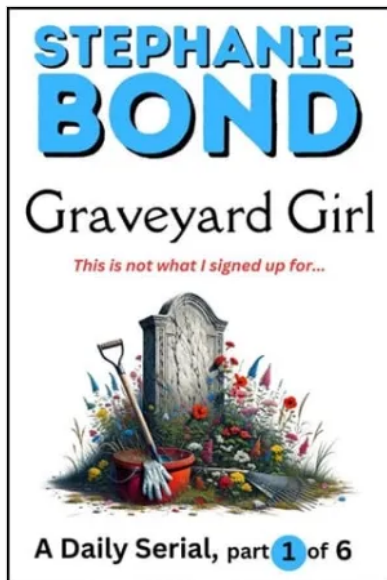




Graveyard Girl, part 1 of 6

Author: Stephanie Bond

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: In the romantic mystery GRAVEYARD GIRL, a city girl hiding out from a scandal agrees to house-sit an old home in a rural area where she thinks no one will know her to finish a project she hopes will repair her reputation. But the house comes with some unexpected surprises—sketchy utilities, chickens to feed, and a graveyard to tend to! The spooky graveyard has a storied past and attracts a steady stream of eccentric visitors—one intriguing man in particular—who seem determined to wreck her concentration. And there's a secret surrounding one grave that no one seems willing to talk about

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“Josephine Vanguard?”

I turned to see a gray-haired man smiling through the open window of a shiny blue sedan.

“Yes.”

“I’m Bill, your driver.”

I doubled-checked the ride share app to make sure the model of the car matched up, then rolled my bulging suitcase toward the car. I was sweating profusely in a pungent humidity I hadn’t known existed and was coming to the conclusion I’d packed poorly for my journey. Overhead an airplane was taking off to parts unknown and I suddenly wished I was on it.

Because I was beginning to think I’d made a gigantic mistake.

Bill jumped out to wrestle my luggage into the trunk of his car that was crowded with an odd assortment of yard tools. Proof, I assumed, that in the new gig economy, people were cobbling together all kinds of jobs.

I climbed into the back seat, still pinging with apprehension. My flight had been delayed and I’d missed my connection in Atlanta, so it felt as if even the universe was doubting my decision. As dusk descended, my energy and confidence were sagging.

The driver slid behind the wheel, then adjusted the rear-view mirror until he could see me. “First time in Birmingham?”

I dabbed at my hairline. “Yes.”

“Where you from?”

Hadn’t I noted in my app profile that I preferred “limited conversation”? “Um... all over.”

“I don’t get many calls to drive to Irving. You got family there?”

“Um, no.”

“Vacation?”

“Not really.” I reached for my purse to rummage for ear buds, hoping to curb his string of questions, but I couldn’t find them.

“Vanguard... your name sure sounds familiar.”

I froze.

“Are you famous or something?”

I shifted in my seat. “How long will it take to get to Irving?”

“An hour, give or take. That’s a pretty rural area and you never know when you’re gonna get behind a tractor or someone on horseback. And it’ll be dark when we get there, so that’ll slow me down.”

I held up the notebook I managed to find. “Pardon me, but I need to work.”

His mouth morphed into a frown. “Got it.”

I ignored his wounded look and opened my blank notebook. It wasn't a lie—I did need to work. I was months behind on delivering the next book in a historical romance series that had been unexpectedly popular. My writing had been interrupted by the romantic drama of my own life.

Anxiety squeezed my chest, and I closed my eyes to keep it at bay. Over the past few months I'd learned to box breathe, meditate to binaural beats, take warm baths, do cold plunges, and a host of other techniques to deal with the stress, all with limited success. I suspected because the events had been self-inflicted, my conscious wasn't ready to let me off the hook.

A few minutes into the trip, I glanced up to see the driver staring at me. He quickly averted his gaze. From my vantage point I could see his phone mounted on the dash of his car. On the glowing screen was my author headshot and the covers of some of my racy books. He had Googled me, and no doubt had seen the salacious headlines.

Romance author falls for romance con man.

Romance novelist robbed of her happy ending.

Writer of bodice-rippers gets ripped off by fiancé.

A hot flush burned up my neck. True, all of it, painfully so. I'd gotten swept up in the fictional emotions I wrote about, had convinced myself that my hero and my happy ending had arrived. Instead I'd been brainwashed by lust and had given Curtis Raeburn free rein to empty my bank accounts and to leverage my credit to alarming sums.

It was the oldest con in the books, and I'd fallen for it. So I was dealing with it the best way I knew how—by hiding.

I doodled on a blank page in my notebook.

Since I was no longer able to afford my Manhattan apartment and I'd wanted to disappear, I'd spent hours on rental sites searching for an affordable place to escape to. The listing for a six-month housesitting stint in the small town of Irving, Alabama had seemed like the perfect solution. I reasoned I'd have privacy to write the manuscript I was behind on and by the time I re-emerged, hopefully the social media trolls would have moved on to someone else.

When I'd called about the listing for The Whisper House, I was informed by a bored agent that in return for staying at the property, I would be responsible for my own transportation, food and incidentals, and for maintaining the house and the grounds.

"And it says here," the agent intoned, "that the house is located in a remote setting, with the nearest neighbor a half-mile away. Oh, and the cell phone and internet reception is quote, 'spotty,' unquote."

"I'll take it," I'd said.

"Fyi, if you leave before the six-month stint is up, you'll be charged a fee for the house to be relisted."

I'd instructed the agent to email the contracts and I'd sent them back the same day. I'd sublet my apartment to my friend Frida who needed a place to stay while her building was being fumigated. She was appreciative, even though she thought I'd lost my mind—again.

"You're moving to a freaking farm?"

"Temporarily. And it's not a farm—it's a farm house."

“In the middle of freaking nowhere.”

“I need some peace and quiet.”

“Sounds like the freaking setup for a horror flick.”

I took in the landscape outside my window that seemed to grow more wild with every passing mile. Indeed, the sign announcing “Irving, population 995” was nearly obscured with some kind of green curly vine that appeared to be virulent here in the South. The car rolled through a tiny downtown area that consisted of three or four blocks of vintage buildings. Quaint, ornate streetlamps illuminated empty sidewalks and old-fashioned parking meters.

We stopped at a single redlight, then proceeded straight through town. Once the buildings were behind us, Bill made too many turns for me to follow onto increasingly narrow and harrowing roads. The app froze on my phone and Bill’s, indicating reception was indeed “spotty.”

“How much farther?” I asked, gripping the armrest as the car lurched over a pitted one-lane road poorly lit by the headlights. Tall trees encroached on either side of us, brushing against the windows. My pulse was thudding in my ears.

“Almost there,” he said. “Just at the end of this road.”

A few seconds later the landscape opened to reveal the house whose lines I’d memorized from the photos online. The Whisper House. With a crescent moon hanging in the background, the two-story gothic farmhouse did resemble something out of a movie. Two chimneys pushed through a many-angled roofline. The deep wraparound porch was hemmed with decorative railing. And most of the tall, narrow windows featured a Juliet balcony. The house sat in a clearing of tall grass, which made it seem more foreboding.

“Pretty spooky, huh?” Bill said.

His comment rankled me even as a shudder passed over my shoulders. The house was shrouded in darkness except for a flickering light next to the front door. I assumed it was left on as a welcoming gesture, but the strobe effect was unnerving.

“You staying here alone?” he pressed.

Fear seized my heart. I was staying here alone, which now seemed exceptionally foolish, but it occurred to me that I shouldn’t share that information with a relative stranger.

“No,” I lied. “My friend—I mean, friends —will be here soon.”

“That’s good. You sure wouldn’t want to be out here all by yourself.”

I swallowed. “Of course not.”

He pulled the car to the bottom of the steps leading to the front door, then jumped out and ran around to the trunk. While he grappled with my bag, I stepped out and stared up at the sprawling, sinister-looking structure. I made myself move forward and climb the wooden stairs. They creaked and groaned beneath my feet. My heart thrashed in my chest. Everything in me wanted to run.

Bill followed, staggering under the weight of my bag. “Where do you want this?”

But coming here was part of my way back. “Here is fine,” I said, pointing to the welcome mat that looked brand new in the blinking light. From a pocket in my purse, I retrieved the key I’d been sent through the mail and inserted it into the lock. I gave it a turn and the door swung open easily. Darkness yawned on the other side.

He parked my suitcase, then gave me a nervous look. “You want me to wait until your friends arrive?”

I shook my head. “No thanks, I’ll be fine. They should be here any minute.”

“Okay. Good luck.” He seemed relieved and practically jogged back to the car.

I looked back to the doorway, then turned on the flashlight app on my phone to see wide plank wood floors on the other side. With my heart in my throat, I stepped over the threshold and scanned the walls for a light switch. I found one a few steps inside and flipped it, sending a dim light over the room from an overhead fixture. But it did little to calm my nerves.

The large room with high ceilings appeared to be a sitting room. The furniture was covered with pale sheets, giving the space a ghostly feel. The air in the room was stagnant and muggy.

And The Whisper House was deathly quiet.

Shaking off the heebie jeebies, I backtracked to haul my suitcase inside, then closed the door and turned the deadbolt. The house extended beyond the light to other rooms, and I could make out a staircase. But I wasn’t about to explore tonight.

Exhaustion pulled at my limbs. I lifted a sheet from a sofa and decided it would make a passable bed for tonight, which seemed borne out by the presence of a folded quilt at one end. I turned off the overhead light, then toed off my sandals and climbed onto the sofa fully dressed. But in the cavernous blackness of the room, I could feel my heart trying to vacate my chest. I was terrified and I felt utterly exposed to the elements inside the house and out.

On the other side of a window, an animal hooted—or was it a growl?

And was it an animal?

I pulled the quilt up and over my head and blinked into the complete darkness. The quilt smelled faintly of a floral perfume and the heat was stifling, but at least I felt safe... er. Still, as my eyes grew heavier, one thought lapped itself in my brain.

What had I done?

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I HAD nightmares. Filled with bogeymen and monsters hiding behind trees and under beds and scratching on windows to get into the room where I slept and loom over me. I bolted awake to a demon sitting on my chest and screaming in my face. Shot through with terror I screamed back, frightening the creature enough for it to fly off and land in a corner where it stared at me with yellow eyes.

A rooster?

It bobbed its head then unleashed another ear-splitting cock-a-doodle-doo , flapping its black wings.

I sat up and waved my arms. “Shoo! Get out!”

Instead, it strutted across the room, exploring and... pooping? Ugh.

In the dawning light, the room where I’d slept was still steeped in shadows from the shuttered windows. I threw back the quilt and gingerly swung my legs over the edge of the sofa, keeping one eye on the rooster while I pushed my feet into my sandals and stood. Every muscle ached, presumably from being clenched in terror for hours. My mouth tasted rancid, and my bladder was very, very full. I stumbled, then gave the rooster a wide berth while I ventured further into the house in search of a bathroom. My footsteps echoed off the walls, kicking up dust bunnies. It appeared the house had been empty for some time.

I flipped on lights along the way, but a couple of light bulbs were burnt out. I opened doors and found closets, a storage room, and a small den before locating a powder room. The commode bowl was stained from rusty water and the faucet sputtered

when I washed my hands in the sink. I found a hand towel inside the tiny vanity and washed and dried my face, then stared at my reflection in the aged mirror that was losing its silvering.

My hazel eyes were bloodshot and rimmed with shadows. My skin was pale and lackluster. My light brown hair was limp and overgrown. My travel outfit of navy linen pants and top were as wrinkled as newspaper and bagged on my too-thin frame. And with apologies to Betty Friedan, the thought skittered through my brain that I was glad Curtis couldn't see me now.

Not because he wouldn't find me attractive—I no longer cared about that. But I'm human and I fantasized that if I ever saw him again, I'd be looking my best and oozing success. If he knew he'd driven me into hiding, he'd be congratulating himself.

A noise outside the door sent fear to my heart, until I heard clucking. I slowly opened the door to see the rooster marching by. I chased after it to herd it toward the front door, but it scrambled away, squawking. Then a thought slid into my brain that raised the hair on my arms—how had the bird gotten into the house?

I forced myself to keep exploring, peeking into room after room on the first level. I found a kitchen with fireplace and keeping room, a dining room, another more formal sitting room with a fireplace, a library, and another bathroom. I mentally catalogued the quality finishes—glass doorknobs, inlaid wood, porcelain tile, thick moldings. The furniture in every room was covered with sheets and the windows were shuttered tight. I made a full circle without finding an open window or door, then approached the wide staircase with trepidation.

The wood treads were carpeted with a footworn blue Persian runner. I climbed the steps, testing for weaknesses in the wood, but the stairs and the handrail appeared to be solid. The stairs turned at ninety degrees then continued to the next level. On the

second floor even more light bulbs were burnt out. With the aid of my cell phone flashlight, I opened doors carefully to find four large bedrooms, two bathrooms, and another sitting room. But I found no broken windows or other openings where the bird might've gotten in.

The Whisper House was huge, I conceded as I descended the stairs. If it were located in Manhattan, it would consume a good portion of a city block. And would be worth a fortune.

I was feeling giddy at the thought of having so much space to myself... and a little overwhelmed. A big house needed a lot of maintenance.

But it would keep my body occupied until my mind was clear enough to write again.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, the rooster reappeared, then puffed out his chest and deposited more waste on the floor. I used my arm to cover my nose and unlocked the front door to shoo him out. At the sight of freedom, he half-ran and half flew out the door. I followed him out to stand on the porch and took in my first view of the grounds surrounding The Whisper House.

The landscaping was wild, consisting of tall spiky plants that looked like some kind of succulent, and tall, leggy orange lilies that had crowded out other plants. The grass around the house was thick and tall enough to conceal small children, so I suspected it was home to lots of varmints and—I swallowed hard—snakes. Beyond the grass in every direction was a treeline that led into dense forests.

The sun was barely above the horizon, and it was already hot. I walked the wraparound porch and spied two outbuildings some distance from the rear of the house. One was a chicken coop. The invading rooster sat on the roof, flapping its wings. On the ground several chickens pecked at grass and flowers.

My pulse spiked. I didn't remember reading about chickens, but I conceded I was so taken with the idea of The Whisper House, I might've skimmed over a few details.

But how hard could it be to take care of chickens? People in the New Jersey suburbs had them in their backyards.

I went back inside and promptly stepped in rooster poo. I grimaced, covered my nose, and limped to the kitchen to look for cleaning supplies. I was pleased to find a few food items, including a bowl of eggs, to get me through a couple of days. Then, equipped with rubber gloves and an N95 face mask, I used a bottle of spray cleanser and a roll of paper towels to clean up the smelly mess and stuffed it all in a trash bag.

My phone pinged and I checked it to see a missed call from Frida. My phone battery was too low to make a call and besides, I wasn't ready to talk to her yet. I was afraid she'd talk me into bailing and going back to New York. I plugged in my charger and cabled it to my phone, glad that I didn't have enough service to check social media and see the latest awful things Curtis's groupies had posted about me.

I opened my suitcase and sorted through my clothes, realizing less than half the items I'd brought were appropriate for this weather. I rummaged through compartments until I found the information I'd printed about the house and the details of what I'd committed to. On the bottom of the eighth page, I found the paragraph I was looking for.

In return for occupying the premises, The Caretaker agrees to clean and maintain the house so it is fit to live in and to maintain the grounds, with the assistance of a groundskeeper, including the care and cleaning of the chicken coop, the barn and the equipment within, the graveyard, and the garden.

I blinked and brought the paper closer to my face. Graveyard?

How had I overlooked that little detail?

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I'D DISCOVERED the best cell phone reception (two bars) was in the corner bedroom on the front of the house, so I'd claimed that room to sleep in. When I'd uncovered all the furniture, I was pleasantly surprised to find a bed with an ornate white metal headboard and footboard covered with a colorful block quilt. A whitewashed wood dresser supplemented a tiny closet. The simple oak desk and chair was a bonus.

But I was still scared of the Whisper House. I'd jammed the wood chair under the doorknob, but on the second floor, the noises were unceasing—creaks and groans that I prayed was the house settling... although you'd think a house this old would've already settled long ago. Needless to say, I'd had nightmares again.

When I woke up, I had a headache from a loud, alien sound I couldn't identify at first.

Birdsong.

These weren't the sweet little chirpy birds in beloved cartoons. These were cawing, screeching, shrieking bird gangs and it sounded as if they were rumbling on the roof. I wanted to put the pillow over my head, but I needed caffeine and food. So I dragged myself up, then removed the chair from the doorknob and gingerly opened the door. When I was sure the rooster wasn't lying in wait, I went downstairs to make coffee. The coffeemaker was old-school so while it was brewing, I cracked some eggs to scramble.

“What the—?”

The yolks were deep orange. I sniffed them to see if they were spoiled, but they

smelled okay. I decided to chance it and they were the best eggs I'd ever tasted. Fortified, I retraced my steps back to the bedroom where I consulted the information about the house and punched in a phone number.

A deep, hoarse voice answered. "Hello?"

"Um, hi, my name is Josephine Vanguard and I'm staying at the Whisper House. I was given your number as the groundskeeper."

"Right," the person said, then sneezed twice and continued in a congested tone. "Sorry I haven't been out to say hello. I'm flat on my back with the crud. I'll come around to tend to the chickens and the mowing as soon as I can."

"Okay."

"Have you gathered the eggs?"

I blinked. "No."

"Hm. You probably should do that. They're gonna be backed up."

"O... kay."

"And you'll need to unlock the gate to the graveyard every morning and lock it again at dark."

I squinted. "And why is that?"

"It's a private graveyard, but the Whisper family let other people have plots there, so it has to be open to the public. The key is hanging in the kitchen closet."

I swallowed hard. “And where is this graveyard?”

The person had a coughing fit. “A few hundred yards past the house on the road you came in on.”

“Okay.”

“I mowed it a couple of days ago, so it should be okay until I’m back on my feet.”

I was still trying to figure out if I was talking to a man or woman. It really didn’t matter except that I was trying to picture them. “What’s your name?”

“Kelly Brown.”

That didn’t help.

Kelly sneezed again, then blew their nose loudly and said they’d come by soon. I wished them well, then ended the call, more confused than before I’d called. I walked to the window and looked down the road running past the house. The broken, crumbling asphalt petered out into a weedy gravel lane. I thought I saw the glimmer of white stones.

I recalled seeing a pair of binoculars in the desk, so I retrieved them. Sure enough, gravestones of different heights came into view, and a tall ornate metal gate.

I lowered the binoculars and winced. The graveyard was a stone’s throw from the house.

I might never sleep again.

I dressed in my only pair of jeans—dark wash Victoria Beard—and my sturdiest

shoes—white platform Keds—then located the key and left the house.

When I stepped off the porch I kept my eyes on the road, scanning for snakes, and other creepy-crawlies. Within thirty seconds my shirt was sticking to my back, and I had three mosquito bites.

I walked a few yards and suddenly was standing in front of the tall metal gate I'd seen from the window. The words "Whisper Graveyard" were hand-lettered in gold Victorian-style font. Through the gate I saw a collection of maybe thirty gravestones in a picturesque field dotted with towering oak trees. The key I'd brought fit into a chained padlock on the gate. I was so intent on unlocking it, I didn't hear the vehicle arriving until it was almost upon me. I turned to see an old black pickup truck pulling up to the gate.

A man with cropped bronze-colored hair stuck his head out the window. "Hi, there."

I gave him a tentative smile. "Hello."

"You must be the new tenant."

Word traveled fast in a small town. "That's right."

"Sawyer King," he offered with a smile. "Welcome to Irving."

"Thank you," I said, purposely not sharing my name. I had no intention of getting to know the locals. I needed privacy to finish my book. "I have to get back."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks for unlocking the gate."

I instantly felt remorseful for my standoffishness. "Do you have family buried here?"

“No.” He jerked his thumb toward a box in the back of his pickup. “I’m putting flags on the graves of the veterans for the Fourth. I shouldn’t be long.”

Oh, brother... he looked like a Boy Scout and he was a do-gooder. I conjured up a little smile. “That’s nice.”

Silence stretched between us awkwardly. I broke it by turning and striding back toward the house.

“I didn’t get your name,” he called after me.

I kept walking, still scanning for snakes.

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WHEN I went to unlock the graveyard gate the next morning, I spotted a handful of miniature American flags waving from graves in the rear of the cemetery that I hadn't noticed in the dusk of the previous evening when I'd gone to lock up. Although to be honest, I'd been so spooked at the idea of being in a cemetery as the sun was setting, I was singularly focused on the gate and getting the heck out of there.

But in the soft early morning light, the dew-dappled cemetery looked less menacing. My curiosity won out and I stepped inside the gate. A wide path of moss-covered stones led down the center of the graveyard and, upon closer inspection, acted as a divider between what appeared to be graves of the "haves" and the "have nots." On one side, headstones were tall and intricate; on the other, headstones were scarce and humble. Four of the five flags were on the "have nots" side. I was drawn to a grave where a flag waved in front of a short headstone with a shield cut into the discolored stone. The letters were worn and difficult to read, but I deciphered that twenty-year-old Cyrus Watt had lost his life in the Civil War, dying two months before the conflict ended. I felt a pang of sympathy for a life unlived, and it struck me if not for the humble headstone, Cyrus would've been forgotten. And from the eroding condition of the stone, it appeared it wouldn't be long before that happened.

I really needed to get some supplies—food, sturdy shoes, and an enormous flashlight for starters, so I decided to venture into the town of Irving. According to the map on my phone, despite its seemingly remote location, the Whisper House sat less than a mile from the town center.

In the barn I'd found a really decent pale blue cruising bicycle with two flat tires. But since I'd lived in Manhattan most of my life, I knew a thing or two about bikes. I'd reinflated the tires and lubed the chain. I found the brown basket in front of the

handlebars charming. Inside was a dried bouquet of some kind of flower with lavender petals and a seedy cone-shaped center. When I touched the bouquet, the flowers shattered, a small thing that bothered me more than it should have.

I set off on the bicycle down the road I'd arrived on, noting that thankfully the farther away from the house I pedaled, the better the condition of the road. Still, the road was so narrow that if I were to encounter a car, I would probably stop and wait on the shoulder until it went by.

But thankfully, I didn't pass a car, and the route back to town was less complicated than I remembered.

And the town of Irving was much busier than I expected. Parked cars lined Main Street and the sidewalks were crowded with people. When I realized Main Street had been blocked off and American flags abounded, I gave myself a mental thump to the head.

I'd arrived in the middle of a Fourth of July parade.

Sure enough, a color guard of uniformed service men and women were marching toward me only a few yards away. I stopped, hopped off my bike, and hauled it to the sidewalk just as the group passed by. To my chagrin, the man holding the flag gave me an amused smile.

Sawyer King, looking very different in a dark blue dress military uniform.

My skin stung from embarrassment. And since I'd nearly crashed the parade, I felt obligated to stay and watch. The high school marching band was next, led by baton twirling majorettes. Then came floats of local organizations and businesses, beauty queens and kings of all ages riding in convertibles, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, vintage cars, floats for churches (a boggling number of churches for such a small town), and

bringing up the rear, horseback riders, some wearing costumes and riding decorated mounts. And it wasn't long before the horses revealed why they were last—so other participants didn't have to march through the mess they left on the street.

I wrinkled my nose from the smell, glad when the crowd began to disperse. I wheeled my bike along slowly, taking in the names of some of the businesses. Harding Hardware, Sophia's Jewelry & Watches, Blakemore Books.

Blakemore Books. A memory chord stirred in the back of my mind, but I couldn't recall why. Regardless, I intended to avoid it because if anyone in town might recognize my name, it would be someone associated with the bookstore.

And I'd come here to get away from all that.

I had turned my bike toward the hardware store when I noticed Sawyer King walking in my direction. Every few feet, someone stopped him to say something or shake his hand. The man was obviously some kind of hometown hero. He looked up and caught my gaze, gave me a head wave, then looked back to the person he was talking to.

I took advantage of his distraction to pivot, losing myself in the stream of people heading to (I overheard) something called a Bed Race, which turned out to be an entertaining and wildly unorganized spectacle. I kept an eye out for Sawyer King, but as it turned out, I didn't have to.

The man seemed to have disappeared. Pfew.

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I SNAPPED on a pair of white disposable latex gloves from the box I'd purchased at the hardware store. I was learning quickly that almost everything having to do with housesitting the Whisper House had less to do with sitting and more to do with getting my hands dirty. Since Kelly Brown the groundskeeper had yet to put in an appearance, I'd decided to tackle the job of gathering eggs. After watching multiple YouTube videos, I was suiting up.

With my Veronica Beard jeans stuffed down into my brand-new leather pull-on workboots, I approached the room-sized gray wooden chicken house with much trepidation. The black rooster who had invaded the house sat on the roof. When he spotted me, he began to flap and crow, posturing, which seemed to stir up the hens. Some of the ladies were pecking at grass and marigolds, and some were holed up inside the coop, but stuck their heads out to let me know I was the interloper here.

From the videos, I knew to approach slowly and calmly. I tried to pick my way around the incredible amounts of poo, but quickly realized that was impossible. I stopped in front of the first opening that had a little ramp leading up to it from the ground. Thankfully, it was empty. I used my new flashlight to shine a light inside to make sure I wasn't sticking my hand into the mouth (or tail) of some varmint. I gasped to see two eggs sitting on top of the straw. I picked up the first one but with too much enthusiasm because it broke in my hand. I grunted, then exercised more care gathering the second egg, which I placed in a basket lined with a soft towel. I felt around in the matted straw and found another egg and got that one, too. Feeling more confident, I moved to the next opening and found three more eggs there, and four in the next nest. By the time I reached the last opening, my basket was full, and I was feeling smug. Then a fat butterscotch-colored hen appeared in the opening, glaring at me as she settled on the nest.

“Hi, chicken,” I ventured in a soothing voice. “Are you a nice bird?”

I swallowed hard, then replaying a video in my head, I eased my hand toward her then slipped it under her to feel around. Her feathered body was warm, and heavier than I expected. My fingers closed around an egg, and I pulled it out. But apparently I moved too quickly because Butterscotch squawked and pecked my hand.

“Ow!” I yanked back and dropped the egg on the toe of my boot. I grimaced and tried again, this time more slowly. I found another egg, but got another peck and another broken egg for my trouble.

“Ow!”

This time she drew blood. And before I could react, she’d pecked me a half dozen more times, then flew at me, wings flapping.

I stumbled backward, flailing to defend myself, slipped on wet poo, and went down hard on my back. Air vacated my lungs, and I saw stars. My cheek felt wet, and I realized I had egg on my face, literally.

Another face appeared over mine.

“Are you okay?”

I screamed and flailed again, but realized I was doing snow angels in chicken crap and stopped. I blinked the upside down face into focus.

Sawyer King, who had swapped his military blues for blue jeans and an olive green US Army T-shirt.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I was driving to the cemetery to remove the flags,” he said, walking around until his face was right side up. “And I saw you were having a bad day.”

I opened my mouth to say I wasn’t in trouble, then I conceded defeat. “I’ve had better.”

He laughed, then reached a hand down to help me up. I took it and stood on wobbly legs, then groaned at the mess of broken shells and runny yolks on the ground. “I ruined the eggs.”

He nodded ruefully. “But that’s the beauty of laying hens—they make more. In fact, I’ll bet if you check again this evening, you’ll find more than enough for breakfast.” He peered at me, and I couldn’t imagine how bad I must look. “That was quite a fall—are you sure you’re okay?”

I nodded.

He leaned over to retrieve my empty basket, then handed it to me. “Hey, I saw you yesterday at the parade.”

“I know,” was the most non-committal thing I could think of to say.

He scratched his temple. “Okay... guess I’ll be going.” He began walking back to his black pickup. “Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow, Josephine.”

I balked. “How do you know my name?”

“Because,” he called, “you told Kelly Brown and Kelly told Dilbert Newberg and Dilbert told Shane Rhondell, and Shane told me.”

He climbed in his truck, then gave a wave and drove off.

I frowned after him until his truck was gone, then suddenly I frowned harder.

Why did he think he'd see me tomorrow?

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I WAS getting better at the egg-collecting. Sawyer was right—I'd found four fresh eggs when I'd checked again yesterday and three this morning. I'd used a broom to shoo Butterscotch from her nest before raiding it, and I managed not to crack them. And I was fascinated by the colors of the shells—some were light brown, some were more of a peach color and a couple were the most beautiful shade of pale green. I was on my way back to the house with my bounty when Sawyer's black truck rambled by in the direction of the cemetery. I surmised he must have family plots in the graveyard to spend so much time there.

The idea of a graveyard intrigued me—spending time where loved ones were buried. My family members who had passed had been cremated and their ashes either interred at imposing and impersonal mausoleums or scattered someplace unknown to me. The idea of visiting a grave seemed so much more personal... but also an obligation.

I went inside and scrambled a couple of the fresh eggs, feeling absurdly proud. And I now knew the pastel colors of the shells came from eating grass and bugs, and the bright orange yolks came from a diet of marigolds.

After breakfast I went up to my bedroom with a big mug of coffee, intent on finally getting some pages written on my novel. But when I sat down at my desk, I spent an inordinate amount of time rearranging files on my laptop and avoiding reading the synopsis I'd written for the story that despite a contract and a deadline and countless emails from readers clamoring for the next book in my Skirts Regency romance series, I couldn't seem to get motivated to write. After a couple of hours of mentally moving food around on my plate, I migrated to the window and picked up the binoculars I'd left on the sill. I gave the horizon a cursory glance, registering the

incredible lushness of this place before sliding my gaze toward the Whisper Graveyard.

It was easy to spot Sawyer because he was the only living thing moving among the headstones. In fact, he seemed focused on one headstone in particular—a monolith of pale stone. While I wondered if he was cleaning the grave or maybe decorating it, he reached for something on the ground, then raised it overhead.

I gasped—a sledgehammer?

He swung the hammer down and made contact with the stone, then lifted it again for another blow. I panicked—was he some kind of maniac who destroyed headstones for kicks?

I dropped the binoculars and jogged downstairs and out of the house. My bicycle was parked on the porch. I jumped on it and rode to the cemetery, not sure what I'd do when I got there. I wasn't equipped to deal with a hammer-wielding vandal. At the open gate, I hopped off my bike and leaned it against the gate post, then hurried over to where Sawyer was preparing to strike the headstone again.

“Hey!”

He stopped mid-swing and lowered the hammer to the ground. “Hey.”

“If you don't stop what you're doing, I'll...” My mind raced, then I lifted my chin. “I'll call the police.”

One of his eyebrows raised slightly. “Irving doesn't have police. The city council decided years ago to contract law enforcement out to the Birmingham.” Then he smiled. “Besides, I don't think the Birmingham police department cares about my little hobby.”

“Vandalizing?”

“Repairing old headstones.”

My mouth rounded. “Oh?”

“I’m a stone mason. On weekends I repair old headstones.” He gestured to the monolith marker he’d struck with the sledgehammer. “The base is broken on this one, so I have to remove the main stone to get to it, and some of these old beauties are hard to budge.”

I was nodding. “So you’re... not a vandal?”

“Nope. Kinda the opposite of that.”

I was still nodding. “Oh. Well... carry on.”

The man seemed amused. “I will. You can stay and watch, if you like.”

I bristled. “No, thanks. I’m... very busy. With an important work project of my own.”

He pursed his mouth. “What do you do?”

“I... would rather not discuss my work.” Was that my voice sounding so prim?

He smiled. “A woman of mystery.”

I balked. “I like my privacy.”

Sawyer inclined his head. “Understood. Sorry to pull you away from your important work project.”

I was nodding again. “I should get back to it.”

“Okay. Don’t let me keep you.”

At this point, the heroine in one of my books would’ve made a dramatic exit that left her adversary marveling at her wit and intellect or athletic prowess. I turned and marched back to the bicycle, mounted awkwardly, wobbled, and pedaled away.

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MY ENCOUNTER with Sawyer King was still pinging at me the next morning when his pickup rolled by the house toward the cemetery. I felt like an idiot for misinterpreting his good deed, and for overreacting when he asked about my vocation.

So I'd decided to take him a peace offering of fresh chicken eggs.

I was afraid the eggs wouldn't survive the bike ride over the rutted road, so I walked the short distance, with a little basket under my arm, feeling like Laura Ingalls Wilder. When I reached the metal gate I'd unlocked a few hours earlier, I almost turned back. Sawyer was erecting a tall wooden tripod over the pieces of the monolithic monument he'd been working on yesterday, which now lay in three pieces on a blue tarp. He was shirtless and his muscled back was shiny with sweat. The faded jeans he wore rode low on his hips. The moisture evaporated from my mouth.

This was a bad idea.

I turned to go, but I stepped on a twig and when it snapped it sounded to my ears like a gunshot.

He turned around and just as I feared, his front was as moist as his back. Except with a light matting of dark hair that had fallen out of trend in wake of manscaping tools and Instagram posing.

But I confess I prefer the natural look.

"Hey," he said with a wave.

“Hi,” I said.

He stepped away from the wood contraption and reached for a T-shirt hanging on a wheelbarrow. I know he was trying to be respectful, but stretching high to don the shirt and pull it over his shoulders pushed the PG-13 exposure into R-rated territory.

I squeezed my eyes closed.

“You okay?”

I opened my eyes, then rubbed at one of them. “Forgot my sunglasses.”

“You should get a hat.”

“A hat?”

He gave a little shrug. “You look like a hat person.”

My lips parted. I owned at least fifty hats, but I couldn’t bring myself to wear them in public.

“What’s in the basket?”

“Hm?”

He pointed to my arm. I looked down. “Oh. I brought you eggs.”

He smiled. “You did?”

“Only if you want them,” I said, back-pedaling. “I can’t possibly eat them all.”

He ambled toward me, then peered into the basket. “Thanks—I’ll have these for supper.”

Was he hinting that he cooked for himself because he lived alone?

“By the way, Coleman at the grocery will be happy to buy your extras. Fewer people around here fuss with chickens these days.”

“They are noisy,” I offered. “And dirty. And mean.”

He laughed. “They just need to get used to you, and you to them.”

But the way he said it made me think he wasn’t talking about chickens. “I won’t be around long enough for it to matter.”

“I heard you’d be here through the end of the year.”

I frowned. “Who told you that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t remember. Does it matter?”

To change the subject, I looked past him. “What’s all this?”

“Ah, so you do want to watch.”

At his self-satisfied tone, I smirked. “I’m just curious about your hobby.”

He walked back to the wood tripod and pointed to the wheel and cable hanging from the center. “This winch helps me lift and move the stones safely.” Then he grinned. “I understand you work with a different kind of wench altogether.”

At the outdated reference to the female characters in my historical books, my tongue lodged firmly in my cheek. “You Googled me.”

“I’m more of a DuckDuckGo guy, which I figured you would appreciate since you like your privacy.”

My cheeks flamed at the thought of this man reading the recent salacious headlines attached to my name. I handed the basket to him. “Enjoy the eggs.” Then I turned to walk away.

“Hey, I was kidding,” he called. “I read somewhere that your books are funny.”

I frowned harder and didn’t respond. My books were funny—that was the problem. After months of being the punchline of bawdy jokes, my funny had gone on hiatus.

And I was afraid it wasn’t coming back.

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WHAT WAS good for the goose was good for the gander, I decided. Into the search engine I typed “Sawyer King Irving Alabama” and hit enter.

Several pictures popped up, all candid taken by someone else. In some, he was identified as Captain Sawyer King in dress blues performing in the color guard or in fatigues assisting after regional disasters. In others he was photographed or filmed in civilian clothes preserving or restoring historical headstones, especially for graves of veterans, as far back as the Revolutionary War. Twice he was attributed as being a sculptor. I dug deeper and found an Instagram post of someone who’d purchased one of his pieces, a hawk on a tree branch made from white marble.

I frowned. The man was legit.

My phone buzzed and I glanced down to see another text from my friend Frida.

If you don’t call me this minute I’m contacting the FBI.

I sighed and reluctantly hit the call button. She answered before it could ring.

“Are you dead?” she demanded. “Because it’s impossible that you’ve been there a week and haven’t returned my calls. You’d better be dead.”

“I’m not dead,” I confirmed. “I texted you when I arrived.”

“And for all I know, some redneck axe murderer could’ve taken you out the minute you hit send.”

I smiled. “No axe murderers here. Just regular people. And chickens.”

“You’re taking care of chickens?”

“Well, so far they kind of take care of themselves, but I collect the eggs.”

“Seriously? To do what with them?”

I laughed. “Eat them.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Frida, where do you think eggs come from?”

“The supermarket.”

“Well, that’s half right.”

“What’s the house like?”

I glanced around the bedroom I’d adopted as my own. “It’s big—huge, in fact. And old. But I’m pretty much only living in the kitchen and one of the bedrooms. All the furniture is covered with sheets and for now I’m going to leave it that way.”

“Sounds spooky.”

“It is... a little.”

“Are you scared?”

“I was the first few nights, but now I’m getting used to the quiet.” I hesitated. “The

house came with a graveyard.”

“It sounded like you said ‘graveyard.’”

“I did. There’s a private graveyard on the property. I have to unlock the gate every morning and lock it back in the evening.”

“That’s insane!”

“I’m getting used to it.”

“Have you met any of the locals?”

“Um, not really. I had to buy a few supplies.” I pressed my lips together. “And there’s a guy who repairs headstones in the graveyard.”

“Wait—that’s a thing?”

“Apparently it’s a hobby of his.”

“Oh, so you’ve had some conversations with this guy?”

I picked up on the interest in her voice.

“Only because he saved me from a chicken. And because he’s in the graveyard all the time.” I made a face because I realized how next-level crazy that sounded, borne out by the stretch of silence on the other end.

“Do I need to send a rescue team?” Frida asked. “Cough if you’re being held against your will.”

I laughed. "I'm fine, really. How are things on that end?"

"I'm loving your apartment. And your bed linens—girl, what kind of thread count are those sheets?"

"Fifteen hundred," I said longingly. I did miss those sheets. "Any mail?"

"A couple of things," she said vaguely. "Bills, mostly."

I winced.

"And a couple of things with Curtis's name on them. Should I toss them?"

"Better not," I said miserably, "in case it's something I'm responsible for."

"Okay, but I don't like it." She sighed. "And you got a postcard from your mother."

My pulse blipped. "From where?"

"Greece, I think."

I exhaled. My mother, the famous British literary novelist, Vanessa Vanguard, was on an around the world tour with her new husband. I was hopeful she didn't know and wouldn't ever know about my scandal. She already thought I was throwing my life away writing romance novels. She didn't need another reason to disapprove of me.

"Send it when you can," I said, then gave her the mailing address of the Whisper House.

"Meanwhile, answer your damn phone," she admonished.

“I will,” I said. But when I ended the call, I turned off the ringer.

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I WALKED into Coleman's Grocery with a basket of eggs, feeling self-conscious. The busy little grocery looked shabby around the edges, but the floors were shiny clean, and the produce was better than anything I could buy in Manhattan, and at much lower prices.

An older man sweeping the floor noticed me. "Can I help you?"

I pointed to my basket. "I was told the grocery buys local eggs?"

He smiled. "I sure do. I'm Coleman. Are you new in town?"

"I'm staying at the Whisper House for a few months."

His expression changed for a few seconds, then he recovered. "Okay. Let's see what you got."

I followed him to an office the size of a closet and watched while he examined the eggs with his big fingers.

"How many?"

"Three dozen, and six are double yolks."

He nodded and seemed impressed with my YouTube-garnered knowledge. "Okay. How does three dollars a dozen sound?"

I smiled. "Sounds fine." It occurred to me I hadn't been this happy about making nine

dollars since I was a teenager.

“Cash or credit?”

“Credit, please. I need to pick up a few things while I’m here.”

He pulled out a receipt book and wrote me a credit slip for the amount, then tore it out.

“How are things out at the Whisper House?”

“Okay, I suppose.” I angled my head. “Did you know the family?”

He gave me a flat smile. “Everyone around here knew the Whisper family.”

“Have they been gone long?”

He hesitated a split-second, then handed me the credit slip. “You be careful in that house, you hear?” Then he shepherded me out and resumed sweeping.

I bit into my lip. Obviously, I needed to do some more Googling.

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BUT WITHOUT family names, I couldn't find any information online about the house or the Whisper family. I ventured into the other bedrooms and did some poking around. The bedroom at the opposite corner seemed the most updated. I opened the closet door and found lots of simple, slender dresses that were timeless, so it was hard to tell the age of the wearer. But the stale air told me it had been a while since the clothing had been stirred.

In the dresser I found more casual clothes—sturdy pants and long-sleeve shirts. And personal items belonging to a woman in her thirties, if I had to guess—makeup, costume jewelry, a sewing kit.

I smiled—whoever she was, she liked to read romance novels. The room was littered with paperbacks ranging from contemporary romcoms to the classic gothic novels I'd grown up on written by Phyllis Whitney, Victoria Holt, and Mary Stewart. I opened one of the books and found the name "Rose Whisper" written on the inside.

I ran my finger over her name, wondering about her identity and why she wasn't in the house. Maybe like my mother, she'd taken a long vacation, or had moved away.

Then a disturbing thought floated into my brain.

Maybe she'd died.

I found a photo album and opened it to find photos of a young girl growing up on the property—I recognized rooms and the chicken house in the background. The photos thinned out as she'd grown older and the last few were of her between a man and a woman I assumed were her parents. The photos had ended abruptly except for one

showing the woman, now in her late twenties, I guessed, smiling through her outstretched fingers, protesting having her picture taken.

I heard a rumbling noise from the road. My first thought that it was Sawyer's truck was banished when I realized it sounded like a heavier vehicle. I closed the photo album and returned to my bedroom to investigate from the window.

A flatbed delivery truck was carefully navigating the rutted, narrow road. In the open back were at least a dozen shiny new gravestones, lined up and strapped down. Obviously the driver had a delivery for the Whisper Graveyard.

Curiosity drove me to exit the house and follow the truck. It was parked outside the gate when I arrived, and the driver, a burly, bearded man, was using a hand truck to roll a pale headstone with a curved top down a ramp. At the bottom he paused to wipe his brow, then saw me and offered a wave. "Howdy. You the caretaker here?"

"Um... I guess so."

"I just need someone to sign the manifest and say you saw me drop off this headstone."

"I can do that," I agreed. "Do you know where it goes?"

"Yeah, I got the plot number. The local funeral home will be out to set it."

He handed me the clipboard. I studied the typed form detailing one marble headstone. Under "Inscription" was the name and date chiseled into the gravestone. I froze.

Rose Whisper. Beloved. Born January 2, 1992. Died February 14, 2024.

The woman was young, about my age. And she'd died less than five months ago.

But how?

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I STUDIED the photos I'd taken of the headstones of the Whisper family. Some of them dated back to the late 1800s. Before Rose, the most recent deaths were of a man named Charles and a woman named Sophia. The age of the couple was right for them to be Rose's parents and considering the proximity of her unmarked plot to theirs, it made sense. Then I realized the dates of death for Charles and Sophia were the same—a tragic car accident, maybe? The year would've meant Rose was only seventeen or eighteen when her parents had died.

My heart squeezed for her loss. I'd lost my father when I was fourteen and at times I still missed him so much I didn't think I could stand it.

Armed with new names and dates, I went back to the internet to search for more information. I found a tiny article on the deaths of two locals, Charles and Sophia Whisper, in a tragic car accident near their home in Irving, Alabama. Their teenaged daughter Rose had survived the crash.

And I found the obituary for Rose Whisper. There was no cause of death listed, only that there would be a private memorial service at a future date.

My phone buzzed and I looked down to see my mother's glamorous headshot on the screen. I winced, but realized I had to talk to her sooner or later. And hopefully, she was on a luxury schooner somewhere, calling me from a satellite phone, blissfully unaware that my life had exploded.

I connected the call. "Hi, Mom."

"Josephine, what the fuck happened with Curtis?"

I winced. The cat was out of the bag. “Um, we broke up.”

“Broke up? That’s putting it mildly. It sounds like the man took you for every-fucking-thing you had. Well, I hope you don’t expect me to support you.”

Like a lot of British people, my mother used the eff word as a noun, verb, adverb, adjective, and gerund. “Of course not. I’ll be fine.”

“You couldn’t have given me a heads up? I have to be fucking blindsided on a zoom interview with Anderson Cooper that my daughter was taken in by a fucking con man?”

“I’m sorry, Mother. I didn’t want to interrupt your vacation.”

“I knew that man couldn’t be trusted. He was too young and too fucking handsome for you.”

What could I say? Hadn’t I thought the same thing a thousand times?

“Don’t let this affect your writing.”

I already had. “I won’t.”

“The book industry is in fucking freefall, even for the pornography end of the business that you write for. You can’t give your editor a reason to cancel your contract.”

I bit my tongue, hard. “I won’t.”

“I’ll be in New York in two weeks. I’ll hook you up with a publicist who’ll start a smear campaign against fucking Curtis.”

I grimaced. “I don’t want that. And I’m not in New York. I left to allow everything to quiet down.”

“Not in New York? Where are you? Los Angeles? Chicago?”

“Um, Irving, Alabama.”

“Alabama? Is this a fucking joke?”

“Um, no. I’m staying in a house in a rural area to finish my book.” I scrambled for words to make the situation sound better than it was. “It’s like a retreat.”

“Oh. Well, that doesn’t sound too bad, I suppose. How is the book coming along?”

“Great,” I lied.

“When is your deadline?”

Two months ago. “Not for a while yet.”

“It’s a good thing you can write those smutty books quickly. You’d be in trouble if you were writing in a category as demanding as mine.”

“I know,” I said agreeably. “Where are you?”

“In Venice. And I have to go. I’m having dinner on a TV producer’s yacht.”

Of course she was. “Sounds fantastic. Take care, Mom.”

“Goodbye, Josephine.”

The call ended and my mother's photo disappeared from the screen. Such a metaphor. Things had gone about the way I thought they would. I exhaled and set aside the phone, then turned back to the information on my laptop screen.

In the article and in Rose's obituary, there was no mention of other family members. It made me wonder if after the accident Rose had returned to the huge house to live alone.

And if the remote solitude had helped her recover... or had made things worse.

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I HAD ridden my bike down to the cemetery to close and lock the gate just before darkness. When I got there, a late-model dark sedan with Fulton County, Georgia tags was parked in front of the gate. I hadn't seen or heard the car pass the house, which made me realize I wasn't always aware when someone drove onto the property.

The thought was unsettling, but I was getting used to feeling off-balance. I was still digesting the information that Rose Whisper had probably been the last inhabitant of the house and had died. I was starting to have nightmares that maybe she'd died in the house, that she'd fallen down the stairs or had been pecked to death by a chicken. Or bitten by one of the several thousand poisonous snakes I was sure lived in the grass surrounding the house that was now well past my knees.

I hoped how soon Kelly Brown recovered and could get back to groundskeeping duties. The chicken coop was also in need of tending—the straw nests were dirty and reeked of poo.

I stopped at the gate and quietly leaned my bike against the post. Inside the cemetery on the “have-nots” side, a tall, broad-shouldered man wearing a suit stood with his hand on a simple white gravestone. I could tell from his body language that he had loved the person buried there. Indeed, as I watched, he passed a hand over his eyes, I assumed to absorb moisture. Then he knelt to lower a small bouquet of flowers to the base of the monument. When he straightened, he noticed me.

“Hello,” he offered.

“Hello,” I said. “I didn't mean to intrude. I came to lock the gate but take as long as you want.”

“It’s okay, I’m ready to leave.”

He walked toward me, his face still grim with whatever thoughts he’d been processing. Then he passed and strode to his car, swung inside, turned the car around, and drove away.

Burning with curiosity, I walked over to the headstone. Serena Benson, loving daughter and friend. The woman had died several years prior, and had died young, in her late twenties. There were other Benson headstones around. In lieu of a headstone, some of the early Benson graves were covered with slabs of shiny granite.

I wondered what had happened to the young woman and who the man had been to her. A brother? A friend? A lover? A grieving husband? Because the big handsome man had definitely been wearing a wedding ring.

And I’d seen the flash of a police badge at his waist.

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All night my dreams were haunted by young women dying and being buried together in the Whisper Graveyard. They were all sitting on their gravestones, with their hands stretched out to me. Help us... or join us.

A loud bang! jarred me awake. Bright daylight streamed through my window. I'd overslept. My mind raced to identify the noise.

Bang!

My bedroom door jostled. Terror gripped my heart. Someone was in the hallway, trying to break down my door. Thank goodness I'd gotten into the habit of locking my door before I went to bed.

"Wh-Who's there?" I shouted.

Bang! The door rattled again.

I leapt out of bed and ran to my window to climb out onto the Juliet balcony. My heart pounded against my chest. I estimated the damage I'd endure when I jumped into the deep grass—if I didn't break both my legs, I'd probably be eaten alive by snakes. But both seemed less likely than being killed by whoever was intent on breaking down my bedroom door. I climbed to sit on the edge of the railing, trying to work up the nerve to jump. I heard a noise coming down the road and my heart soared to see Sawyer's black truck rolling up.

"Help!" I screamed, waving my arms. "Help me!"

The truck came to an abrupt halt in front of the house. Sawyer jumped out and ran toward the house. “Josephine! What’s wrong?”

“Someone’s in the house, trying to break down my bedroom door!”

He disappeared under the roof of the porch. I heard the distant sound of glass breaking. Inside, my bedroom door was still being viciously kicked—it couldn’t withstand much more. My heart was in my throat when I realized Sawyer had to confront an angry intruder—he could be hurt, or worse. And crazily, my mind went to Rose Whisper—had she lost her life at the hands of an intruder?

I heard the pounding of feet as Sawyer ran up the stairs, and then....

Laughter?

The kicking abruptly stopped, and I could hear Sawyer’s voice scolding someone. I frowned, confused. Then a knock on the door sounded.

“Josephine? It’s okay. Open up.”

I climbed off the railing and stepped back into the room, then fumbled to unlock the door. I opened it gingerly.

To find Sawyer holding back a hooved white furry animal with floppy ears. It opened its mouth and bleated at me.

“Your intruder,” Sawyer said with some amusement, “is a goat.”

I frowned. “How did it get into the house?”

“Good question. I’ll take him downstairs and try to find out while you...” He looked

me up and down and I realized I was wearing only a thin nightgown.

“Right,” I said, then closed the door. I changed quickly into jeans and T-shirt, then pulled on sneakers and hurried downstairs. The kitchen had been ransacked. The refrigerator door stood open. Broken eggs and other food lay on the floor. Jars and baskets had been pulled off counters, chairs overturned. Sawyer was repairing the narrow door leading from the outside into the kitchen.

“He must’ve kicked in the lower panels,” Sawyer said. “I added some reinforcement so it won’t happen again. It’s not pretty, but it’s secure.”

“Thank you,” I murmured. “Where did the goat come from?”

“He belongs here. He must’ve gotten loose and just now found his way back.”

I wet my lips. “You seem to know a lot about this place.”

He shrugged. “When I was a teenager, I mowed the grass for the owners.”

“That was Charles and Sophia?”

“You’ve been doing your homework. Yes, they lived here then.”

“And Rose?”

Sawyer’s expression darkened. “Yes. She lived here with her parents until they died.”

“What happened to them?”

“Murder, suicide.”

“I thought it was a car accident.”

“They were in a car when it happened. Rose was in the back seat.”

I winced. “That’s awful.”

He nodded. “Rose went to live with relatives in another state.”

“But she came back?”

“About a year ago.”

“How did she die? I know it was recent. Her headstone was delivered a couple of days ago.”

“We’re not sure,” he said. “Suspected suicide... overdose.”

I swallowed hard. “Where did it happen?”

“She was found in the graveyard.”

“Found?”

He shifted from foot to foot. “I found her.”

I gasped. “How terrible for you.”

“Anything else you want to know?” he asked sharply.

I blinked.

“Sorry,” he said quickly, pulling a hand over his mouth. “It just brings up bad memories.” He gestured to the mess in the kitchen. “Do you need a hand cleaning this up?”

“No,” I said, a little stung by his reaction to my questions.

“Okay, then, I’ll try to find a rope to tie up your goat.”

“He’s not my goat,” I protested.

He gave me a wry smile. “He is now.”

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I'D NOTICED Sawyer had left the day before soon after tying "my" goat to a tree with a rope long enough to let it graze, without going to the cemetery to work on the monolith restoration. Obviously he was still harboring troubling thoughts about finding Rose Whisper deceased in the graveyard.

And rightfully so.

My musings about whether he'd be back today were answered when I saw his truck roll by while I was gathering eggs. He raised his hand in a wave, and I waved back. After a while, I filled a thermos with iced tea and rode my bike down.

The man was shirtless again.

For most of my career, I'd silently lamented the bare-chested, long-haired men my publisher had put on the covers of my books, in a clench with a begowned woman swooning in his arms. It was what the readers wanted, but I had always wished for something a little more upmarket to squash disparaging remarks I and other romance novelists endured from people both inside and outside the industry.

Including my mother.

But standing there watching Sawyer's body ripple and move from exertion, I suddenly understood why readers liked it.

For the first time, I kind of liked it myself.

With the help of the winch, he was lowering the repaired base of the monument into

the ground. When it was in place, he moved in with a tool I recognized as a level, then nodded with satisfaction and stepped back.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

His head swung around. “Slow. But I’m getting there.”

I lifted the thermos. “I brought tea if you’d like some.”

He smiled. “Yes please.”

I pushed down the stirring in my midsection and poured tea into two plastic cups.

He gestured to a concrete bench a few feet away. “Want to sit?”

I nodded and followed him over. I sat as far away from him as I could, but it was a small bench. I could practically feel the heat emanating from his body.

“I Googled you,” I said. “You’re a captain?”

“In the Army Reserves—it’s part-time service.”

“And you’re a sculptor?”

His eyebrows went up. “Wow, you had to go to the third or fourth page of search results to find that.”

I laughed. “I saw one of your pieces. You’re very good.”

“Thanks. But most of what I do is much less artistic—firepits, stone walkways, retaining walls.”

“And you spend the rest of your time restoring headstones?”

“Most weekends when the weather allows. It’s peaceful work.”

Something in his eyes made me wonder if his childhood had been chaotic, like mine.

“Do you have family around here?”

He shook his head. “My family’s all in Atlanta. I used to come here with a buddy to hunt, so when it came time to settle down, I bought a place here.”

I wet my lips. “Settle down? So there’s a wife and kids?”

He laughed. “No. I live alone.” He took a drink from his cup, then cleared his throat. “I would ask the same, but...”

“But you read about my engagement to a con man online?”

“I don’t believe everything I read, especially on social media.”

I sighed. “You can in this case.”

“Sounds like a guy who needs to be punched in the face.”

“Yeah, but didn’t you read all the comments? I deserved it.”

“No one deserves that kind of betrayal,” he said, then abruptly pushed to his feet. “I should get back to work.”

“Oh, right,” I said, then downed the rest of my tea and stood.

He handed me back the cup. “Thanks for the break. I just need to finish this today. I

have reservist duty next weekend and I don't want this to sit for too long."

"I understand," I said.

I gathered the thermos and walked back to my bike, then rode back to the house, massaging at a pinging sensation in my chest. I reasoned it was the caffeine in the tea kicking in.

It couldn't be... anything else.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

IT WAS more foggy than usual when I walked to the graveyard to unlock the gate. It had rained overnight, and the mist enveloped me past my tall leather boots. When I reached the graveyard, it looked as if it was boiling, with rolling wisps rising from the ground and licking at the gravestones. As I unlocked the gate, I heard a noise and startled to see a shrouded figure standing a few feet away in the road.

“Howdy,” the woman said. She wore a broad-brim hat, a long sleeve tunic, and pants stuffed into rugged boots. She held a tall walking stick upright and carried a sling bag. “Who’re you?”

“I’m Josephine,” I ventured. “I’m staying at the Whisper House. Can I help you?”

She scoffed. “You need to help yourself.”

“Excuse me?”

“That house is cursed. Bad things happen to people who stay there.”

I had news for her—bad things had happened to me before I came to the house.

“What do you mean?”

“You deaf girl? Bad things.”

I frowned. “I heard you, I just don’t believe you.”

“Neither did Rose.”

A finger of fear nudged the back of my neck. “You knew Rose?”

“I know everyone round these parts.” The woman laughed, revealing she had no teeth. “I’m older than the trees.”

And a little touched in the head, no doubt. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Muriel. I’m a picker.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

She opened her bag to show me it was full of green and brown things. “I pick leaves and berries and whatever else the Good Lord provides. Whisper Graveyard is one of the best places to find things because most people won’t come near it.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“Because of the witches,” she said bluntly.

My eyebrows flew up. “Witches?”

“The witches are buried here,” she said. She walked into the graveyard, then used her stick to point to the graves covered with a sheet of granite. “Those two were so strong, they covered their graves with a stone so they couldn’t get out.”

A shudder passed over my shoulders. “That’s folklore.”

“Don’t mean it ain’t true,” she said, then shuffled to the edge of the graveyard where she stooped to dig up something that looked like a weed. She stuffed it into her bag, then pointed at me again. “You’ve been warned, Missy.”

I gave her a shaky smile, then backed out of there and practically jogged back to the house, looking over my shoulder.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

AFTER DROPPING off eggs at the grocery, I walked outside to put my purchased items into the bike's basket. It was especially hot today, and I was wishing I had one of my hats to protect me from the searing sun.

Maybe I'd ask Frida to send me a few.

"You're Josephine Vanguard."

I froze at the unknown male voice, then slowly turned my head. A man I guessed to be in his mid-forties stood there, his face mildly handsome, his chinos and button-up shirt more dressy than average for this area. "Do I know you?"

"No." He extended a smile. "I'm Wayne Blakemore. I own the local bookstore."

My stomach pinched. "Oh. Hello."

"You have a lot of fans around here," he said quickly. "Romance flies off the shelf."

I gave him a bland smile. "That's nice. I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"If you'd ever consider doing a signing at my store, I'd be thrilled."

"I'm busy working on a manuscript."

"I know. My customers can hardly wait for the next Skirts book. When will it be out?"

“I don’t have a release date yet.” Because I didn’t have a manuscript yet.

“Your mother did an event at my store a few years ago.”

I blinked. “She did?”

“When she was doing a book tour for *The Color of Yesterday* .”

“Oh. That’s nice.”

“We’re a little off the beaten path here,” he conceded, “but there was a rumor going around at the time that we were a reporting store for the New York Times Bestseller List.”

“Is that so?” The list of NYT reporting stores was supposed to be top-secret, but I’d heard rumors it was circulated to select authors, agents and editors in the industry. It didn’t surprise me to learn my mother had tried to game the system.

“Okay, I might’ve started that rumor,” he said with a laugh, “but we attracted some big names, and it allowed me to expand.”

“I really have to go,” I said, walking my bike to the curb.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a card. “I’m sorry about everything you’ve been going through. If you ever want a sympathetic ear, call me. Maybe we could do lunch?”

“Thanks,” I said in a non-committal tone, then pocketed the card. I climbed on my bike and rode away, legs pumping. A hot rush of anxiety flooded my chest. I couldn’t hide out much longer.

I needed to finish writing the book.

Ack, I need to start writing the book.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

I WAS sitting in a wicker chair on the wraparound porch, expanding the outline of my manuscript in my notebook, when an orange vehicle pulled up and parked near the chicken coop. It was an old El Camino, half-car, half truck. The back held a large riding lawnmower and some other tools.

A wide person emerged, dressed in yellow spandex and workboots. They waved. “Hiya, I’m Kelly. Finally shook the crud. Whew, look at this grass, why don’t you? Gonna take me a while to knock it down.”

“Hi, Kelly.” I still couldn’t tell if Kelly was male or female—not that it mattered. I just felt gauche asking, so I didn’t.

“I see Satan is back.”

“Satan?”

“The goat. He’s trouble.”

“I know. He broke into the house and destroyed the kitchen.”

“Sounds about right. I’ll make a pen for him. And pee-ew, I can smell the chicken coop from here. I’ll fix that, too.”

“Thanks. I’ve been gathering the eggs.”

“Yeah, Coleman at the grocery told me you’d been by... and Wayne said he talked to you yesterday.” Kelly grinned. “I think he has a crush on you.”

News spread like wildfire in Irving. I was starting to realize hiding out in a small town might've been an error in judgement.

On the other hand, I realized Kelly might be a source of information. "How long have you been looking after things around here?"

"Not long—a couple of months."

My shoulders sagged. "So you didn't work for Rose Whisper?"

Kelly's eyes widened. "Nobody wanted that job. Rose Whisper was a witch."

I wet my lips. "You mean, she was difficult to work for?"

Kelly scoffed. "No, she was a witch, like the kind that ride broomsticks and shit."

Kelly turned and strode back to the vehicle, whistling under their breath.

But the casual proclamation left my hair standing on end.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

WHEN MY phone buzzed, I glanced at the screen and my stomach seized up.

It was Bruce, my editor.

I didn't want to answer, but Bruce didn't leave messages. He would keep calling until I picked up. So I picked up.

"Hi, Bruce."

"Josie, my favorite writer—next to your mom, of course. She called me."

I frowned. "My mom called you?"

"Sure did. Said this mess with your fiancé had driven you underground, and I should reach out."

I pushed my tongue into my cheek. "She shouldn't have."

"She said you were in Arkansas?"

"Alabama," I corrected. "I, um, rented a house in the country to finish my book."

"That sounds extreme, but whatever works. So how is the book coming along?"

"Pretty well," I said, stalling.

"Good," he oozed. "When will I see it?"

I grimaced. “Let me think about it and I’ll email you a new schedule.”

“Email is for Boomers, darling. Text or nothing.”

“Okay.”

“Your mom thinks you should do some publicity, and considering the bad press your, um, boyfriend generated, that’s not a bad idea.”

“I think it’s best to let things die down. Besides, I’d rather spend the time writing.”

“Just one or two small events so your readers don’t think you have writers block.”

I swallowed hard. “No, we wouldn’t want anyone to think that.”

“The town where you’re staying in Arkansas—does it have a bookstore?”

“It’s Alabama. There’s a small bookstore here called Blakemore’s.”

“Blakemore’s... that sounds familiar. He snapped his fingers. “I think that’s a New York Times reporting store.”

I rolled my eyes. “Have you now?”

“Why don’t you set up a signing there, something cozy to get a few photos of you to publish to our social media accounts?”

“I’ll look into it,” I promised.

“Do more than that,” Bruce said, his voice deceptively light. “I need something to show the editorial staff you haven’t gone AWOL.”

My stomach crimped again. “Message received.”

“I hope so. Bye, darling.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

I WAS walking to the cemetery carrying my gigantic flashlight in case the sun set before I could lock the gate and racewalk back to the house. At a rumbling noise behind me, I turned to see a small bus lurching over the uneven road, going much too fast. I jumped into the ditch to get out of the way as it sped by.

Who would be visiting the cemetery at this hour?

On a bus?

By the time I reached the gate, the bus had parked and a couple of dozen people had disembarked. A white-haired woman wearing a colorful caftan seemed to be leading the motley group of people. She passed out flashlights, then clapped her hands and they all crowded around as dusk descended.

I gathered it was some kind of tour. I stopped at the gate to watch and listen.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the woman announced in a ringmaster’s voice, “this is the infamous Whisper Graveyard. There are more alleged witches buried here than anywhere else in the south. Two families—the Benson family and the Whisper family—lived here in Irving. They’re reputed to have descended from witches burned during the Salem witch trials, and they fled here to hide out.”

I smirked. Irving seemed to be the place people went when they wanted to disappear.

“Despite an ages-old rivalry between the families, they had to depend on each other, and they worshipped together. The Whisper family was much more prosperous, and they allowed the Benson family to bury their dead here, although you can see the

distinctive divide where the Whispers were buried on one side and the Bensons on the other.”

She indicated the center path with a flourish of her arms.

“Then the unthinkable happened—Charles Whisper and Sophia Benson fell in love, infuriating both families and renewing the feud. The Whispers and the Bensons allegedly turned their black magic on each other. Charles and Sophia’s romance was a true Romeo and Juliet story that sadly ended in a suspected murder-suicide.” She pointed to their graves and sighed.

“And the worst part of this sad story is that Charles and Sophia had a child named Rose. Besides being beautiful, she was allegedly a Grand High Witch, the most powerful kind of witch known to the Wiccan religious. But she, too, died tragically in this very cemetery only a few months ago, her cause of death, unknown.”

I frowned. It didn’t seem right that the woman was embellishing Rose’s overdose for the sake of the story.

“And you are my first group to see Rose’s headstone. Gather around, quickly. For darkness is falling and who knows what could happen if we tarry.”

The group rushed forward to see Rose’s headstone, then just as quickly rushed back to the bus, staring at me as if I might suddenly elevate.

“Please hurry,” I announced loudly. “I need to lock the gate.”

“Yes, hurry,” the woman said, shooing them. “The gates have to be locked to keep the witches’ spirits within the cemetery.”

I snagged her arm as she passed. “That’s not remotely true.”

She gave me a haughty look, then leaned in. “Really? Then leave the gate unlocked and see what happens.”

She palmed a card into my hand, then climbed onto the bus. When the vehicle pulled away, the woman was staring at me through a rear window.

I pushed down a sense of foreboding. I knew fiction when I heard it.

But I locked the gate anyway.

And ran all the way back to the house.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

“I’M SO glad you called,” Wayne said with a broad smile.

We were seated at a table in B’s Diner, the nicest eatery in Irving and by the size of the lunch crowd, popular with the locals.

“When my editor suggested I do some publicity while I finish writing my book, I remembered your offer to host a signing.”

“I’d love to,” Wayne gushed. “And maybe a little talk beforehand with a sneak preview of the new book?”

I bit into my turkey BLT. “Maybe,” I said, nodding.

“You know,” Wayne said through a mouthful of roast beef, “I’m a bit of a writer myself.”

I stopped chewing. “Really?”

“Really,” he said. “I’m writing a horror novel.”

I resumed chewing. “I’m afraid I don’t have any expertise in horror.”

“Still, would you mind reading it? I’d love to get your feedback, just to see if you think it has potential.”

Bruce’s veiled warning replayed in my mind. I needed to ensure this was a good event. “Sure, no problem. Maybe you could give it to me at the signing?”

He reached into his messenger bag and withdrew a thick sheath of papers. “I have it right here.” He blushed. “Just in case you agreed.”

“Oh. Okay.” I took the manuscript and glanced over the title page. “ War of the Witches . Interesting title.”

“Thank you. It’s actually based on a true story. Well—as true as these things can be, if you believe in the supernatural.”

“I don’t,” I said easily, “but I’ll read it and let you know what I think.”

“Great,” he said, beaming. “And hey, if you want to pass your manuscript to me to get my feedback, you know, writer to writer, I’d be glad to help.”

I swallowed a bite without chewing. “Thanks.” I wasn’t insulted... actually, I was envious.

Wayne Blakemore had a finished manuscript, and I didn’t.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

I WAS awake before dawn, worrying about the writing I wasn't getting done. I finally turned on a lamp and reached for the notebook where I'd been scratching out notes about my characters. The heroine was fresh off a romantic betrayal and had written off men. The hero was a brooding stonemason who seemed to have secrets of his own. Their physical attraction had caught them both off guard. But they knew if they acted on it, it could release a torrent of emotion neither one of them was ready for—

I heard the sound of a car engine going past the house toward the cemetery. I set aside my notebook and went to the window, curious as to what could bring someone to a graveyard at five in the morning.

Then another car passed. And another.

Something was going on.

I quickly changed into clothes I could walk in. If they wanted to visit family graves, I would have to unlock the gate.

Because it was a full moon, I didn't need my giant flashlight. The moon was so bright in the cloudless pre-dawn, it was practically like daylight. I pedaled to the cemetery, wondering if it was another tour group. When I arrived a clump of six people were standing at the gate. At first I thought they were waiting, then I realized they were all walking in some kind of a pattern in front of the gate and chanting something I couldn't make out.

But I could easily make out the wood symbol that each person was holding aloft.

A Wiccan pentagram.

I stopped and hung back. Another car pulled up and two figures alighted, both of them young women with long blond hair. They looked like teenagers and appeared to be twins. They rushed up to the group and joined in, although it seemed as if they were unfamiliar with the ritual. The other members of the group instructed them, pointing to something on the ground that I couldn't see from this distance.

It occurred to me it was no coincidence that they were performing a ritual on the same day as the full moon.

I was witnessing a bona fide gathering of witches.

I turned to go before anyone noticed me. As I hurried past the last car that had arrived, I noticed it had a vanity license plate: BNSNTWNS

Benson twins.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

WHEN I jarred awake Monday morning, the house was quiet.

Too quiet.

No humming of lights, no buzzing of appliances.

I dragged myself up to investigate and found my laptop was dead. After a blip of panic, I realized that everything was dead. The electricity was off.

I found Kelly's number and connected the call.

"This is Kelly."

"Hi, Kelly. This is Josephine at Whisper House. The electricity is off."

"Yeah, figured that was coming."

I frowned. "This happens regularly?"

"Pretty much, always after a full moon."

I shook my head. "What does a full moon have to do with it?"

"You tell me. It takes a lot of power to take out a transformer."

"But we haven't had any storms."

“I didn’t say it was lightning.”

“But what else could it be?”

Kelly sighed. “I’ll call Buck at the power company and tell him to send someone out. They know the drill.”

“Okay,” I murmured. “How long will it take? I need to use my laptop.” Yesterday I’d written the first six pages of my book—a monumental feat.

Kelly made a sucking sound through their teeth. “Yeah, I wouldn’t count on your computer working when things come back up. It’s probably been zapped. Sorry about that.”

Kelly ended the call, and I balled my hands into fists. “Ooh!”

My anger over the pages I’d bled evaporating was surpassed only by my incredulity that during the full moon something around the Whisper House had generated so much power, it had zapped a transformer. My mind went back to the ritual I’d witnessed.

Something... or someone?

Page 23

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

AFTER DROPPING the extra eggs at the grocery, I rode my bike to the public library, hoping to find more information about the local witchery situation.

I told myself it was a legit distraction while I waited for my new laptop to be delivered.

The library was an old building—the oldest in town that I’d seen, made of hand-hewn bricks and other natural stones.

I would have ask Sawyer about its origin when I saw him again.

If I saw him again. He’d finished the repair of the monolithic headstone, so he didn’t have a good reason to be back my way... which was probably for the best.

I pushed open the door to the ancient building and walked in on worn wooden floors. The architecture on the inside was just as impressive, with a domed atrium whose ceiling was painted with a foreboding Biblical scene.

No signs of witches here—Christianity was on full display.

“Can I help you?”

I turned to see an attractive woman I guessed to be in her forties standing behind a tall desk, processing a pile of books.

“Yes, I’d like to find some books on—” I glanced at her nameplate and stopped. Tilda Benson.

“Book on what topic?” she prompted me.

“Um, I noticed your nameplate. Your last name is Benson?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

Was it me, or had her eyes become guarded? “I was told the Benson family has been around this area for a long time.”

She nodded. “That’s right. Are you a new resident of Irving?”

“I’m just visiting. Do you have a big family?”

“I’m one of three sisters, although one of them has passed. My other sister has two daughters, and so do I. Twins, in fact.”

“Twins?” I parroted. The two young women I’d seen at the graveyard? Had Tilda been there as well? “That’s so... special.”

The woman smiled. “I think so. Er, what topic were you interested in?”

I looked at my watch. “Actually, I’ll have to come back another time.”

“Okay. Have a nice day.” But her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

I skedaddled out of there, feeling like I’d brushed against something evil.

Which was nonsense, I told myself.

I didn’t believe in the supernatural.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

I WAS still waiting for my laptop, but until it arrived, I sat on the wraparound porch and poured a sudden bout of productivity into my notebook. My characters had finally taken shape in my head, and I'd filled the pages with snippets of dialogue, descriptions of settings, sensory details I wanted to impart, and full scenes that seemed to scroll out of my head onto the page.

My hero, Logan, was quickly becoming one of my favorite heroes to write. It was difficult to depict a man of the Regency era with an artistic vision. Fair or not, my readers preferred their men on the page to be alpha and to hold positions and titles that afforded them to purchase whatever art and sculptures they needed to furnish their lavish castles, versus making it themselves.

But I'd made Logan a stone mason and a third son who'd never expected to inherit a title and had made his fortune in brick-making. After a tragedy takes the lives of both elder brothers, he finds himself suddenly a Duke. Logan is having trouble assuming the social airs of someone at his new station. He keeps tripping over himself and saying the wrong things. I hadn't had this much fun with a character in a long while.

I closed the notebook, satisfied and relieved that I was finally getting somewhere. When my computer arrived, I was confident I'd be able to transcribe at least fifty pages of manuscript to build upon.

On the table next to my chair sat Wayne's daunting manuscript. I picked it up and scanned the first ten pages, praying it was good.

It was not.

I sighed and put the manuscript down, hoping it would get better as it went on. But for now, I didn't have the... energy... to read... it....

I dozed and enjoyed pleasant dreams of Logan my hero arriving in a black pickup—er, on a black horse... calling up to me as I sat on the rail of my Juliet balcony, wearing a voluminous gown, ready to jump into his arms because something was chasing me... nibbling at me... licking me—

I started awake and cried out to see Satan the goat's tongue reaching out for another taste. He bleated at me. The beast had gotten loose. From the frayed edge of rope around his neck, it appeared he'd chewed his way to freedom. He was standing on his hind legs, with his front legs on the table next to my chair and he was...

Oh, dear God, no...

Chewing the remnants of my notebook and...

Oh, dear God, no ...

The last bits of Wayne's manuscript.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

WHEN I arrived at the cemetery gate the next morning, the old woman Muriel was once again waiting with her foraging bag and her walking stick. She gave me a toothless smile as I inserted the key into the padlock.

“Do you lock the gate to keep humans out, or to keep the spirits in?”

Her nonsensical question reminded me of the kooky tour guide. Instead of responding, I decided to change the subject. “Do you have anything in your bag to kill a goat?”

She cackled. “No. Goats are good, they eat trash.”

Everyone was a critic. I swung the gate open. “Have a nice day.”

“I hear the witches are back,” she said.

I sighed. “Okay, I’ll play along. Why are they back?”

“To choose a new leader. Their rose in bloom is gone.”

I shrugged. “That has nothing to do with me.”

“They will need a sacrifice.”

A chill went up my back, then I frowned. “You’re trying to scare me.”

“And are you scared, Missy?”

“No,” I retorted, then turned to walk away.

“You better keep locking that gate,” she called after me.

I kept walking... still scanning for snakes, of course.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

“WHAT KIND of redneck witchcraft village did you move to?” Frida demanded.
“This is next-level scary stuff. You can’t see me, but I’m crossing myself.”

“I didn’t know you were Catholic.”

“Girl, when it comes to the supernatural, everyone’s Catholic. When people’s heads start spinning around, even Evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jews start dialing the damn Pope begging for an exorcist.”

I scoffed. “It’s all just a bunch of folk tales and made-up stuff to drum up tourist business.”

“I thought you said people had died.”

“They have, but at the hands of plain old humans, or by their own hand.”

“So how do you explain your electricity going off?”

“Power surge?”

“What about the Satanic goat?”

I frowned. “Okay, he does seem possessed. I can’t believe I have to start my book over— again .”

“Have you told the bookstore guy that his manuscript is now goat poop?”

“Not yet. I really need for this booksigning event to go well to get Bruce off my back until I can get the book written.”

Frida heaved a sigh. “Girl. Your life. How’s the hot graveyard guy?”

“Out of town. Which is fine. I’m too busy for... heat.”

“A fling is exactly what you need.”

“We’re a long way from fling territory. He might not be interested.”

“The man has a pulse. He’s interested.”

“ I might not be interested.”

“You already have an exit plan—you’re leaving in a few months. You couldn’t write a more perfect situation.”

She had a point.

“I have a point,” Frida said. “Just say you’ll think about it.”

“I’ll think about thinking about it.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

BY THE middle of the sweltering afternoon, I'd decided that Sawyer wasn't coming back, and it was just as well. I was sitting on the wraparound porch under a ceiling fan waiting for a FedEx truck to arrive with my new laptop. When I heard a vehicle arriving, I pushed to my feet. But instead of a white delivery truck, Sawyer's black truck came into view. I told my stupid heart not to perk up. But it did a little dance, dammit.

He waved and I waved back as he rambled by. Then suddenly his brake lights came on and he backed up. He stopped in front of the house and rolled down the passenger window. "I was hoping you'd come down after while with some sweet tea."

I hesitated, then nodded. "I could do that."

He grinned, then kept going.

I puffed my cheeks out in an exhale. With my track record, I had no business falling for a hot guy I didn't know that well.

But I felt a bout of vertigo coming on.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

“THE STONE looks new,” I said, marveling over the difference in the small headstone of the Civil War soldier, Cyrus Watt.

“It just needed to be cleaned,” Sawyer said, wiping a cloth over the surface. “Years of acid rain and other chemicals in the air and in the ground, plus fungi and algae, it all takes a toll.”

“It’s nice, what you do,” I offered.

He inclined his head. “Thanks, but I really do it for myself more than anyone else. I hope after I’m gone someone will do the same for me.”

I didn’t like to think about death, especially my own. Although I’m sure a therapist would have a field day with that one.

“Hey,” he said casually, “I was wondering if you’d like to come by my studio sometime.”

I straightened. “Your art studio?”

“It’s more like a workshop.”

I hesitated. A fling was one thing, but getting to know each other, spending time in each other’s living spaces...

“Never mind,” he said.

“No,” I blurted. “I’d... like that.”

He smiled. “Okay. We’ll make that happen sometime.”

“Sawyer... how well did you know Rose Whisper?”

His demeanor changed. “We were friends before she left to live with relatives after her parents died.”

“But not when she came back?”

“Not really,” he said. “Rose was different when she came back to Irving. She had emotional issues, which was understandable, but she used recreational drugs to cope, and that’s not my thing.”

“There was a tour guide here a few days ago. She said this graveyard is a famous burial ground for witches.”

His face went stony. “I’ve heard that nonsense, too.”

“She said Rose’s parents were witches and she had some kind of great power.”

He scoffed. “Don’t tell me you believe that crap.”

I raised my hands. “No. But did Rose believe it?”

He sighed. “Yeah, she did. And I think it killed her.”

I inhaled sharply. “What do you mean?”

“The trauma around losing her parents, the rumors and the whispers—it was just too

much for her.” He pulled his hand over his mouth. “Can we change the subject?”

“Sure,” I said, feeling contrite. “Tell me more about your studio.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

I WAS exploring Whisper House, still killing time because my laptop hadn't yet arrived. In a back hallway, I found a narrow door that I'd assumed was just a closet. But now I realized in the back of the closet was another door, which led to a room.

My heart thudded in my chest as I cast the beam of my flashlight inside. Pieces of furniture sat around the space, and worktables crowded with hand tools. The scents of sawdust and linseed oil tickled my nose. I found a light and illuminated a workshop. The pieces of wood furniture were in different phases of being refinished—some were in need of repair, some were stripped to bare wood, some were half-stained. I ran my hand over a wonderful rocking chair, a child's cradle, a beautiful side table, all waiting to be restored.

On one of the worktables someone had carved the initials RW, as if to test the sharpness of a chisel that lay nearby.

I realized this was Rose's workshop. I circled the room, picking up tools and examining cans of wood stain, but I was inexplicably drawn back to the wobbly rocking chair. And just like that, I decided to pick up where Rose had left off.

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AFTER I dropped off the extra eggs at the grocery, I rode my bike to the hardware store to buy the supplies I needed (according to YouTube) to refinish the rocking chair—more sandpaper, mineral spirits, wood glue.

At the hardware store I saw Wayne Blakemore and turned to go in the other direction, but he spotted me.

“Josephine! Hi.”

“Hi, Wayne.”

“There’s been a terrific response to your booksigning. Thirty-two RSVPs and it’s only been up for a couple of days.”

“That’s great news, Wayne, truly.”

“Stop by the bookstore when you can, and I’ll show you the event space. My staff would love to meet you.”

“Yes, I’ll stop by soon. Thanks again.” I turned to go, but he reached out to touch my arm.

“I don’t suppose you’ve had a chance to read my manuscript?”

I broke out in an instant flop sweat. “No,” I said truthfully. I couldn’t bear to tell him that Satan had devoured the manuscript before I’d had a chance to get past page ten.

“But I’m sure it’s... very tasty.”

He squinted. “Hm?”

“Juicy,” I amended. “A juicy story.”

His eyes shone. “I hope so. Are you making progress on your manuscript?”

I wasn’t, and my new laptop still hadn’t arrived. “Yes... the pages are piling up.”

In my head.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 7:01 am

I WAS on my way to lock the gate when I heard voices coming from the graveyard. I'd learned to hang back and observe, so I approached as silently as I could, without using my flashlight. Curiously, when I got there, no cars were parked along the road or outside the gate.

By this time, darkness had descended, and the muggy night air was oppressive. Inside the cemetery among the gravestones, a woman dressed in a hooded robe was speaking to a group of about two dozen people who also wore robes. The sinister sight set my hair on end, but I kept telling myself they were simply costumes.

And I was more fascinated than I was frightened.

The leader extended a welcome to new members of the group and explained for the newcomers that Lughnasadh was a traditional Wiccan ritual to celebrate the first harvest of the year, and the ceremony would commence soon.

“But first,” she said, “we need to address an important matter—the selection of a new Grand Witch to replace and avenge the murder of our former leader, Rose Whisper.”

I gasped. Rose had been murdered?

The woman speaking must've heard me because her head swung around and she looked directly at me through the darkness. “I see you,” she said, then pushed back her hood.

It was Tilda Benson. I didn't think she could see me, but I retreated slowly until I could no longer see them. Then I sprinted back to the house.

Hours later, I lay huddled in my bed, listening to the sounds of night animals (and night people?) hooting and screeching, when I realized I'd left the graveyard gate unlocked.

The creepy tour guide's words came back to me.

The gates have to be locked to keep the witches' spirits within the cemetery.

I shuddered and pulled the covers over my head.
