



## Graveyard Girl, part 2 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...

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

AFTER A restless night of dreams featuring flying witches that reached out to me from their graves, I jolted awake.

To find myself shrouded.

I flailed at the cloth over my face and head, crying out. I tore away the quilt I'd burrowed under and fell back, limp. The bedroom I slept in was stuffy and warm—the recent power outage had definitely affected the central air conditioning along with other appliances in the house.

I flung back the covers and sat up. The images of the robed figures in the graveyard the previous evening were branded on my brain. I stood and walked to the window, shivering despite the temperature. Picking up the binoculars I left there, I swung them toward the Whisper Graveyard, which appeared empty and quiet in the rising sun.

I exhaled. As it should be.

But the words of the white-haired tour guide still revolved in my head.

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

I'd been spooked away the previous evening by the group gathered to celebrate an unpronounceable Wiccan holiday before I had the chance to secure the padlock on the graveyard gate. So there was no real reason for me to walk to the graveyard this morning except sheer curiosity... and to ensure the visitors had left the cemetery untouched.

When I emerged from the sprawling farmhouse, the clucks and cackles of the hens from the chicken coop reached me. Satan the white goat bleated with irritation from his pen.

I would deal with them later.

It occurred to me as I walked down the pitted one-lane road that sometime in the month since I'd arrived to house-sit The Whisper House in remote Irving, Alabama, I'd embraced the role of caretaker of the Whisper Graveyard.

Remembering how vulnerable I'd felt the night before, I picked up a piece of tree limb to use as a walking stick and potential weapon against...

I smirked.

Against witches? If I believed the local gossip, no mere stick was going to protect me. But since I didn't believe anyone had magical powers, I reasoned a stick would work just fine on regular old humans.

And snakes, I thought, as I scanned the ground in front of me, ever watchful.

When I reached the graveyard, the only sound in the air was the cacophony of birds in the trees that surrounded and invaded the cemetery. Low-hanging limbs lent a shady, peaceful air to the sacred spot, but made it feel insulated... and isolated.

I opened the creaky metal gate, then stepped inside to look around. The monolithic monument that Sawyer had repaired dominated the scene, rendering the stones around it a little shabby by comparison. I walked around to the grave of the Civil War soldier whose headstone Sawyer had restored, smiling to see the stone standing erect and polished.

I was inexplicably drawn to the newest headstone in the cemetery belonging to Rose Whisper. The headstone was light gray, with a rounded top. According to Sawyer, she'd died here in the cemetery and according to the date on the headstone, on February fourteenth of this year.

Valentine's Day.

Sawyer had found her body in the graveyard and had inferred she'd committed suicide by overdose. I idly wondered if she'd chosen the date for a reason. Conversely, the leader of the group that had gathered last night, librarian Tilda Benson, had declared to attendees that Rose was murdered, and vowed vengeance.

In the light of day, it all seemed like fantasy spun out the desire to create drama where none existed.

I continued strolling among the headstones, then I stopped and inhaled sharply.

Two of the decades-old Benson graves had been covered with slabs of black granite. According to the aged forager Muriel, the granite was supposed to keep the spirits of the occupants—alleged witches—contained.

One of the slabs had been dislodged and lay to the side of the grave, exposing the compacted dirt underneath, which had a fresh furrow running through it.

As if something had been removed from the grave... or had escaped it.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I WAS sitting on the porch, enjoying a plate of fresh scrambled eggs, but my gaze kept wandering in the direction of the graveyard, looking for... I didn't know what.

I wasn't sure who to report the upended slab of granite to—or if it was even my responsibility. I considered calling Sawyer, but realized I didn't have a contact number for him. It occurred to me all I had to do was ride my bike into the small town and ask literally anyone on the sidewalk how I could reach him, but I didn't want to seem... needy.

The obvious culprits were the people who'd gathered in the graveyard, although I couldn't be certain it hadn't happened before they arrived. Plus Sawyer had told me the town of Irving didn't have its own police department but instead depended on the nearby city of Birmingham to provide protection. And this seemed like a small potatoes problem to report to a department that undoubtedly had more serious crimes to solve.

That said, I felt as if I needed to officially document the incident. I was looking up the phone number for the property agent when I heard a vehicle approaching. To my relief, it was the orange El Camino that the groundskeeper Kelly drove.

The car came to a stop and Kelly leaned over to wave through the passenger side window.

“Is the graveyard gate unlocked?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll mow there first, then I’ll come back to mow your grass and clean the coop.”

“Okay. Oh, by the way—”

But Kelly was already gone, kicking up dust as the car sped toward the graveyard. I assumed she’d see the stone and could advise me on what to do, if anything.

I finished eating my eggs, then decided to walk down to the cemetery to get Kelly’s take on things. I had walked a few yards when I saw the El Camino tearing toward me at a frightening speed. I jumped into the ditch to get out of the way. The car screeched to a halt next to me. Kelly’s eyes bulged. “I’m outta here. Sorry, but you need to find someone to replace me.”

My pulse blipped with alarm. “What? Why?”

“I don’t mess with witchcraft. People told me this place was cursed, but I took a chance since Rose is gone.”

“Kelly, please—I need your help.”

Kelly barked out a dry laugh. “You need more help than I can offer. Good luck.” The car-with-a-truckbed tore away in a cloud of dust, with the mower in the back bouncing up and down.

“Wait!” I shouted, waving my arms and coughing. “Come back!” But she didn’t, of course.

A sense of déjà vu washed over me, and I stopped. I’d said those exact words as Curtis had fled in the new SUV I had purchased, stuffed with clothes and furniture I also had purchased. His betrayal had led me to come to this remote place to write a romance novel that would reclaim my reputation, career, and financial security.

Instead, one month in I had a fried laptop, a dirty chicken coop, and a hungry goat on my hands, plus shin-deep grass around the house, a cemetery that needed to be mowed... and possibly an escaped witch.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I APPROACHED the chicken coop with trepidation, wearing rubber gloves, my sturdy boots, and a kitchen towel tied around my nose and mouth like a bandanna. I pushed a wheelbarrow full of straw I'd found in the barn and was armed with a pitchfork. Here is where I should say that until now, I'd only seen these items in pictures and on television, but I was coming around to how useful they could be.

I opened the side door of the chicken coop and recoiled from the unholy odor that pierced my makeshift filter. The two hens that had been nesting squawked and flew the coop. (I now realized where the idiom I'd been using in my books for years came from). Then as instructed in various YouTube videos, I systematically removed the filthy top layer of straw on the nests and on the floor and replaced it with fragrant new straw, then stood back and surveyed my work with a strange sense of accomplishment I hadn't felt in a while.

I wheeled the soiled straw to the tree line and to my delight, found evidence of previous batches of the straw being scattered on the ground. I added my contribution and spread it out, as if I knew what I was doing.

I was feeling smug when I walked back to the barn, but the angry bleating of Satan the penned goat brought me back to reality. The container of goat food pellets was empty and he'd eaten the grass in the pen practically down to the dirt. I stopped and stared at him through the wire fencing. "What am I going to do with you?"

He bleated at me, pawing at the fencing.

I angled my head. He was kind of cute... when he wasn't devouring everything in sight.



Then a crazy thought slid into my head. I turned back to study the tall grass around the house, then turned back to look at Satan.

“You’re hungry, and the grass needs to be mowed. I wonder...”

I returned the wheelbarrow to the barn and rummaged through tables of piled up tools and materials until I found a metal stake, a hammer, and a coiled length of rope. Then I waded to the center of the grass, pounded the stake into the ground (harder than it sounds). I backtracked to the pen, opened the gate, and approached the goat warily. But he loped up to me and nudged my hand, seemingly in search of attention. It occurred to me that he had been Rose’s goat and probably had run away when she died.

I gave his long white ears a scratch, then looped the rope around his neck and tied it off. He followed me out of the pen willingly enough and I secured the other end of the rope to the stake. I stepped back, gratified to see him already munching on the grass. If my scheme worked, Satan would graze in the circle around the stake, then I’d move the stake.

Goats were nature’s lawnmower.

A rumbling noise sounded from the road. I looked up to see a familiar black pickup rolling toward me. I waved, and the truck slowed. I walked over, feeling self-conscious about my getup—and the stench I’d acquired—then decided it was what it was.

“Hi,” Sawyer said with an amused smile. “You’re starting to look like a local.”

I smirked. “The groundskeeper quit.”

“Kelly quit? That doesn’t sound like her. Did something happen?”

I tucked away the information that Kelly was a “she,” then pressed my lips together. “Well, now that you mention it, something happened in the graveyard.”

He frowned. “What?”

“It’s probably better if I show you.”

He leaned over and opened the passenger door. “Get in.”

I accepted his hand and awkwardly climbed up onto the bench seat of the old truck. I scanned the dated interior from the rollup window handles to the vintage radio.

He smiled. “She’s old, but she runs like a teenager.”

I smiled back. “This is the first time I’ve been in a truck.”

“No kidding? You probably drive something nice in the city.”

“I don’t have a car... or a driver’s license.”

“Ah, a city girl, through and through. Do you miss it?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted with a laugh, lifting my soiled rubber gloves. “But it’s been a nice break from...” I coughed. “It’s been a nice break.”

“Are you making progress on your novel?”

“Mm-hm.” Thankfully our arrival at the cemetery prevented me from expounding. I climbed out of the truck, then led the way into the cemetery and over to the grave of Nell Benson with the displaced slab of granite.

He grunted. “Ah, that explains why Kelly was spooked. Do you know about the folklore?”

“That the granite is there to keep the spirit in the grave? Yeah, a woman brought a tour group here and that was one of her stories. She insinuated the woman was a witch.” I studied Sawyer for his reaction, but he seemed more concerned with the condition of the stone.

“I don’t see any cracks, thank goodness. Did you see who did this?”

I hesitated. “There was a group of people here a few nights ago having some kind of ceremony. They were... wearing robes.”

His mouth turned down. “Did you recognize anyone?”

“Tilda Benson. I met her in the library.”

He nodded. “I’ve heard the rumors. This piece of rock probably weighs half a ton, so it would take several people or some kind of tool to move it. I’ll put it back with the wench.”

“Should I report it to the authorities?”

He shook his head. “No need. I’ll talk to Tilda when I see her. This witch nonsense has to stop.” His gaze flickered over me. “Before someone else gets hurt.”

He stood and stalked back to his truck to unload his equipment while my mind scrolled back to the warning the old woman Muriel had murmured about the witches coming together to mend an ages-old feud.

They will need a sacrifice.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I HAD set my alarm for six a.m. with the intent to get a jump on my writing. But I had just opened a brand new notebook when I heard a car coming down the road. I went to the window to see a car roll by that I'd seen before, the one with the vanity license plate BNSNTWNS.

Curious as to what the teenage twin daughters of Tilda Benson would be doing in the cemetery at such an early hour, I dressed quickly and walked down to see, reasoning they might need the gate unlocked.

They had timed their arrival perfectly with the sunrise. Indeed, every woodland creature seemed to be waking up from the birds to a family of rabbits that hopped along the road in front of me before veering off to safety.

I slowed my steps as I walked up. The blonde twins had left their car and were pacing in front of the gate.

"Hello," I called. "I came to unlock the gate."

They turned startled eyes toward me, then exchanged worried glances before responding. "We don't need to get inside," one of them said.

"Okay," I said casually, then proceeded to the padlock. "I'm Josephine. Are you twins?"

They smiled and nodded. "I'm Taylor and this is Tessa... Benson."

"You must be Tilda's daughters."

They exchanged another glance. “That’s right,” Tessa said warily.

“I met her at the library.”

“Are you staying in Rose’s house?” Tayler asked.

“Yes.”

“Alone?” Tessa asked, her eyes wide.

I hesitated and instead of answering, I asked, “If you don’t mind me asking, why are you here so early?”

“It’s a new moon—” Tessa began

“School project,” Taylor cut in with a meaningful look at her sister.

After a beat, Tessa nodded agreement. “Right, school project. Local history and all that.”

I smiled and nodded. “Lots of history in cemeteries, I suppose.”

They nodded, then stood hugging themselves until I relented. “Have a good day.”

“Thanks,” they chorused.

I could feel their gazes on my back as I walked away. When I glanced over my shoulder, they had resumed their strange pacing in front of the gate, eyes down. I decided it must be some kind of ritual for the new moon, and from their body language, that the girls were new at it. Remembering how they were being shown ceremonial steps in a previous Wiccan ritual, I deduced the teenagers were new to the

religion.

Witches in training?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

“WHEN DO you expect to find a new groundskeeper?” I asked.

The out-of-state harried listing agent for The Whisper House, Gladys Maddox, sighed. “I haven’t received any responses to the job posting.”

I frowned. “The housesitting agreement said I’d have a groundskeeper to help with the house. Maybe you should increase the amount of money being offered.”

“I will,” she said. “But this property has proven to be... problematic.”

“I understand the former owner died.”

“That’s right. And people in that area are superstitious.”

“Who owns the property now?”

“All I know is the property is in probate. My company was hired to manage the online listing.”

After extracting a lukewarm promise to keep me posted about the position, I ended the call. With a sigh I sat down at the small desk in my bedroom to try to focus on my novel. I still hadn’t received my new laptop, nor had I texted my editor Bruce a new timeline for delivery.

I wasn’t feeling particularly inspired.

I warmed up by doodling in the margins of the notebook—a bird... a tree... a rocking

chair. I lifted my head and set down the pencil, then walked downstairs to the hidden workroom I'd found where Rose Whisper had been refinishing wood furniture. I told myself I'd think about my novel while my hands were occupied.

On a side table sat the items I'd bought at the hardware store to aid in restoring a beautiful rocking chair the woman had been working on when she died. The finish was bubbled, and the wood was scarred with wear and tear. I picked up a sanding block and ran it over the top rail of the back. The wood was oak, I'd learned from a chart of wood grains hanging over one of the worktables. It warmed beneath my fingers as I moved the block back and forth, in the direction of the grain. Slowly the surface began to soften and smooth. The tension in my shoulders and neck melted away. It was therapeutic, I conceded, and pictured Rose in this room, preferring the company of old things to people.

Hiding out.

Like me.

It occurred to me that Rose Whisper, a stranger that I would never meet and knew about purely by chance, and I had a lot in common.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

AFTER DROPPING off my extra eggs at the grocery store in exchange for the few items I needed, I walked to the post office to see if the mail my friend Frida had forwarded had arrived.

“Oh, you’re the woman who’s staying at The Whisper House,” the man at the counter said—Dilbert Newberg, according to his nameplate. The name rang a bell, then I realized Dilbert was part of the word-of-mouth rumor mill that had initially passed my name to Sawyer.

“Yes. For now.”

“You doing okay out there all by yourself? You got a gun?”

I blinked. “No, I don’t have a gun.”

He made a rueful noise. “You need a gun to be safe.”

The woman at the counter next to him sniffed. “Only if she gets a silver bullet for that gun.”

I was dismayed by the direction of the conversation. “Silver bullet?”

She put her hand up to the side of her mouth. “For the witches.”

The man cleared his throat loudly, then nodded at someone who had just walked up behind me.

Tilda Benson, sans the hooded robe she'd been wearing when I'd last seen her speaking to a group in the graveyard.

"Hello," she said coolly.

"Hello," I offered, then turned back to the counter where the clerks seemed to be frozen in place. "My mail?" I prodded.

"Right," Dilbert said, then disappeared for a few seconds and returned with a large envelope. "Here you go."

"Thanks," I said, then turned to go.

Tilda extended a smile. "I understand you met my girls."

I nodded. "Yes. Very pretty... and very interested in history."

"Thanks. They like visiting the cemetery."

"The Whisper Graveyard seems to be a popular place."

Her eyes narrowed, but she kept smiling. "Some of us are intent on preserving history."

"Then maybe you know who moved the granite slab on your family grave?"

Her mouth opened in surprise. "What? When?"

"Sometime around the last day of the month."

"Whose grave?"

“The headstone says Nell Benson.”

“My great-aunt,” she murmured. She seemed agitated and flustered.

“Sawyer set it back in place,” I assured her. “It was probably just a prank.”

“Right,” she said, nodding. “Just a prank.”

I walked by her and left the post office, mulling the turn of events. It was clear the woman hadn’t known about the granite being moved.

So if the group she was with hadn’t upended the stone, who—or what—had?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

“THANKS FOR sending the mail,” I said.

“No problem,” Frida said. “Did you open the pieces with Curtis’s name on them?”

“Yeah. One was a thank-you letter from an online gambling site for being such a loyal customer.”

“Gawd.”

“And the other was an invoice from a jewelry store.”

“A jewelry store?”

“For an engagement ring.”

“Ah. The ring you never got.”

I sighed. “Right.”

“How much of your money did he spend on it?”

“Nine thousand.”

“Big spender.”

“I looked up the model number on their website—it’s a gorgeous ring.”

“Wonder what the jerk did with it?”

I was quiet.

“Josie?”

“I might’ve... noticed... on Instagram that he’s... engaged.”

“To the overtanned influencer?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Girl, don’t tell me he gave her the ring he bought with your money.”

I closed my eyes. “Okay.”

“You can’t let him get away with this!”

“I just want it to end,” I murmured. “I don’t want to fuel anymore humiliating headlines.”

“I’m still wondering who leaked your text messages. My money is on Curtis.”

“Why would he do that? He doesn’t exactly come across as a hero in those messages.” Granted, neither did I... if he looked like a parasite, I looked desperate.

“He’s a publicity whore. All he wanted was a scandal with someone with a big enough name to attach himself to.”

“I don’t have the big name—it’s my mother’s.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Josie.”

“Regardless, the money I lost was a tax for being stupid.”

“You weren’t stupid, you were in love. And you trusted him.”

I made a face. “Can we change the subject to something good?”

“Your new book is going to be a bestseller and you’ll make so much money, you won’t even miss the nine grand.”

“Right,” I said, pushing down the rising panic in my stomach.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I WAS supervising Satan's grazing efforts, feeling proud of myself for the impromptu idea to have him munch down the yard.

The grass was eaten down as even as any lawnmower would've cut it.

I walked to the chicken coop to gather eggs. Butterscotch was getting used to me and now let me search under her rump with only the occasional peck. The black rooster still menaced me and the goat, but I managed to stay out of his way.

I'd let Satan out of his pen and found him next to the barn, munching on an effusive vine that had consumed the outside wall of the barn with flowers that were blue along the fluted edge, but faded to white on the inside. I took a picture of them with my phone and searched on the image.

"Morning glories," I murmured. I'd heard of the flowers and now understood the charm. They were indeed glorious—and tasty, according to Satan, although I was starting to realize he would eat almost anything.

He appeared to enjoy the treat immensely because afterward he ran around kicking up his heels and chasing the black rooster, who was not amused.

I laughed out loud—an alien sound, I realized. How long had it been since I'd laughed out loud?

Years?

Then another sound rent the air—a high-pitched screeching noise from the direction

of the graveyard.

A shiver ran over my shoulders at the inhuman sound. It was just a bird—wasn't it?

But why had the goat stopped in its tracks? And the rooster? Both animals stood with their heads cocked in the direction of the cemetery.

I waited, expecting to hear the sound again.

But all was quiet.

After a few minutes, the animals relaxed. I tied a rope loosely around Satan's neck and walked him to the graveyard, then set him loose inside to munch down the weeds. I walked around and wrote down the names and dates on each headstone with no particular goal except I felt compelled to learn more about the people buried the graveyard that was my accidental responsibility for the next few months. The Bensons were buried on one side of the dividing walkway, and the Whispers were buried on the other side. I noticed Sophia, Rose's mother, who had defected and married a Whisper, had been returned to the Bensons in death.

And that Rose's grave was on the Whisper side.

A nudge to my hand startled me so bad I cried out. Then I laughed when I realized it was Satan, letting me know he was finished eating. He bleated loudly.

I surveyed his handiwork, pleased that my scheme had worked. The grass around the graves and headstones was noticeably shorter and neater.

Except for one grave, I suddenly noticed.

The goat had meticulously ignored the grass around the burial plot for Nell Benson,



the grave on which the slab of granite had been disturbed, then righted.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

HI, brUCE. I wanted to let you know my laptop died and I lost all the pages of the manuscript I'd written. I'm going to need more time.

I nervously waited for him to text back, hoping for No worries, take your time.

Instead my phone rang and Bruce's name appeared on the screen.

I sighed, then connected the call. "Hi, Bruce."

"Josie, what this? I'm desperate for the manuscript and you tell me the dog ate your homework?"

I winced. "More like a goat."

"Are you having a nervous breakdown?"

Maybe. "This place is more remote than I counted on. The power transformer blew and fried my computer. I'm still waiting for the new one to be delivered."

"You didn't back up your files?"

"No." And I didn't want to tell him it was only six pages.

He sighed. "Darling, I'm getting the feeling you don't want to write this book."

"No, I do. I need to." For the money.

“Okay, then do . I expect the first three chapters by Monday.”

“But—”

“No buts.”

The call ended and anxiety welled in my stomach.

I reached for the notebook and a pencil, massaging my temples. Deep down I knew what had inspired the brief bout of productivity I’d experienced to create the pages that I’d lost, but I didn’t want to go there: Sawyer King. The man had been grist for the backstory for Logan, the hero in my book.

I was getting a little too comfortable with having Sawyer around on weekends... was starting to look forward to seeing him.

And I didn’t want to be that woman... again.

On the other hand, if the handsome, outdoorsy man who was good with his hands could get me over the, um, hump , of my writers block, maybe it was okay to dwell on his... physical gifts.

For the sake of literature.

Unbidden, my pencil started to move.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

SAWYER PULLED his truck to a stop in front of the house and climbed out. He was dressed in low-slung jeans, work boots, and a snug T-shirt. “Morning.”

I was sitting on the porch, writing in the notebook. I sat up and felt my guard go up at the same time. “Good morning.”

He held up a small sheet of glass with tape around the edges. “Thought I’d replace the window I had to break when I saved you from the goat.”

I glanced toward the vertical row of small windows alongside the door. The one he’d broken to reach the doorknob inside still sported a piece of wood he’d nailed in place.

“For the record, you didn’t save me from the goat,” I said, pointing to where Satan stood nearby chewing on the edge of a porch rug.

He grinned. “Let me be a hero.”

Ack, was he reading my mind?

He walked up onto the porch, then nodded toward my notebook. “Working on your novel?”

“As a matter of fact, I am.”

“What’s it about?”

I balked. No way was I going to tell him my hero Logan was a hunky stone mason

who suddenly inherited a title that made him an ultra-eligible bachelor. “You wouldn’t be interested.”

“I asked because I am interested.” He opened a toolbox and carefully removed the wood panel.

“Okay.” I struggled for words to describe the thematic elements. “It’s a romance set in Regency England between a woman who doesn’t trust anyone and a man who feels out of place.”

“That sounds like a contemporary story.”

I nodded. “It could be.”

“I guess relationships don’t change that much over time. Have you always been a writer?”

“I was born into it. My mother is a literary novelist. I was her assistant when I was younger, then I started writing.”

“Your mom must be so proud.”

“Er, not really.” I gave a dismissive wave. “It’s a long story.”

“Is your dad around?”

“He died when I was fourteen.”

“Sorry. I was fifteen when I lost my dad. It never stops hurting, does it?”

I shook my head, staggered by his understanding. “Is your mother still alive?”

“Yes. She’s in Atlanta, and I have sisters there, plus nieces and nephews.”

“And you live here?”

He nodded. “I just feel connected to this place. And it’s only a two-hour drive.” He proceeded to mark off the glass, then cut it.

“By the way,” I said, “I ran into Tilda Benson in the post office, and she seemed truly surprised about the piece of granite being moved.”

“I talked to her, too,” he said. “She swears no one in her group did it.”

I wet my lips. “So it’s just accepted around here that a Wiccan group exists?”

He shrugged. “I think it’s a don’t ask, don’t tell situation. They haven’t been too visible... until now.”

“Rose’s death changed things.”

He grunted. “So I hear.”

He placed the glass in the opening, then added caulk. I watched, gathering my nerve. Finally I said, “I could hear some of what Tilda was saying the night they were in the cemetery. She said they need to select a new Grand Witch to replace and avenge the murder of Rose.”

Sawyer stiffened, then began to clean up and closed his toolbox. “Tilda is just trying to stir up trouble. She’s harmless.” He stood back, then gestured to the glass. “What do you think?”

“It looks great. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He started walking toward the truck.

“Are you working on a new headstone today?” I called, reluctant to see him go.

“Not today,” he called back. “I’m taking a break.”

He threw up his hand in a wave, climbed in his truck, turned the vehicle around and drove away.

But since his equipment was loaded in the back of his truck, I had the feeling he’d changed his mind on the fly.

Because of what I’d said about Rose being murdered?

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

SAWYER DIDN'T show, so I was left to worry I'd opened a can of worms by opening my big mouth.

I felt restless and, on a whim, decided to take my notebook to the graveyard in the hope that the atmosphere would inspire me to write. I walked down the road, scanning for snakes that might be sunning themselves on the crumbling asphalt. The weather had taken a brutal turn with record-high temperatures and humidity that made the air feel cottony.

But it was cooler in the graveyard, beneath the shade of the low-hanging limbs, insulated from the intense sun. I walked through the headstones to the concrete bench where Sawyer and I had shared cups of iced tea and lowered myself to the mottled surface. I took a few minutes to glance around and soak up the silence and sacredness of the place, imagining all the emotions the people had felt when they were alive—joy, sadness, happiness, disappointment, love, hate, longing.

I zeroed in on the pale gray headstone of Rose Whisper, the newest occupant. Sawyer had insinuated that all the rumors about her parents and her lineage had been too much for her and she'd ended her own life.

This place must've been special to Rose if she'd chosen to die here.

How many times had she made the walk from the house to the cemetery to visit her parents' graves? How many times had she sat on this very bench, contemplating her life and her place in the world?

Something about the place made me feel all the feels. For the past several months I'd



fallen numb to deal with fallout of Curtis ending our relationship and leaving me, with cruel words to punctuate his actions.

You write dummy books for dumb people. Even your mom thinks you're an embarrassment.

Frida insisted that the real point of contention was that my star had been rising, and he couldn't deal with the fact that my deadlines took priority over attending events meant to foster his career which, in hindsight, appeared to be taking mastermind classes in entrepreneurship in order to learn how to sell mastermind classes to other entrepreneurs who wanted to learn how to sell their own mastermind classes.

And he was good at it. It was a hyper-social vocation among hyper-social individuals. I'd funded his efforts, wanting him to be happy, but it was never enough. Thank goodness he'd ended things because I probably would've held on forever. He'd done me a favor, although I wished it hadn't become so publicly ugly.

Because I was good at this.

Suddenly I couldn't write fast enough to get down the scenes unfolding in my head. I needed somewhere for the hero and heroine to meet, and to keep meeting in secret as their romance bloomed. I realized a cemetery would be the perfect place for her to visit unchaperoned.

As the hours passed, I filled the pages of the notebook with an enthusiasm I hadn't felt since the beginning of my career, when I'd been writing for my own entertainment, without the pressure of a deadline and readers I was bound to disappoint and my mother's legacy I would never live up to.

It struck me that one of the best ways to feel alive was to spend time with the dead.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

HI, brUCE. Here are the first three chapters, hope you enjoy.

I attached photos of the notebook pages I'd written, forty-two in all, which took a while to send with my spotty service.

A few minutes later, he responded.

Hand-written? This is old school. But okay, I can work with this. More soon.

I stowed my phone, feeling better than I'd felt in... years? Something about the process of writing long-hand—the tediousness, the frustration—had energized me. Every word had seemed important. And it was inspirational to see the pages adding up. It wasn't the same seeing digital pages accumulate in a file. I hadn't printed out a manuscript in years, but I was tempted to start up the practice again.

One of my favorite photos of my mother was her at her desk surrounded by stacks of manuscripts, all different versions of her books.

I only wished someday she'd be as proud of me as I was of her. It was a longshot, but a girl could hope.

I stood up to stretch, then heard the muffled noise of an engine coming from the road. I went to the window and smiled to see a FedEx truck lurching over the uneven pavement.

My new laptop had finally arrived!

I jogged downstairs and met the driver when he alighted, signed for the box and carried it back inside.

When I set the box on my desk, I hesitated and glanced over at my rumpled notebook.

Then I slid the box containing my new computer under the bed.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I SOLD my extra eggs at Coleman's grocery, then rallied and walked to Blakemore Books, although my feet and stomach felt heavy.

Wayne Blakemore's face erupted into such a big smile, guilt pinged through me. I chastised myself, then returned his smile. It wasn't his fault that bookstores made me anxious.

You read that right.

Since I was a child, my mother had dragged me into every bookstore we passed so she could rearrange her books on the shelf and wheedle better placement from the clerks. As her career progressed, her book displays expanded from front-and-center shelving to endcaps to table placement to front-of-store table placement to point-of-sale checkout placement. It was common to pass a bookstore and the entire window was dedicated to Vanessa Vanguard's somber, literary tomes. She'd won every notable award except the Pulitzer, but she'd been on the shortlist more than once and it was an inevitability.

Worse, most of her books had been about fraught mother-daughter relationships, with many centering on a daughter who had somehow wronged her mother. The academic side of me knew it was fiction, but some softer part of me couldn't help but feel her inspiration came from having a novelist daughter who continued to disappoint.

"Josephine, welcome!" Wayne glided toward me, then clasped my hand between both of his. "Everyone is so excited about the booksigning Friday—we're going to have a nice crowd."

He introduced me to his two employees, Dora and Lawrence, who seemed equally pleased I was there.

“I’ve read all your books,” Dora gushed.

“They got me through the lockdown,” Lawrence added.

People really were nice, I conceded. And I relaxed.

The bookstore was pleasantly stocked and merchandised. The books in my Skirts series were displayed on a table near the front with a sign to Meet the Author! Wayne showed me the area where the event would take place. I assured him I was looking forward to meeting his customers—and suddenly I was.

“And you’re still planning to share a sneak peek of the new novel?” he asked.

I nodded. “I can do that.”

He beamed, then he bit into his lip. “Have you had time to read my manuscript?”

I hesitated. I really, really needed to tell him that Satan had devoured his manuscript before I could read it, but I didn’t want to cast a pallor over the event.

“Not yet,” I said. “But I’ll make it a priority... after the booksigning.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I WAS writing in the graveyard when I heard a car arrive. I looked up to see a dark sedan that seemed familiar, but I couldn't place it until a tall man with wide shoulders emerged.

The cop from Atlanta was back.

He closed his car door, then shrugged into a sport coat despite the stifling heat. His long legs carried him through the gate and into the cemetery in only a few strides. He was carrying a bouquet of fresh flowers and had reached the grave of Serena Benson before he noticed me.

"Hello," he said with a nod.

"Hello." I bent back to my notebook but watched him under my lashes.

The big man reached over to touch the headstone and briefly closed his eyes. Then he knelt to lay the bouquet of flowers on the base of the headstone. He pulled out a handkerchief to wipe off the gravestone, then leaned over to pull a few weeds.

I felt compelled to offer, "We're in between groundskeepers, so it's not as tidy as usual."

"That's okay. Are you the caretaker?"

I smiled. "I'm staying at The Whisper House, and to my surprise, the graveyard came with it."

“Ah.”

“Are you a relative?”

“Hm?”

I pointed at the gravestone. “Of Serena’s?”

“Oh.” He sighed. “No. Just a friend.”

“I saw you here before. You must have cared for her a great deal.”

He nodded. “I did. It was a long time ago, but I can’t forget her.”

I closed my notebook. “How did she die? If you don’t mind me asking. I’ve been trying to find out more about everyone who’s buried here.”

“I don’t mind,” he said, but his brow furrowed with grief. “She was murdered by a home intruder.”

I gasped. “How horrible. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. Me too.”

“Did it happen in Irving?”

“No, in Birmingham. But Serena’s family is here.”

I nodded. “I’ve met some of the Bensons. Tilda and her daughters.”

“Tilda is Serena’s sister.”

Although from the slight hesitation, I gathered they weren't close. "I noticed your badge," I said, nodding to the plate at his belt. "Did you work the case?"

"No, I was her... boyfriend. And a cop. We never solved the case." His jaw hardened. "I never solved the case."

"I didn't mean to intrude," I said, pushing to my feet. "I'll give you some privacy."

He nodded, but as I was leaving he said, "What's your name?"

"Josephine Vanguard."

"Nice to meet you, Josephine. I'm Detective Jack Terry." He reached into a pocket, then extended a business card. "If you ever notice anything odd around Serena's grave, would you reach out to me?"

I took the card. "Odd?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, anything out of the ordinary."

"O... kay."

I left the graveyard wondering if Serena shared some of the same family hobbies as the rest of the Bensons.



## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I WAS cleaning the chicken coop when my phone rang and my mother's picture came on the screen.

I sighed. Perfect timing.

I used my elbow to connect the call. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, Josephine. Are you still in fucking Alabama?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good God. What are you doing?"

I surveyed my rubber gloves and poop-covered boots. "I'm writing, what else?"

"Good. You need to honor your contracts, even if you're writing dreck. It's a matter of principle. We share a fucking name, you know."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, I know."

"So I talked to my publicist about getting back at Curtis."

I winced. "I don't want to do that, Mom."

"Good, because she said you fucking can't. The man has blown up on Insta so big, he's untouchable. How did that happen?"

“I don’t know. Maybe one of his multi-level marketing schemes finally paid off.”

“He’s so full of shit. I could put a hit on him—I met a guy in Costa Rica who knows a guy.”

I smiled. “Thanks anyway, Mom.”

“Well, it’s a shame you can’t do something to get back at that fucking con man—put a curse on him or something.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Okay, I have to run. I’m having another meeting with that TV producer—I think he’s interested in turning one of my books into a feature film.”

“That’s great, Mom. I hope it works out.”

The call ended and I shook my head at her rant. She meant well.

Because as much as I fantasized about paying Curtis back for what he’d done, my thoughts didn’t extend to putting a hit on him.

Then I stopped. But her other idea... putting a curse on him.

I needed a witch for that.

Which in Irving, just might be doable.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

THE TURNOUT for the booksigning exceeded my wildest expectations. The bookstore was fairly bursting at the seams with readers, all of whom seemed excited to meet me, and some who'd come from as far away as Florida to meet me.

When had I become so popular?

Or rather, my series.

When I'd sold my first Regency romance novel to Bruce, he'd made it clear it was unusual in a market where historical romances had fallen out of favor in wake of #MeToo and other movements. Women, he said, weren't happy to be reminded of how confining and discriminatory history had been to them. Writing about a period in which a woman's livelihood depended on how rich of a man she could ensnare did seem to be wildly out of step with the times.

He was wrong.

Sales of my books had slowly snowballed until I was pulling down really decent advances and royalties. If my new book, the last book on my contract, performed to expectations, I might possibly be elevated to the bestseller lists that my mother had dominated. If it didn't, I might be working as my mother's assistant again.

Wayne Blakemore introduced me with bouncing enthusiasm and announced I'd be reading a passage from my new book. The applause cinched the knot in my stomach tighter as I walked up to the podium Wayne had set up for the occasion. I carried my notebook, with a passage marked that was provocative while being safe for public consumption.

I opened my notebook and cleared my throat.

When Lady Kate Hilliard first noticed the man, he was dressed in stained breeches and had removed his shirt in deference to the searing sun. He was building a stacked rock wall around the fountain in the middle of the park, situating each stone so they locked into place. She couldn't pull her gaze from his bare chest and powerful arms, slick with perspiration. Inadvertently, moisture dotted her upper lip and her tongue slipped out to whisk it away at the same moment his gaze locked onto hers. Something wildly inappropriate flashed through his eyes, something animalistic that made her breathing even more shallow in the confining corset.

"Look away," Aunt Annette said into her ear. "It's not ladylike to gawk at the help."

Kate jerked away her gaze, then straightened. "I was simply admiring the... craftsmanship."

"Yes, well, scrutiny only leads to trouble. Perfect the art of skimming, my dear."

"Yes, Auntie."

Her aunt walked ahead, and Kate chanced a glance back at the hulking man, who was still looking at her, but this time with amusement.

She frowned, picked up her skirts, and hurried away.

I closed my notebook. "What Kate doesn't know is she'll see the man again at a coming-out ball for her younger sister in only a few days, and he'll be dressed quite differently—as a Duke."

The audience laughed, then applauded. Someone called out to ask when the book would be released.

“Soon,” I promised. “I’m making good progress.” My gaze went around the room and I spotted Sawyer standing in the back, looking amused.

My cheeks flamed—I hadn’t dreamed he’d be there.

“What do you say,” the clerk Dora asked, “to people who’ve read all the headlines lately?”

The room went deadly quiet, and everyone looked at me with bated breath.

My smile froze. My skin tingled. My heart raced. “I’d say their time would be better spent reading a good book.”

The audience laughed and the good mood was restored.

Wayne organized a line for the booksigning. I sat at a table and signed books and chatted with readers for over an hour. I kept looking for Sawyer, but apparently he’d left.

Which was fine. It kept me from having to explain myself.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

“SO YOUR hero is a stone mason?” Sawyer asked with a grin.

I smirked. “Don’t let it go to your head. I was looking for a good vocation for this character and when you told me about your job, it was a good fit.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he said, sounding unconvinced.

To change the subject, I gestured to the graveyard beyond the gate where we were standing. “What are you working on today?”

“Since most of the headstones are in good shape now, I’ve been thinking about tackling the labyrinth.”

“Labyrinth?”

He pointed to the ground where we stood, then crouched down to point. “It’s hard to see because most of the stones have sunk. This used to be a labyrinth design.” He stood and from this pocket removed a folded sheet of paper. On it was a computer design that depicted a maze of sorts.

“It’s beautiful,” I said. “Does it have a function?”

“Not really,” he said. “It’s just a nice feature of some old cemeteries.”

I handed back the paper. “Looks complicated. How long will it take you?”

He gave a little shrug. “Don’t know. Could take three months or more. Think you

could stand having me around that much?”

I knew what he was asking. I was starting to like this man. But I didn’t want to get in too deep. I didn’t trust my judgment anymore. And I was leaving in a few months.

“Why don’t you just take it month by month?” I asked lightly.

His mouth twitched, then he nodded. “I’ll do that. Meanwhile, would you like to visit my workshop tomorrow?”

I struggled to tamp down my excitement. “I could make that work.”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I RODE the bike I'd found in the barn through town, past a couple of neighborhoods until I found Sawyer's house. It was a compact A-frame cabin, furnished with worn wood furniture and lots of unpretentious plaid.

"I like it," I said when he showed me around. "It suits you."

"I'll take that," he said, then ushered me outside to a wood-clad building that housed his "workshop."

I turned in place to take in the stained concrete floor and the immaculate well-lit work areas. Along one wall was a library of every kind of natural material. Blocks of stone were neatly organized and labeled. His works in progress were elevated on platforms, with hand tools and mechanical tools arranged nearby.

I stopped to admire a towering black bear standing on hind legs, with two cubs at its feet. The piece was as tall as I was. "This is stunning," I said. "What kind of stone is this?"

"Obsidian. It's a commission from a state park."

"And that one?" I pointed to a horse sculpture that was waist high.

"Alabaster, which is becoming more rare. A horse owner in Florida commissioned this piece."

I walked around, touching everything I dared, asking questions and becoming more and more impressed.



“You are so talented,” I said.

He smiled. “So are you.”

I shook my head. “It’s not the same.”

“Sure it is. We both make something where there was nothing before.”

I conceded his generosity. “Okay, it’s similar. But seriously, Sawyer, I’m bowled over by your skill.”

“Thanks. I enjoy this work a lot, but repairing headstones is more fulfilling.”

“The town is lucky to have you,” I murmured. “And this is a great studio.”

“Workshop,” he corrected.

“This is more than a workshop,” I insisted. “A workshop is, well... like Rose’s workshop.”

His expression changed, but he recovered. “You found Rose’s workshop?”

“I was exploring. She was in the middle of refinishing several pieces of furniture.”

“It was a hobby of hers when she was a teenager. I didn’t know she’d started that up again.”

“She had. I thought I’d finish restoring a rocking chair she was working on. It’ll be my gift back to the house when I leave.”

“Right,” he said, nodding. “Hey, let me show you the stones I’m planning to use on

the labyrinth.”

I followed him, but I could tell he was a little upset. I just couldn't tell if he was upset that I was finishing Rose's chair, or that I had reminded him that I'd be leaving.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I'D DECIDED to pull out my laptop and get it set up, reasoning I'd eventually have to send Bruce a digital manuscript. To my relief, he'd texted that he loved the first three chapters of the book and couldn't wait to read more.

I couldn't wait to write more. After I set up the laptop, I spent the morning transcribing my hand-written pages into a file. Because of the daily writing stints in the cemetery, I'd gotten to chapter ten, and I was very pleased with the story so far. After I entered the pages, I inserted a USB drive to back up the files, then I walked downstairs to let Satan have at my notebook.

It seemed like a good ritual to get into. I had a new notebook at the ready for tomorrow's writing session.

I found Satan chewing on morning glories, but he abandoned them to tear my notebook into pieces. The sound of a caravan of cars brought my head around.

Four... five... six cars drove by. I squinted at my watch. One o'clock in the afternoon was a strange time for visitors, but maybe it was a family.

I walked back into the house and up to my bedroom window, then picked up the binoculars. A crowd of about fifteen had gathered in front of the gates and were pacing methodically—walking the remains of the labyrinth, I suddenly realized. They were performing some kind of ritual again. Instead of robes, they wore matching shawls draped over their shoulders. The Benson twins were there, but I didn't see Tilda, although it was hard to see everyone for the trees.

I stared, fascinated as the crowd moved in unison for several minutes before coming

together in a clump and lifting their arms to the sky. I pulled out my phone and checked the lunar calendar.

Today was a full moon, a supermoon, and seasonal Blue moon at 1:25 p.m., even though the moon wasn't yet visible.

Suddenly the electricity blinked, then went out.

I gasped. The same thing had happened last month at the full moon... and Kelly had inferred that it happened regularly.

I turned and ran to my new laptop to see the dreaded blue screen of death. "No!" I shouted. Thankfully, I'd backed up the pages I'd typed in onto the USB drive. I removed it from the machine and held it up in triumph.

But the end was completely melted.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

AFTER I sold the extra eggs at Coleman's grocery, I walked back to the borrowed bike, intent on getting back to the house to begin rewriting the pages I'd lost.

The power company had come out to repair the transformer, but now the stove was on the blink and the air conditioner wasn't working. I'd called the property listing company and left two unreturned messages.

I walked the bike past a sign that read 'Sophia's Jewelry.' A memory cord pinged. Sophia was Rose's mother's name... and in the obituary didn't it say the couple had owned a jewelry store?

I parked the bike, then stepped inside the store that was surprisingly full of merchandise. A woman came from the back and gave me a welcoming smile. "Hello. Can I help you?"

"I was just looking," I said, ad-libbing. "Do you have any unusual stones?"

"I have precious stones, semi-precious stones, and crystals," she said, gesturing to the cases. "Did you have something particular in mind?"

I smiled. "Something for good luck?"

She smiled. "That would be citrine." She pulled out a tray of yellow crystals.

They were beautiful, I conceded. And compelling. I reached out to touch several of them, expecting a spark. But the stone was cool and smooth... comforting.

“Do people just buy loose crystals?”

“Sometimes,” she said. “To put under a pillow, or in a pocket. They’re more effective if they’re nearby.” She gestured to racks of necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and rings.

“Of course, it’s convenient to just wear the crystals you prefer.”

“Did Sophia Whisper use to own this store?”

The woman’s smile fell a little. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Are you related to Sophia?”

“No. My family bought the store after Sophia... died. My last name is Benson. Franny Benson.”

I tried to hide my surprise. “Are you related to Tilda Benson?”

Her mouth twitched downward. “Tilda is my sister, but that’s where the similarity ends.”

The door opened and another customer entered. Franny excused herself, and I took the opportunity to take my leave with a mental note to return soon.

So Franny wasn’t keen on the witchy ways of her sister.

And in fact, sold good luck charms to ward off bad juju.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

WHEN brUCE texted me raving over sales from the signing at Blakemore's, my guilt got the better of me. I rode the bike to town and walked into the bookstore with wet palms.

Wayne Blakemore lit up. "Josephine, how nice to see you. Everyone is still talking about your signing, and we've sold almost two dozen more books since the event."

"That is just... great," I said, trying to sound cheerful, but failing.

He squinted. "Is everything okay?"

"No," I blurted. "My goat ate your manuscript. Please tell me you have another copy."

His eyes bulged and he didn't respond for a few seconds. Then he grinned. "Of course I have another copy, what century are we in?"

I went weak with relief. "Thank goodness. Will you print one for me? I promise to take better care of it this time."

"I keep a copy behind the counter," he said, leading the way. He leaned over to pull out a manuscript box, then handed it to me with a wink. "Just in case an editor or a famous author like you comes in."

The box was beautifully embossed with the title War of the Witches and "written by Wayne Blakemore," along with his phone number. "That's very... shrewd."

“I have big dreams,” he said. Then he wet his lips. “After you read it, maybe we can have dinner to discuss it. Someplace nice in Birmingham.”

I recalled Kelly’s comment that Wayne had a crush on me. And he wasn’t bad-looking, but I didn’t need another complication. Giving him feedback on his book would already be sticky enough.

“We’ll see,” I said, nodding as I backed away. “Sorry again for the... um, goat... issue. Goodbye.”

“I hope you like my book!” he called after me.

“So do I,” I muttered to myself.



## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I WAS sitting on the porch writing in my notebook when I heard a vehicle approaching, I looked up and was relieved to see the orange El Camino rambling to a stop.

Apparently Kelly had changed her mind.

She climbed out of the car and looked all around, then closed the door and approached me.

“Are you back?” I asked.

“Only because I need the money,” she grouched.

“It makes the world go around,” I agreed. “The chickens and Satan will be glad you’re back.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Has there been any more funny business at the graveyard?”

I decided not to mention the lunar gatherings, occasional inhuman screeches, and the fact that Satan still refused to eat the grass around Nell Benson’s grave.

Instead I donned an innocent expression. “No.”

She frowned. “I know the electric went off again.”

“It’s back on. But do you know anything about stoves or air conditioners?”

“I’ll take a look at them,” she intoned.

From her pockets she began to pull chunky necklaces of crystals and stacked them around her neck.

“What are those?” I asked.

“Selenite, black obsidian, and black tourmaline,” she said, pointing to each. “To ward off the witches.” She stared at me defiantly.

I crossed my arms. “I can live with that.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

WHEN THE sun rose, sending light slanting into my bedroom window, I stretched high and yawned. I'd stayed up all night reading Wayne's manuscript. Surprisingly, after slogging through the first dozen or so terrible pages, it had turned into a very entertaining story of two local witch covens in a blood feud.

And it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out he'd based the story on the Benson family and the Whisper family.

One of my first pieces of advice would be to suggest he change the characters enough that he wouldn't be sued.

But meanwhile, it was a wealth of information and insight into the family trees and the feud that had kept them apart before the ill-fated "Chip and Sandy" had defied their relatives and married, only to die tragically.

And to leave behind a daughter named Daisy, who would leave, then return and rise to the top of the coven, only to commit suicide at the graves of her parents.

There were a lot of logistical issues—there were so many characters, I'd lost track of them and how they were related to each other. And the history was a little fuzzy—I was going to suggest opening with a flashback to the Salem witch trials, which was where the two families had allegedly descended, then fled together to the nether regions of Alabama where no one would look for them or suspect them.

It was enough material for three books, but I wasn't sure Wayne would have the patience or the talent to pull off a supernatural trilogy. But the paranormal market was hot, so an editor might take a chance if they liked the premise.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, then padded over to the window and stare out over the peaceful scenery that hid a boiling drama.

And there was one part that disturbed me and I wondered if it were fact or fiction.

Daisy, it seemed, had returned to Alabama not to rise to the rank of Grand High Witch, but because she had been wholly, utterly, and epically in love with a local stone mason.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

SAWYER WAS away at his reservist duties, so my inquiries into the truthfulness of Wayne's book would have to wait.

I decided to take a break from re-creating the chapters I'd lost and work on Rose's rocking chair. When I entered her workshop, I felt as if I knew her better from the descriptions of "Daisy" in Wayne's book.

She had been sensitive, with so much empathy for others she maintained an aloofness so as not to absorb the energy of others. She'd had a unique connection to animals and seemed to communicate with them. She preferred dresses and sandals and light colors. She grieved bitterly for her parents. And she was head over heels in love.

I found a dusty radio and plugged it in. It was tuned to a public radio station that was playing classical music, which I let play. And I found suede gloves that must have been hers. They were stiff from disuse but I put them on, then sanded the slats of the rocking chair until my hands were tired. I could almost feel Rose in the room, humming along with the haunting music, focused on her task of restoring a piece of beloved furniture...

And pining for Sawyer?

While exploring the rest of the room, I found a small chest that sat on a table. At first I thought it was a piece meant for restoration, until I realized some of the drawers contained items.

Crystals. I recognized selenite, black obsidian, and black tourmaline, but there were others I couldn't identify. Even to my untrained eye, the crystals were heavy and

shaped with care, and appeared to be of good quality... perhaps even heirlooms.

Another drawer produced what looked like a hand mirror fashioned out of thick black glass, with no reflecting surface. I'd never seen anything like it, but it seemed more purposeful than a crafted item.

And another drawer produced a bag of blue-black crescent-shaped seeds. They were in a nice cloth bag, so I assumed they were of some value.

I had no idea what either of the items were.

But I knew someone who would.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I WAS waiting for Muriel when she appeared with her sling bag and her walking stick.

“I see you’re still here,” the woman said with a cackle.

“That’s right,” I said, extending a basket of eggs. “I brought these for you.”

“Thank you kindly,” she said, taking them. She cracked one into her mouth and swallowed it raw. “Good for the eyes.”

My own throat constricted, then I extended the bag of seeds. “Do you know what these are?”

The woman peered inside, then stuck in her hand and lifted some of the seeds to fall through her gnarled fingers. “Them’s morning glory seeds.”

I gave a little laugh. “Is that all? Flower seeds?”

“Not just flower seeds,” she said, wagging her finger. “Chew ‘em up and you’ll go for a ride.”

I squinted. “I’m not following.”

“They’re like LSD,” she said. “Hallucinogens.”

I remembered Sawyer said Rose had done recreational drugs. Had she kept the seeds on hand for her own trips?

“Not for the innocent,” she said, then took the bag from me and put it in the basket with the eggs.

“Okay,” I relented. It wasn’t as if I was going to use them. I pulled out the black hand mirror. “Do you know what this is?”

Muriel recoiled. “It’s a scrying mirror.”

My eyes widened. “What’s that?”

“Used to divine the past and present, and the future.”

I shook my head. “What does that mean?”

“It’s used to talk to the dead.” Muriel crossed herself, then turned and hurried away.



*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

“GIRL. GAWD. Golly,” Frida howled. “You landed in Oz. Goats? Witches? I’d so be outta there.”

“I can’t leave now,” I said. “I’ll have to pay to have the house relisted. Besides, I’m getting a lot of writing done.” I winced when I realized how ridiculous that sounded. Proof that writers would put up with just about anything to get words on the page.

“Whateva. Have you let the hunky stone man lay you down?”

I frowned. “Uh, no.” I didn’t want to say I was having second thoughts about Sawyer now that I knew—er, suspected—that he and Rose had been involved.

Frida sighed. “Don’t let Curtis wreck this good thing for you. He’s so not worth it.”

“I know.” Anger balled up in my chest. “Have you seen the latest?”

“No. What now?”

“My editor sent me a screen shot where Curtis is claiming the Skirts book series was his idea and he helped me write the books.”

“No, he did not.”

“Did.”

Frida screamed. “Josie, I know you’ve taken the high road, but you have to fight back. You can’t just let that piece of human feces—”

“I’m going to... fight back, that is.”

“Oh! Good. What’s the plan?”

“I’m going to have a curse put on Curtis.”

Frida was quiet for ten seconds, then twenty, then... “That’s the freakiest, craziest, most amazing idea I’ve ever heard. Tell me more.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

WHEN I took my extra eggs into Coleman's grocery to sell, he was arguing with someone in his office. From the hallway I could hear raised voices, then Coleman said, "It's your own fault. Flaunting yourself. What did you think would happen?"

A woman's voice sounded, then Coleman said, "I can't help you anymore. You're on your own here."

The door opened and out walked Tilda Benson, who glared at me before stalking by.

Coleman saw me and plastered on a big, fake smile. "Howdy, Josephine. Let's see what you got today, any double yolks?"

I glanced back at Tilda hurrying away. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, sure," he said with a smile. "Just a spat between old friends."

He pulled out his receipt book to write out the amount due to me, then handed it over. But under the receipt book, I recognized an item peeking out that I wouldn't have noticed before.

A scrying mirror.

"Thanks," I murmured, then took the receipt. "What an interesting object." I pulled out the mirror.

"That old thing?" Coleman said, gently taking it from me. "It's just a knickknack."

“It’s pretty,” I said. “Did you buy it around here?”

“No. It’s been in my family for years.” He smiled, then set it reverently on a tall shelf. “One of those things you should throw away but can’t.”

I nodded. “Right.”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

MY PHONE rang and Bruce's name came up on the screen. I connected the call.

"Hi, Bruce."

"You're going to love me."

"I already love you," I said patiently. "For believing that Curtis had nothing to do with my books."

"You're going to love me even more when you hear what I've done for you."

I was wary. "Okay."

"Based on the first three chapters, I got the buyer for Clifton's to agree to order three times as many books as she normally would."

I grinned. "That's amazing!"

"If you get the book to me by the end of November."

I stopped grinning. "That might be pushing it."

"With that kind of incentive, I know you'll make it happen."

I swallowed hard. "I'll try."

"Don't try, Darling. Do. Else people might start believing your boyfriend's posts that

he was the one who wrote the books.” He ended the call.

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*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

MY PHONE rang and my mother's picture came up on the phone. I didn't want to answer, but I did.

"Hi, Mom. Where are you?"

"In Paris for a few appearances. What's this fucking shit about Curtis writing your books?"

I sighed. "It's a lie."

"I thought so, but then I also thought that might explain a lot."

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. "I'm sorry to confirm, Mother, that I write my own books."

She sighed. "Okay. Well, I can't fucking sleep, so why don't you read me one of your books?"

My eyes popped open. "Really?"

"To put me to sleep."

I frowned. "Can't you take something?"

"I can't get fucking Ambien in Europe, and I forgot to stock up when I was in New York."

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. Not sorry. “Hey, I have some good news.”

“Let’s fucking hear it.”

“I’m making good progress on the book. I’m really finding my groove here. I write in a cemetery, if you can believe that. Oh, and Bruce says the buyer at Clifton’s is going to triple their order of this title, and Book Bin is going to follow suit. He says with this kind of retail support, it could even hit the Times list. Wouldn’t that be great?”

Silence.

“Mom?”

A snoring sound came over the phone. I sighed, then ended the call.



*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

WHEN I saw the charter bus lurch by on the road to the cemetery, I grabbed a flashlight and tore off after it.

The white-headed leader of the tour, Edra Waco, according to the business card she'd given me, was in fine form, dressed in a deep red flowy garment trimmed in black, with a black hat and netted veil. I hung back while she gave her spiel to the crop of new tourists about the history and lore of the witches in the Whisper Graveyard. She made a point of showing them Rose's gravestone and once again said the woman had died under suspicious circumstances. And somehow she knew about the slab of granite that had recently been disturbed on Nell Benson's grave.

So the woman had an informant.

When the tour ended and she was shepherding everyone back onto the bus, I waved to get her attention.

"You're still here?" she asked lightly.

I frowned. "Yes. I'd like to talk to you."

"You want your palm read? Sure, make an appointment."

"I want you to tell me how much of this is true." I put Wayne Blakemore's manuscript in her hand.

She studied the cover but maintained a poker face. "Okay, but it'll cost you. I'll look it over and send you an invoice. Then we'll meet."

“You’ll have to come here. I don’t have a car.”

“I do Zoom readings. And I take Venmo. I’ll be in touch.”

She tucked the manuscript under her jacket, then climbed onto the bus.

I frowned after her, hoping I hadn’t made a big mistake.

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*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:57 am*

I WAS enjoying my early morning walk to the cemetery, taking in the sounds of the day coming to life—the birdsong, the chattering of insects, the slight coolness in the air whispering that summer would be ending soon.

I inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of flowers and moss. When I walked up to the gate, I was humming under my breath.

When I saw Sawyer’s truck parked at the gate, I felt torn—I wanted to see him, but I dreaded asking him about his relationship with Rose.

Then I noticed the gate was open, and the chain holding the padlock hung loose.

I hurried forward but when I saw the graveyard, I came up short and gasped.

Sawyer was standing with his back to me, hands on hips. Around him, several headstones lay in pieces, broken and jagged. Others had been spray-painted with black graffiti. A sense of violation shot through me, followed by an intense sadness for the occupants of the Whisper Graveyard and their loved ones.

Sawyer turned and his face was dark, his eyes wet with unshed tears. “Look what they did.”

I went to him, and he pulled me close. I could feel the anguish vibrating through his big body.

“It’ll be okay,” I murmured.

But I had a feeling it wouldn't be.

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