feel a presence drawing close. Spirit... we greet you. If you are willing to speak to us, make a sign."

One of the candles winked out.

June bit off a scream; Frannie gasped. Glyn leaned in, his gaze narrow and searching. There was no draft, no puff of air. The candle itself hadn't changed. Vane didn't appear to be manipulating anything, but then he wouldn't.

Vane maintained his calm. "We have received a sign. Welcome to our circle, spirit. May you find comfort here. We humbly ask you to share your secrets, in the manner you've chosen to communicate. Did your life end in this house? I beg you, give us a sign."

A second candle went out. With a dozen others still lit, the room's brightness didn't dim, but the shadows seemed to deepen.

Then the air turned cold. Gooseflesh crawled up Cormac's arms, and his breath fogged. Even Amelia's presence shivered. This was the sharp, bone-stabbing chill of a winter night in the mountains. If they'd gone out to the porch last night, this was what they'd have felt.

It felt like death.

"Spirit," Vane murmured. "Were you murdered?"

The flames of every candle wavered, shuddered, and stayed lit. And this was the

problem with trying to speak to spirits with signs and symbols: ambiguity.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Beck asked in a strained voice.

Vane met Cormac’s gaze across the table and seemed uncertain what to do next.

Cormac—Amelia, rather—said, “You died in winter. You died in cold.”

A third candle went out, and the hair on the back of Cormac’s neck stood up.

“Am I speaking to Monty Connor?” Vane asked eagerly. Too eagerly, Amelia thought. He would scare off whatever was in the room with them.

The candles didn’t waver. No change, no answer.

“Monty would have hated this, he’d never take part in this,” June hissed. “It’s all bunk.”

“Shh!” Lora hissed at her.

Vane was undeterred. “Spirit, we feel your presence. The cold haunts this place, haunts your death. Was your passing from the material plane recent?”

No change.

We’re not speaking to Monty.

That seemed clear, and Cormac wondered if June had the right of it: Monty would never have put up with this. He wouldn’t do anything Vane asked him to.

“In the past, then.” Vane could be forgiven for sounding disappointed. Imagine,

solving a murder through a séance? Not tonight, apparently. “Fifty years ago? A hundred years ago?”

Confusion. The candles flickered, but this time the movement seemed in time with the breathing of those seated around the table. The normal wavering of candle flames.

Vane kept trying. “Did you die before your time? Was your death violent? What is your connection to this place?” Wincing, he shook his head. That wasn’t a yes-no question.

The cold continued. Next to Cormac, Frannie was shivering.

Murdered, but not...

Amelia, speaking through Cormac, asked, “Are you Tobias Wright?”

All the candles went out. The room went totally dark.

A woman screamed, and there was scrambling as chairs pushed back from the table. Something fell over, maybe one of the candles. Suddenly, with a shushing of fabric, one of the curtains swept open to reveal the blinding glare of snow in daylight. Everybody winced and turned away.

Glyn stood at the window, hand on the curtain. “Well, Beck. I think your house is haunted.”

“And we don’t have it on video,” Lora said despairingly. “How could we not have it on video?”

“Wouldn’t matter,” Vane said. “People would still say it was a trick.”

“What about Monty?” June demanded. “Where’s Monty? If you can call up spirits why not Monty?”

“Maybe he didn’t have a reason to stick around,” Cormac said.

Beck looked at him. “Not even to talk to his own wife?”

It was Tobias Wright’s spirit, I know it... but there’s something about it I’m missing, another part of the mystery...

Across the table, Vane sat with his hands steeped before his face, his eyes closed. Maybe shivering, just a bit.

“Vane?” Lora prompted.

The psychic sighed. “We could try again, maybe after dark—”

“This is all theater,” Glyn said suddenly. “You could summon the ghost of Sherlock Holmes himself and it wouldn’t bring us any closer to learning what happened to Monty Connor and which of us is the murderer.”

“Maybe the ghost did it.” Frannie said. She was hugging herself.

“Ghost wouldn’t have needed a knife,” Cormac said.

“It’s time to get back to good solid detective work,” Glyn said. His look hardened, a determined glint lighting his eyes. The manner of someone used to bowling over obstacles when he needed to. He marched to the stairs.

“Wait, does that mean he’s going to search all our rooms?” Lora said. She and Vane looked at each other—and raced after him. She called after Glyn, “You can’t do

that—!”

“I’d better keep an eye on him.” Beck went after them. June, eyeing Cormac nervously, followed Beck.

Frannie gave him a wide-eyed, mildly terrified look. “I think I should go help Beck.” She fled after the others. Safety in numbers, maybe.

I’m offended that no one wants to be left alone with you.

“I’m not,” he murmured. This gave him the chance to go back to the coat tree, to check on those papers in that inside pocket of Monty’s coat. Maybe it was nothing, but maybe it would point to why someone would want to kill the man. Pulling back the other coats, he exposed the tan duster.

Someone else had been here since he’d searched. The front lapel was turned back, and the inside pocket was empty. “Well, I guess it was important.”

Who else has been by here? Who else had time to search?

Everyone did. Everyone had been going up and down stairs to change clothes, to linger by the door and look out the window at the snowscape. Cormac himself had been back and forth from one room to the other. He hadn’t watched the stairs the whole time. Maybe he should have.

What do you think was in that pocket?

Information about his land dispute with Beck? A blackmail letter? Lyrics to a new morose cowboy poem?

“And there he is, the man himself.”

A crowd of footsteps rattled down the stairs and stopped on the landing above the foyer. Glyn Farrow stood behind the banister, like an actor in a play. He was holding something, a towel-wrapped bundle.

June came up next to Glyn and leaned on the banister. “What are you doing with that?”

Cormac was still holding Monty’s coat. And didn’t that just look guilty as hell? He didn’t bother explaining himself; this was exactly what it looked like.

“What is it?” he said tiredly to the crowd looking back at him with undeniable shock and horror.

On the other hand, Glyn seemed to be enjoying himself, wearing a small, eager smile. “We found this shoved behind the dresser in your room. Wondered if you could comment on it.”

He unfolded the towel to reveal a gleaming chef’s knife, the brown handle a match for the set in the kitchen. A red tint of blood still marked the point.

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In the back of his mind, Amelia swore. It startled him.

Cormac grinned, deciding that yes, he definitely should have driven away when he had the chance. “You already know I’m going to say I have no idea how it got there. Somebody planted that.”

“I wanted to see your reaction. You don’t react to much of anything, do you?”

Cormac spread his arms in a show of agreement. After the shit he’d seen? After helping save the world from a demonic invasion and volcanic destruction? After carrying around the soul of a Victorian wizard in his mind for years? This didn’t scare him, and he was annoyed that Glyn somehow thought it should.

The better question in his mind: Why was Glyn trying to frame him? Only one answer: he might have killed Monty himself. But why?

Maybe just to see if he could.

Glyn spoke to the others, “I’ll just go put this out in the garage with Mr. Connor, for safekeeping.”

June’s voice pitched high as she called, “Are we just going to let him stand there like nothing’s wrong? He did it!”

“The knife was in his room,” Glyn said. “The other doesn’t necessarily follow. He’s right—someone might have planted it.”

“Someone like you?” Cormac said, and Glyn made a little nod as if to say, touché.

“I can’t stand this. I can’t trust any of you. I’m locking myself in my room until the police get here.” June stormed back up the stairs, and a moment later a door slammed.

“Probably for the best,” Beck said nervously. “Maybe we should all just stay in our rooms.”

And wait like a lamb for the slaughter? No, absolutely not.

Glyn came down the stairs and brushed past Cormac, pointedly meeting his gaze as he passed through the foyer. Cormac followed.

“You watch me, I watch you,” Cormac said flatly, to Glyn’s look of inquiry.

“Or you murder me when you get me alone in the carriage house?”

Cormac huffed. “How stupid do you think I am?”

Glyn turned his back on Cormac, an obvious snub. He wasn’t afraid.

The temperature in the garage was frigid; their breath fogged. Glyn did exactly what he said he was going to do, setting the towel-wrapped knife next to the shrouded body.

They both stood a moment, regarding the bundle. If you didn’t know it was a body, you might think it was a tarp, maybe a rolled-up carpet. Since the two of them had put it there, it was easy to see which end had the shape of a head, and which end tapered to feet.

There’s another spell I know, Amelia said. Not to summon the spirit, but a scrying

spell.

They'd never get enough time alone to set it up and go through with it. Not with Glyn watching. He felt a sigh of agreement from her.

Perhaps we could bring him in on it.

Unless he was the murderer. Cormac wasn't turning his back on the man.

If he is the murderer, then the spell should be especially effective with him standing right there.

Tempting.

"Why were you searching Mr. Connor's coat?" Glyn asked as they turned back for the house.

Cormac's first impulse was to blow him off; he didn't need to tell this guy anything. But he said, "There was something in the front pocket. Some papers, I think. I didn't get a chance to look the first time, and when I went back for it..." He shrugged. He should have just looked the first time. Lesson learned.

"Papers revealing motive, you believe?" Glyn said. "Or were you trying to cover your trail?"

"I keep telling you, if I'd done it you never would have found the knife."

They went back to the house. The sun was setting—where had the day gone? From the side of the house he could see the front drive, the cars parked under mounds of snow like igloos, the pine trees beyond weighted down with the stuff. Maybe the authorities would get here by morning, or maybe they'd be stuck for another day,

hurling suspicions and accusations. Cormac wasn't sure they'd survive it.

He didn't realize he'd paused, watching the late afternoon sun cut through the forest, until Glyn stopped beside him, looking out at the same scene.

"Can I ask you a question?" Glyn asked.

"Why stop now?"

"Do you believe in Vane's performances? In séances, ghosts, all the rest of it?"

That wasn't a simple yes or no question. It would definitely take too long to explain, standing out here in the cold.

He chuckled a little. "Two of my best friends are werewolves. So yeah, some of it."

"Werewolves? Really? Hm. Then you think Vane really contacted Tobias Wright?"

"Or what was left of him. Ghosts aren't... people. They're reflections. Memories. I'm not sure what they are."

They hadn't worn coats out, and the cold was biting. Cormac was feeling it; Glyn hugged himself. The stars would be glorious on a night like this, the clear sky after a storm.

"Then you think it might be possible to contact Mr. Connor, to learn what happened?"

"I think it might be possible to learn what happened." He studied the author, but the man was as unreadable as ever. British reserve, or something else.

Was he worried about Cormac discovering the truth?

“Let’s get inside,” Glyn said. “My lungs are freezing.”

In the kitchen Frannie was putting together trays of food.

“It’s just sandwiches,” she said. “I didn’t feel up to doing much else.”

“It looks perfect,” Glyn assured her.

“So you two decided not to kill each other?”

Cormac glanced at Glyn, who glanced back wryly. Cormac had a sinking feeling he was going to have to have it out with the guy at some point. He missed his guns less and less as time went on, but he might have wished for a handgun under his pillow tonight.

“Here, let me help you with that,” Glyn said, moving to the sink to wash his hands first.

The others, except for June, had gathered in the dining room. Vane and Lora were side by side, hand in hand. Beck stood pensively by the window. No one made a move toward the sandwiches.

Frannie had a separate, smaller tray prepared. “I’ll just take this up to June, then.”

If anything, they were looking more unhappy and uncomfortable than even this morning. The shock of seeing the body hadn’t worn off. Neither had the shock of knowing that one of them had done it. Would the murderer strike again, to cover their tracks?

Or perhaps the ghosts in this place were lonely and wanted someone to sing them morose songs for eternity.

That was a really disconcerting thought.

Frannie returned with the tray, still with all its food. “She said she wasn’t hungry.”

Are we hungry? Cormac prodded Amelia. She agreed that they weren’t. They politely took the offered food, and picked at it. Lora went through a glass of wine and started on another. As appealing as the self-medicated numbness sounded, Cormac needed to stay sharp. No pun intended.

They finally gave up, and Frannie and Beck cleared the table and returned leftovers to the kitchen. When she returned, Beck stood at the dining room table, hands clasped before her.

“I’ve decided... I think June is right, and everyone should stay in their rooms until Sheriff Andrews and his crew get here in the morning.”

Vane leaned forward. “I could try another séance. I’m getting close, I know it—”

Lora put a hand on his arm, and he stilled.

“On the contrary, I think it would be better for us to wait in the parlor, together,” Glyn said.

No one sneaking around, no one getting up to anything. Cormac was annoyed to discover that he agreed.

“I can’t do it,” Frannie said. “I can’t sit here staring at each other waiting for something to happen. Beck’s right. Good night.” She said this in a rush and fled.

“We lock our doors, nothing bad can happen, right?” Beck seemed to be trying to convince herself.

“Locks don’t matter in a haunted house,” Vane said.

“Great, now I’m not going to sleep at all,” Lora muttered. “I really want to go home.”

Impossible, of course.

Vane stood, held out his hand, and Lora took it as he helped her to her feet.

“Sleep well,” he said wryly to the others. Hand in hand, they went through the parlor and up the stairs.

Glyn watched them go. “I’m trying to decide if one or both of them would be willing to create a ghost, if they couldn’t find one for their séance.”

“Oh Glyn, really,” Beck said. But she glanced after them with her brow furrowed.

Cormac was still betting on the man who just happened to find a knife in Cormac’s room. “I’m all right with the two of us sitting in the parlor staring at each other all night.”

“Indeed,” Glyn said, studying him with a focused gaze that made Cormac nervous.

Beck said, “I’m not going upstairs till you two get to your rooms.”

“Don’t trust us?” Cormac said with a smirk.

“You two are the ones in this house I know are capable of killing someone. The thing is, you two have the least reason to do it.”

Whereas Beck might have had the most, and she knew it.

Glyn went to the sideboard and put a finger of liquor in a tumbler. “Well then, a nightcap for me and off to bed. The sooner morning comes the sooner we can put this behind us.”

As if Cormac would be able to sleep.

Beck scattered the ashes in the fireplace and turned out lights. The three of them went upstairs. On the third floor, Cormac and Glyn stood at their respective doors, across the hallway from each other. Waiting for the other to enter his room and shut the door first.

“Well then,” Glyn said flatly. “Good night.”

“Guess so.”

Neither of them moved.

For God’s sake just get in the room.

He pushed open the door, stepped in with all the leisurely saunter of a western stereotype. Matched Glyn’s gaze as the Brit did likewise. Finally, at last, they shut the doors.

On the shelf next to the bed, the name glared out from the row of books. GLYN FARROW.

Why the hell was he letting this guy get under his skin?

Cormac’s duffel bag had been moved. Probably the contents rifled through as well.

He could see where the dresser had been shifted to hide the knife, by whoever had done it, and to find it again. Who'd had time to sneak the weapon into his room? Everybody.

He sat on the bed and tried to sort out the day's activities. Frannie was the only one who hadn't been upstairs—but no, she'd come up when everyone else did, when Glyn grandly announced he was searching rooms. At some point each of them had come upstairs to change clothes.

Cormac kept coming back to Glyn, who had so grandly appointed himself the amateur detective in charge. As a distraction?

And he keeps coming back to you.

There was a noise at the door. Small, subtle. The slide of metal against metal. The soft thud of a lock turning over.

Someone had the key to the old-fashioned lock in the door.

Cormac jumped off the bed and grabbed the door handle. It wouldn't turn. He shook it, rattling the door on its hinges. The house might have been old, the hardware on the door might have been original, but it was solid. Didn't budge.

He fell to the floor, pressed his face to the gap at the bottom of the door, hoping to see out, any detail. He just saw the shadow of feet walking away. No telling whose.

"Goddammit," he muttered, hitting the floor with his fist. He rolled back and stared up at the ceiling. His pulse raced, and there was nothing he could do about anything.

Breathe, my dear. Just... breathe. I want to see you.

He unclenched his fists and closed his eyes.

Before he opened them again on the mindscape of his ideal mountain valley, he heard pacing. A long skirt swishing against the grass. A frustrated sigh. When he looked, he saw Amelia, her hair pulled away from her face and hanging long down her back. Her blouse was mussed as if she hadn't changed it in a couple of days—and why that detail? Why should her imagined self ever be anything other than perfect? Because their minds were in disarray. His own jeans were faded. His T-shirt itched. He rolled out an imaginary kink in his imaginary shoulders.

She stopped. Snarled a little. “I went to prison for a murder I didn't commit once, I don't intend to do so again.”

He was tired. How could he be this tired? He settled on the grass and leaned up against the tree that always seemed to be right there for him to lean up against.

“Aren't you going to say something? Do something? Anything?” Her anger made her flushed. She glowed. She was gorgeous, like an old painting. If he told her that right now, she'd scoff at him. Tell him he was distracted and irrational.

“Yeah. I just need a minute.” A minute to not think about it. A minute to just... let whatever he was supposed to be feeling wash over him. If he let himself actually feel it, he might never stop screaming.

The fight went out of her all at once. His exhaustion, spilling on to her. They could never avoid each other's moods, here. She sank to the grass beside him, and her expression turned beseeching.

Suddenly, she seemed young. She was terrified and trying very hard to hide it. “Whatever happens, we're together. You have no idea how much that means to me.”

“Yes, I do.” He opened his arms and drew her into an embrace. She gave a little sob, quickly cut off, repressed. But he heard it. Kissed the top of her head, because it gave him comfort. Maybe it would comfort her, too. The weight of her—the imagined and no-less-real feeling weight of her—anchored him.

“We’ll go mad,” she murmured. “We could stay locked here in our minds forever, go mad... and that wouldn’t be such a bad thing, would it?”

Right now, it sounded pretty good. The length of her, lying half on top of him, her arms around him. God, he wanted her. He could shift a little, slide his hand down her hip, put his leg between hers—

“We’re not going to take this lying down, are we?” she said abruptly.

He chuckled. “Oh hell no.”

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With a pair of tweezers from his shaving kit and a paperclip from the stash of odds and ends Amelia had him carry around in his pockets, he picked the lock at the bedroom door in less than a minute. Slowly, carefully, he eased it open, muting the sound of creaking hinges as much as he could. He half expected Glyn to be waiting outside, standing guard. But the hall was dark, the other doorways closed.

He gathered a few materials from Amelia's kit: white votive candles, a bit of chalk. More scrying, but not the imprecise business of trying to talk to spirits this time. This involved the material plane entirely. They just needed half an hour without interruption. By this time he knew which stairs creaked, which floorboards would squeal at his weight, and successfully avoided them. Good, old-fashioned sneaking. It was a relief to be doing something.

He hesitated on the last flight of stairs. The lights were off, just as Beck had left them. Outside, visible through the window in the front door, faint moonlight turned the snow-covered landscape silver. All was still, perfectly quiet. So why was the hair on the back of his neck standing up?

Stepping softly, he reached the bottom of the stairs, listening hard, muscles tensing. He wanted the lights on. Flush out whatever shadow was waiting for him.

Something struck toward him from a hiding place to the side of the stairs. Cormac ducked back just in time, as Glyn drew back the staff he was holding—broomstick, or walking stick maybe—and thrust again, and again Cormac dodged. This time, he took hold of Glyn's arm. The man easily twisted out of his grip, finessing some martial arts move to slip away.

Cormac's injured shoulder ached—he didn't want to get into a knock-down drag-out with this guy. He'd lose. He pointed and said, "You locked my door—"

Glyn drew back. "I thought you locked my door." Cormac was breathing hard; Glyn wasn't. He lowered his weapon, what turned out to be a carved wood walking stick, and straightened out of his fighting stance. "You were locked in too?"

"Yeah, I picked it open."

"So did I."

"Then who—"

Glyn raised an eyebrow. "Whoever murdered Monty, trying to keep us out of the way."

Enough of this. Time for some answers. Cormac went to the coat tree and grabbed his coat off the top. "Which one is yours?"

Glyn found his coat, a sensible waterproof overcoat, under the layers. "Planning on a walk?"

"Just to the garage. Something I've been wanting to do." You all right with an audience? he asked the back of his mind.

Looking forward to it. He imagined her rubbing her hands together with anticipation.

Glyn followed without a word. He kept the walking stick, Cormac noticed.

They'd tamped down a clear way to the carriage house by now. At night, it had become slick. They crossed it carefully.

The outbuilding was freezing. Thank goodness. Monty's body must have been frozen solid by this time. Cormac worked quickly; moving kept him warm.

He gave Glyn a flashlight to hold until he got the candles lit. He cleared a space on the concrete floor and made a circle of buttery light.

After putting on gloves, he drew out the bundle containing the knife from the back of the truck and unwrapped it.

"What're you doing?" Glyn asked.

"Just watch. And be quiet."

Setting the knife aside, he drew a chalk circle on the floor, with symbols at the cardinal points for insight. For revelation. Amelia told him what to do; usually he'd let her take over but he needed to stay in his body. To stay fast, alert.

He put the candles at the cardinal points, then added more symbols, one for each person in the house, even himself, no exceptions.

"Are you summoning demons—"

Cormac held up a hand, palm out—stop. Surprisingly, Glyn shut up, standing back against the wall and watching skeptically.

Cormac tied black twine around the knife's center of balance, leaving it suspended, parallel to the ground. An arrow, with the ability to turn in any direction. Tied off the other end to a broom handle jammed into the truck bed, so his own microscopic movements on the string wouldn't impact the direction. Finally, he burned a pinch of sage to clear the air. The sharp, herbal scent of it changed the space. Took him just a little bit out of reality. The candlelight settled and spread.

Amelia told him what to say, a series of phrases in other languages. Repetition, asking for truth, to banish mystery, to summon insight. The garage was so quiet he could hear the wicks of the candles burning, a spark popping now and then. The fragile stillness stretched out. Glyn was holding his breath.

Monty Connor is not any more cooperative in death than he was in life.

Cormac hummed softly, ““Oh bury me not on the lone prairie, where the coyotes howl and the wind blows free...””

That is a dreadful song.

The knife... shivered. The string twisted. The point of the blade drifted, drifted... settled. At the glyph Amelia used to represent Glyn Farrow.

Cormac glanced at the man, inquiring.

“What does that mean?” Glyn said softly.

“Each of these symbols stands for someone in the house. That one’s yours,” Cormac replied.

“But I didn’t—”

“That just means you were the last person before me to handle the knife. Let’s see if we can find who held it before you.”

Repeat the words.

He did, asking for the knife’s truth, for the secrets it conveyed. Then, just in case it helped, he murmured the next line of the song. The knife turned, turned again. A

shiver, as if a breath of air pushed it. Maybe a draft in the garage was nudging it along.

The next glyph it rested on was June Connor's.

"Whose symbol is that?" Glyn hissed.

"Shh."

He repeated the incantation a third time and added, "'In a narrow grave, just six by three, they buried him there on the lone prairie.'" The knife did not move again.

Cormac sat back on his heels, trying to imagine the picture the scrying had given him. He couldn't quite do it.

"You look positively gobsmacked."

"It's pointing at June Connor," Cormac said.

"Well." Strangely, Glyn didn't seem surprised.

Cormac cut the string and let the knife fall, ringing against the concrete. He wrapped it back in the towel. Another round of burning sage, a few closing words to banish the magic, and he pinched out the candle flames. The flashlight seemed particularly dim after. The knife went back in the truck and he scuffed out the chalk marks with his boot. He felt unsettled, looking over his shoulder. A queasy anxiety wouldn't fade. He wanted to get back in where it was warm. Sit with Amelia in their meadow and figure out what to do next.

"You think she really could have done it?" Cormac asked.

“In hindsight, it might even make the most sense.”

“How—”

“Let’s get back inside.”

The stillness from the garage carried to outside. The wind had stopped. Starlight blazed overhead. A blue, crystalline glow touched the post-blizzard world. Time seemed to slow to an imperceptible pace.

This wasn’t just the winter night. Not just the frozen air. Something was... off.

Wait a moment.

Cormac put his hand out to stop Glyn, and they both stared ahead.

A figure stumbled down the steps from the kitchen door as if shoved out. It turned back to the house, shouted—and made no sound at all. A young man, maybe eighteen, with short brown hair and a thin mustache. He wore boots, rough trousers, and a flannel shirt. No coat, no hat, no gloves. Not dressed for the weather, which was already getting to him. He hugged himself, slapped his arms as if trying to beat warmth into them. Looked up at the sky with a wincing expression of consternation. Trudged away from the house a few halting steps, as if he knew he wouldn’t get very far—

And then he stumbled down the steps as if he’d been shoved out the kitchen door. Shouted silently. Turned from the house with uncertain steps. Looked at the sky as if he was looking at his doom. It had been a winter night when Tobias Wright died. Maybe as freezing cold as this one. If he’d been kicked out of the house, if he’d been left outside with the temperature dropping like this...

The scene played out a third time.

“Oh, my God,” Glyn murmured. It might have been the first thing that had shocked him all weekend.

Tobias Wright wasn’t shot. He froze to death. Murdered but not murdered. Oh, that poor young man.

In his—and Amelia’s—experience, ghosts weren’t spirits so much as they were memories. Imprints. This was the moment that doomed Tobias. What happened after... his brother might have invented the story about the shootout. He could have shot the body after the fact. In that version, he was defending himself. A player in an Old West tragedy. Not the instigator of an act of terrible cruelty.

Cormac, love. You’re freezing. We should go inside.

He hadn’t noticed if the chill he felt came from the cold night air, or the terrible scene playing out before him. Didn’t really matter.

Just then, the figure’s movement changed. Instead of turning away he stopped—and looked at Cormac and Glyn. His exasperated frown deepened into grief. As if he had consciousness and remembered what had happened. As if he sought understanding. Sympathy.

Cormac started to say something—he wasn’t sure what. I’m sorry, maybe. Or, How can I help? But in the next breath the figure vanished.

Cormac touched Glyn’s shoulder and urged him toward the door. They both skirted the path the ghost had taken. The snow there showed no footprints, no disturbances.

Back in the kitchen, the heated air hit him like a wall, and he shivered. They both did.

“I think I’ll go start a fire,” Glyn said, propping the stick by the door and nodding toward the parlor.

“I’ll be there in a sec.” He took off his gloves and went to the sink to wash his hands, which also gave him a moment to think.

“The scrying,” he murmured. “You think it worked?”

I do. With the body and murder weapon right there—and that song. I’ve never seen so much power go into that spell. I think even Glyn’s presence helped. He wants so badly to learn what happened.

“But why would she do it?”

I’m not sure any amount of scrying could answer that.

Voices carried from the parlor, just as Cormac stepped into the dining room. He froze and listened.

“What are you burning there, Mrs. Connor?” That was Glyn, asking a smooth, innocuous question, as if he simply happened to be passing through in the middle of the night for no particular reason.

June Connor answered quickly. Rushed, stressed. “Nothing. It’s nothing.”

Cormac carefully, quietly, edged up to the doorway, to get a look into the room without being seen.

June stood at the fireplace, caught mid-gesture, holding a piece of paper toward the robust fire burning in the fireplace. She held more pages in her other hand. She had apparently been feeding them one by one to the flames.

“That’s the document from Monty’s coat, isn’t it? The one that Mr. Bennett conveniently discovered for you, and you subsequently took.”

And just like that, the gaps between a number of puzzle pieces closed, shapes locking into place. Those papers—when the others had come down the stairs and saw him standing there... June had noticed. June had known he’d found something. She’d retrieved the papers later, setting Cormac up for that moment of frustration.

In considering Monty’s death and who might have inflicted it, they’d failed to ask the simplest question. Who in the house had the clearest motive to murder Monty? Maybe the person who knew him best.

Moving quickly, Glyn pulled the pages from June’s hand. Futilely, with a cut-off sob, she grabbed after him, but he’d paced out of reach. June remained by the fire, hands now covering her face. Glyn tilted them toward the dim firelight to better study them.

“Divorce documents,” he said thoughtfully. “And they were not initiated by you. I think I understand, now. Monty wanted a divorce. This might have been a complete surprise to you, but... I think not. Then Monty discovered his plot of land was worth a whole lot of money in mineral rights. He wasn’t going to invoke those rights until the divorce was finalized, entirely cutting you off from that wealth. If he died first, however, and if you successfully framed someone else for his murder... you’d inherit everything. How am I doing?”

He remained focused on the documents, no doubt studying every detail, which meant he wasn’t watching June. But Cormac saw her lower her hands, an expression of profound loathing twisting her ordinarily gentle features. Her gaze fell on the wrought-iron vintage fireplace tool stand just half a pace away from her. She didn’t have to move to reach down and take hold of the poker, weighted with ornate Victorian flourishes. Without a sound, she removed it from the stand. All she’d need to do was swing hard, and she’d smash Glyn’s face in. It would only take a second.

In three calm strides Cormac was across the room, at June's side, wrenching the upraised poker out of her hand. She cried out briefly—then folded. Sank to the floor and shook, crying silently.

Glyn blew out a breath. He had seen the blow coming, and he might even have been able to do something about it. But maybe not this cleanly.

“Thank you, Mr. Bennett,” he breathed.

“You're welcome. You think she locked the doors, too? Keep us from snooping around?”

“No, I wonder now if that was Beck wanting to be sure we stayed put. She ought to know us better than that, don't you think?” Glyn studied him with more intensity than ever. Even more than when he thought Cormac had murdered Monty. “Mr. Bennett. I might be a little bit in love with you.” He did not seem to be joking.

That flush Cormac felt—flattered and pleased about it—came from Amelia. Cormac. That might be an avenue worth pursuing. I don't have a body but he does—

No. Just... no. He looked away to hide Amelia's blush.

Glyn flashed a lopsided grin, as if he could guess what Cormac was thinking. But he would never have any idea what Amelia was thinking.

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They waited in the parlor for morning to arrive. June settled in an armchair—the same one Monty had occupied—and stared at the fire. She offered no denials, made no excuses. Cormac and Glyn waited more restlessly. Every now and then Glyn paced to the window, peering out, watching for both the sun and the police, as if they were in a race. Cormac fed more logs to the fire, keeping the flames going. Its light and warmth seemed important.

This was the tableau that greeted the others when they arrived in the parlor, shortly after dawn. Frannie was first, the smell of fresh coffee wafting out from the kitchen with her. Cormac's mouth watered, and his shoulders finally started to unclench. A cup of coffee sounded like salvation right now.

She pulled up short at the doorway to the dining room, with a startled gasp. "Oh! I didn't expect anyone—"

The bleary-eyed expressions looking back at her must have been stark. She seemed to consider the implications, and then froze.

"If it isn't too much trouble, I'll have some of that coffee as soon as it's ready," Glyn said softly.

"I... I'll bring out a tray." She fled back to the kitchen.

The others followed soon enough, and Cormac wondered if anyone had really managed any sleep. Beck gave a startled gasp when she saw them.

"We picked the locks, if you're wondering," Glyn said casually.

“Oh. I mean... what do you mean?” She wasn’t selling the pretended ignorance very hard. She crossed her arms. “I just knew you both would wander and get yourselves in trouble. But what—”

“The mystery is solved,” Glyn said, just as Vane and Lora came down.

They stared at June. Of them all, Beck regarded her with something like pity.

By the time the morning sun blazed over the treetops, turning the snow-covered world into blinding crystal under a searing blue sky, a big commercial pickup truck with a wide plow blade attached to the front muscled its way up the drive, and a sheriff department SUV crawled along behind it. The cavalry.

Glyn waited to deliver the full explanation, how all the bits and pieces fit together, until the sheriff and his deputy were settled in the parlor with cups of coffee. Cormac was happy to let him do the talking.

June Connor knew Monty had gone as far as drawing up divorce papers. She didn’t know he’d brought them with him, and she hadn’t known about his argument with Beck until she overheard them in the hallway. Everyone had heard that, apparently. Part of why Monty had accepted Beck’s invitation was to use the time here to convince her not to sue him over the mineral rights, which he had, in fact, known about before convincing Jim Anderson to sell. If she agreed, she could keep the house. June realized then that time was against her, and Monty would force their separation sooner rather than later. Their folksy music act had been on the downswing for years. Bookings had just about dried up, and Monty refused to use the internet to revitalize their career. She was tired of the clichés and the down-home shtick, of supporting all his talent by sacrificing her own. He thought he could get someone younger—more attractive, a better draw—to take her place. She had suppressed her fury at this, until she couldn’t any longer.

June had confronted Monty in the kitchen, where he’d gone looking for food. He had

insomnia. She'd known to find him there.

Glyn said, "My guess is you didn't plan it. But the knife was right there. Just like with the fireplace poker, hm? You confronted him, and he laughed. Brushed you off as if all those years of your partnership meant nothing. Perhaps you only meant to scare him, and then..." He spread his hands, presenting the obvious picture.

"He didn't make a sound," June murmured. "He was so surprised."

The sheriff turned to June. "Ma'am, is this right? Anything else you want to add?"

"I would like to call my lawyer," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Then, she chuckled harshly. "Monty's lawyer, I mean. Everything I have belonged to him, really, didn't it?"

The strange, grinding tension of the last day and a half lingered, like mist after a rain. More calls were made, the coroner was on the way, and the sheriff took possession of the memory card from Lora's camera. Then they took June away, into the blinding morning sun.

The whole thing was a domestic tragedy that would have seemed ludicrous if they hadn't been in the middle of it.

The cold spell broke that morning, and the snow started melting, sending a rain of drips off the roof. The truck with the plow shoved the bulk of the drifts to the edge of the drive. Cormac went out with a shovel to help clear the cars. Purely a selfish gesture. The sooner the snow was cleared the sooner he could leave. And the coroner's van needed a path to get to the outbuilding. Cormac and Glyn were the only ones who watched them carry out the gurney, the closed body bag secured to it.

"Someone ought to bear witness," Glyn said. "Don't know that it matters. But... here we are."

“Yeah.”

The van doors closed, the sound echoing. Some snow fell off the branch of a nearby pine tree.

“I owe you an apology, of course.” Glyn glanced at him sidelong. “I really did imagine a scenario where Beck hired an assassin to remove the obstacle to her financial well-being.”

“That wasn’t a pro hit,” Cormac said bluntly, even as he knew the statement didn’t paint him in any better light.

“There is that.”

“You going to get a new book out of this?”

Glyn smiled. “People always ask that.”

“Has this happened to you before? Does this happen to you a lot?”

Glyn rubbed his arms in a dramatic show of keeping warm. “It’s getting chilly out here. I think I need to pour myself some of that new pot of coffee Frannie put on.” He went back up the porch and to the kitchen door.

Cormac blew out a breath that fogged around him.

Beck was the only one who saw him off, standing on the porch amid the sound of dripping snowmelt. Maybe Cormac should have said goodbye to the others. Amelia wouldn’t have minded talking more with Vane. But, well... if any of them wanted to talk to him, they could ask Beck to get in touch.

“I don’t know if it still matters,” Cormac told her. “But the house really is haunted.

Focused on that back porch, outside the kitchen door.” He and Amelia had considered whether to tell her the true story, that Tobias had been locked out and froze to death, rather than dying in the more thrilling shootout. They decided not to. Let her keep the old family story.

“Well, that’s something I suppose,” Beck said with a sigh. “I’m sorry this didn’t turn out to be much of a relaxing weekend. But... I appreciate you being here.” She handed him an envelope with cash. His father’s traditional method of getting paid. Cormac accepted with a thin smile and slipped the envelope inside his jacket pocket. “You drive safe now, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Beck went back inside, to the warmth and shelter of the house.

Cormac sat in the Jeep for a moment, letting the heat run. Wright House was an impressive mansion, lurking against its mountain backdrop. The windows reflected the blue sky and glared down like eyes. Cormac repressed a shiver. The house seemed to exude a chill. Maybe it would feel different in the summer.

“Any reason to stick around?” he asked his partner.

No. It’s well past time for us to be away from all this.

Carefully, avoiding spinning out in the ice and slush, he steered the Jeep out of the drive and on to the road. He didn’t breathe easy until the house was out of sight.

We never got our holiday, Amelia thought wistfully. We didn’t even get to sleep in.

She was right. He was suddenly exhausted. Maybe they did need a vacation.

“We can stop at a hotel on the way home. Someplace with room service.”

That isn't at all the least bit haunted.

“Agreed.”