



## Graveyard Girl, part 4 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

This GRAVEYARD GIRL, Part 4 novella is a month's worth of daily episodes: OCTOBER

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE EARLY morning fog clung to the headstones like cobwebs, steeping the Whisper Graveyard in Irving, Alabama in extra spooky ambiance. Not that it needed it. The gaping hole of Rose Whisper's empty grave was unsettling enough.

I stood off to the side, hugging myself against the autumn chill, as Sawyer spoke in hushed tones with Detective Jack Terry from the Atlanta PD and Officer Ramirez from the Birmingham PD. The scent of their strong coffee mingled with the earthy smell of upturned soil. The roots of the tree that had brought the concrete vault to the surface reached into the air like long witches' fingers.

"So let me get this straight," Detective Terry said. "A freak storm uprooted this massive oak, which somehow managed to pop open a cement vault, revealing that the occupant had... what? Taken a stroll?"

Officer Ramirez grunted. "Zombie apocalypse, anyone?"

I rolled my eyes. "That's your professional assessment?"

The young officer had the grace to look sheepish. "Sorry, ma'am. Gallows humor."

"Do we know the casket was in the vault?" Detective Terry asked.

"I was a pallbearer," Sawyer said in a choked voice. "The last time I saw Rose's casket, it was sitting on the grave, waiting to be lowered into the vault."

"So you never actually saw it go into the vault?"

"No," Sawyer admitted. "The gravediggers hired by old man Whittam would've done it."

Jack Terry made a note on his pad. "Whittam, you say?"

"He's gone," Sawyer offered. "Died during the pandemic. The funeral home is boarded up."

"What about the gravediggers he hired?"

"Transients, mostly. He hired people passing through the local rehab center, or undocumented workers."

"So we're not positive the casket was in there to begin with."

Sawyer made a strangled noise. "Where else would it have been all this time?"

Detective Terry lifted his hand. "Easy. We're just talking this through. Can you think of anyone who could've done this?"

Sawyer's mouth tightened. "No."

But I knew he was lying—he had suspects in mind.

"There's a bit of a feud in Irving," I offered. "Between the Whispers and the Bensons."

At the mention of his former girlfriend's family, Detective Terry's expression darkened. "What kind of feud?"

"Petty misunderstandings about property and such," Sawyer said quickly. "It's

nothing serious." He glanced at me and begged me to be quiet with his eyes. I pressed my lips together to stem the questions I wanted to ask.

"If someone took the casket," Ramirez said, carefully stepping around the fallen tree. "Their footprints were washed away."

"It would've taken more than one person," Detective Terry said, walking over to join him.

I wandered over to the other side of the fallen oak. Its massive root ball towered over me, chunks of earth still clinging to the gnarled wood. Something metallic glinted among the roots, catching my eye.

"Hey guys?" I called out. "I think I found something."

They hurried over as I pointed out the object. Ramirez donned a pair of latex gloves and carefully extracted it from the tangle of roots.

"It's a locket," he announced, holding it up.

The heart-shaped pendant dangled from a delicate chain, its surface tarnished but still beautiful.

"Can you open it?" I asked, leaning in for a closer look.

Ramirez fumbled with the clasp for a moment before it sprung open. Inside was a tiny photograph of a smiling couple—a man and woman I didn't recognize.

"That's Charles and Sophia Whisper," Sawyer said softly. "Rose's parents."

Detective Terry's brow furrowed. "Was Rose wearing this when she was buried?"

Sawyer shook his head. "No, she wasn't. I don't understand. This locket was a family heirloom. Rose told me she'd lost it years ago."

"Well, evidently it's been hanging out in this tree," Ramirez quipped.

"Or someone put it there," I mused.

"We need to expand the search area," Detective Terry said. "Everyone step back, please. Officer Ramirez, call for backup. We need a team out here ASAP."

Sawyer stepped up. "Is there any way we can keep this quiet? I don't want a bunch of looky-loos coming round to gawk at Rose's grave."

"We'll do what we can," Detective Terry said. "But these things have a way of getting out. Besides, the rumor mill might come in handy—if someone took the casket, maybe they bragged to someone about it."

Sawyer relented with a nod. We both knew word was probably already spreading like wildfire through anyone in town with a police scanner.

As the men sprang into action, I stood there, staring at the empty grave. The locket's discovery only deepened the mystery. How did a long-lost family heirloom end up in the roots of an ancient oak?

And where on earth was Rose's body?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE MIDDAY sun hung high in the cloudless sky, offering little warmth against the crisp autumn air. I huddled deeper into my sweater as I made my way to the Whisper Graveyard, drawn by the sight of a small gathering near the center of the cemetery.

As I approached, I recognized the Benson twins, their matching blond heads bent together in whispered conversation. Tilda stood nearby, her usual severe expression softened by something that looked suspiciously like excitement. A few other locals I vaguely recognized milled about, all wearing various shades of black and silver.

Tilda saw me and beckoned me closer. "We're going to perform a new moon ritual." She gestured to Rose's open grave that had been staked off with yellow warning tape. "The group is energized to learn our Grand Witch Rose has been released from the grasp of death."

I wet my lips. "So... none of you had anything to do with removing the casket?"

Tilda's eyes bugged. "Absolutely not. This was all Rose's doing."

I wanted to point out that if Rose had risen from the dead, why hadn't she left the casket, but before I could form the crazy-sounding words, Tilda had turned away.

The group formed a circle, joining hands. I hung back, watching as Tilda began to chant in a language I didn't recognize. The words seemed to hang in the air, vibrating with an energy I could almost see.

As the chanting grew louder, a gust of wind whipped through the graveyard, stirring up fallen leaves into miniature cyclones. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

"O dark goddess of the new moon," Tilda intoned, her voice carrying easily over the wind, "we call upon you to bless our endeavors and grant our petitions."

The Benson twins stepped forward, each holding a small object. One carried a black candle, the other a silver knife that glinted in the sunlight.

"We offer you our devotion," the twins said in eerie unison, "and ask for your favor in return."

Tilda took the knife and, in one swift motion, pricked her finger. A drop of blood welled up, which she used to anoint the candle. The flame that sprang to life was an unnatural shade of blue.

I took an involuntary step back, my heart racing. This was getting a little too real for comfort.

As if sensing my unease, Tilda's eyes locked onto mine. "Josephine," she called out, "won't you join us? The more energy we channel, the stronger the spell."

I shook my head, trying to keep my voice steady. "No, thanks. Just here to observe."

Tilda's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "Suit yourself. But remember, magic has a way of affecting everyone in its path—whether they believe in it or not."

The group resumed their chanting, the strange words washing over me in waves. Despite my skepticism, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was happening. The air felt charged, alive with possibility—or was it menace?

As the ritual reached its crescendo, a flock of crows erupted from a nearby tree, their raucous cries drowning out the chants. The candle's flame guttered and went out, plunging us into sudden, eerie silence.

Tilda looked positively gleeful. "It is done."

The others began to disperse, chatting excitedly, but I remained rooted to the spot. What had I gotten myself into? And more importantly, what had I just helped unleash?

I retreated backward through the graveyard gate, nearly falling in my haste. As I hurried back to the house, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched.

By the person who'd taken Rose's body?

Or, if Tilda was to be believed, by Rose herself?



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE LATE afternoon sun slanted through the kitchen windows as I waited for my tea to steep. On the counter, my phone buzzed, and Frida's smiling face lit up the screen. I answered, grateful for a dose of normalcy.

"Hi, Frida."

"Girl. You are not going to believe what happened!"

I cradled the phone between my ear and shoulder as I added a splash of milk to my tea. "Don't keep me in suspense."

"It's Curtis," she said, her voice a mix of glee and disbelief. "He's been in an accident."

My hand froze midway to grabbing a cookie. "Is he okay?"

"Physically, he'll live. His ego, on the other hand..."

I sank into a kitchen chair, my tea forgotten. "Frida, what happened?"

"Okay, picture this," she began, barely containing her excitement. "Curtis was at some bougie rooftop party, probably trying to schmooze his way into another get-rich-quick scheme. Apparently, he'd had a few too many of whatever overpriced cocktail they were serving and decided to demonstrate his superior 'core strength' by doing a handstand on the edge of the roof."

"He didn't."

"He did. Long story short, a pigeon—a pigeon!—flew right into his face mid-handstand."

I gripped the phone, suddenly terrified. "Did he fall off the roof?"

"Thankfully, no. But he did manage to break both arms trying to catch himself."

I winced, torn between sympathy and a perverse sense of satisfaction. "That's... wow."

"And here's the best part—he can't type!"

"Really?"

"Both arms in casts. He's physically incapable of updating his Instagram. His girlfriend posted the photos on her feed. His entire social media presence has gone radio silent."

I sat there, stunned.

"Jo? You still there?"

"Yeah, sorry. It's just... a lot to process."

"It's the curse! It actually worked!"

"Or it was just a coincidence," I countered as I carried my tea upstairs to my bedroom.

"Wait—I thought you believed in this witchy stuff."

"I was just... blowing off steam when I did... what I did."

"Blame it on witchcraft or karma or the weather, but the guy got what was coming to him."

"Yeah, I'm not shedding any tears," I admitted.

"How are things in Witch City? Any more spooky graveyard drama?"

I walked to the window and glanced in the direction of the Whisper Graveyard, remembering yesterday's new moon ritual. "The usual—Wiccan ceremonies, secret feuds... oh, and a tree fell over and pushed up an empty grave vault."

"What the hell? Somebody robbed a grave?"

"It's unclear," I murmured. "The police are looking into it."

"Ugh," Frida said with a shudder in her voice. "Quick, tell me something good. How's the hardbody stone mason?"

My cheeks warmed. "He's... fine."

"Girl, I can hear you blushing through the phone. Spill!"

As I regaled Frida with a heavily edited version of recent events, my eyes kept drifting to the graveyard. I set down my tea and picked up the binoculars. The sun was setting now, casting long shadows across the headstones.

A movement caught my eye—a flash of white among the graves. I squinted, trying to make out what it was. For a moment, I could have sworn I saw a figure in a white dress ducking behind a monument.

"Josie? Hello? Did I lose you?"

"Sorry, Frida. Bad reception out here in the boonies. I'll call you later, okay?"

"You were just getting to the good part!"

"Bye, Frida."

I ended the call, then used both hands to focus the binoculars. But the white figure was gone.

If it had ever been there.

Chastising myself, I set down the binoculars and reclaimed my tea. As I brought the cup to my mouth, I couldn't help but smile at the thought of Curtis with both arms in casts.

A sense of wonder filled my chest... I guess I did believe in witchcraft.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE SHRILL ring of my phone jolted me awake. I fumbled for it on the nightstand, squinting at the screen. Mom. Of course. Because 6 AM was a perfectly reasonable time to call someone.

"Hello?" I croaked.

"Josephine, darling! You sound dreadful. Late night with your rustic Romeo?"

I rolled my eyes, sitting up in bed. "Good morning to you too. Where are you?"

"I'm in London for the Literature Festival."

"Has it been nice?"

"No, it fucking hasn't. More than one person has hinted at the claims of that parasitic ex of yours."

I winced. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry—be proactive."

I bit my tongue to keep from telling her I had been proactive. "I heard he had an accident and might be out of commission for a while."

"You were misinformed. Vivian just called me. Since Curtis can't work, he's demanding more money."

I blinked. "More? But I thought you were already paying him off?"

"We were going to, but now that he's temporarily out of the social media game, he claims he needs compensation for lost income."

I closed my eyes briefly. "How much more does he want?"

"The fucker wants another hundred thousand on top of the original amount."

I bolted upright. "That's insane!"

"Vivian thinks we should counter-offer."

I sighed. "What do you think?"

"I think we should pay the shitstain to make him go away."

I bit my lip. Had my attempt at magical revenge somehow made things worse?

"Josephine? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, sorry. I just... I need to think."

"Well, don't think too long. We need to give Vivian an answer by Monday."

"Okay. I'll let you know... soon."

"How's the book coming along?"

I brightened. "I'm making good progress. I should be able to deliver the manuscript soon."

"Tick tock," she sang, then ended the call.

I frowned, then flopped back onto the bed and groaned. Then I picked up my phone and thumbed through posts of Curtis with both arms in casts straight out in front of him, Curse of the Mummy-style as he glared into the camera. I laughed, but the noise petered out to a whimper.

The curse was supposed to make Curtis back off, not double down on his demands. And now, thanks to his "accident," he had even more leverage.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE CRISP autumn air nipped at my fingers as I scribbled in my notebook, perched on the now-familiar concrete bench in the Whisper Graveyard, covered with a blanket. I was supposed to be working on my manuscript, but my attention kept wandering to the muscled form of Sawyer as he labored over a damaged headstone.

His strong hands moved with surprising gentleness, piecing together the shattered marble like a jigsaw puzzle. A bead of sweat trickled down his neck, disappearing beneath the collar of his worn flannel shirt. I found myself imagining tracing its path with my fingertips, remembering the feel of his skin against mine from our night together.

I shook my head, trying to banish the distracting thoughts. This was neither the time nor the place for such musings. Besides, Sawyer seemed a million miles away.

Every few minutes, his gaze would drift to Rose's disturbed grave, his brow furrowing with an emotion I couldn't quite read. Was it guilt? Sorrow? Or something deeper, more complex?

I wanted to ask him about it, to bridge the silence that had grown between us since that stormy night. But the words stuck in my throat. How could I bring up our intimate encounter when we were surrounded by such stark reminders of death and loss?

So instead, we both retreated into our own thoughts, the only sounds the scratch of my pen and the scrape of Sawyer's tools against stone.

My heroine, Lady Amelia, stared up at me from the page, her fictional problems



suddenly seeming trivial compared to the real-life mystery surrounding us. How could I focus on crafting the perfect romance when there was an empty grave just yards away?

I sighed, closing my notebook. "Any progress?" I called out, more to break the silence than out of genuine curiosity.

Sawyer looked up, seeming almost startled by my voice. "Hm? Oh, yeah. Should have this one fixed up good as new by sundown."

From my seat, I could see the name on the headstone. Earl Maxwell, Jr., US Army. He had died in 1968 at the age of nineteen. I did the math—Vietnam. A pang of sadness struck me. "I'm sure the family will appreciate it."

"Maybe," he said with a shrug. "If they ever come to visit."

There was a bitterness in his tone that surprised me. "Do you know them? The family, I mean."

"Used to," he replied, turning back to his work. "But grief does funny things to people. Sometimes it's easier to stay away, I guess."

I thought of my own reasons for coming to Irving, of the scandals and heartaches I'd been trying to outrun. "Yeah," I murmured. "I guess it is."

Sawyer's hands stilled, and for a moment, I thought he might say more. But then he shook his head slightly and resumed his methodical repair work.

We lapsed back into silence, each of us lost in our own private burdens. The weight of unspoken words hung heavy in the air between us, as tangible as the autumn mist that clung to the headstones.

I found myself wondering about the stories buried here, not just in the graves but in the very soil of this place. How many of the graveyard's secrets were tangled up with the strange events unfolding around us?

As the sun began to dip towards the horizon, painting the cemetery in shades of gold and amber, I realized we'd barely spoken all day. Yet somehow, I felt closer to Sawyer than ever. There was a comfort in this shared silence, in the knowledge that we were both grappling with things beyond our understanding.

I stood, stretching my stiff muscles. "I should head back to the house," I said softly. "I need to feed the chickens... and Satan."

Sawyer nodded, not looking up from his work. "I want to finish this up."

As I walked away, I glanced back over my shoulder. Sawyer had paused in his task, his gaze once again fixed on Rose's empty grave. The fading sunlight cast long shadows across his face, highlighting the weariness in his features.

In that moment, he looked every bit as haunted as the graveyard around him.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE CRISP autumn air nipped at my cheeks as I scribbled away in my notebook, trying to capture the essence of my heroine's latest romantic misadventure. Nearby, Sawyer worked diligently on repairing yet another vandalized headstone, his strong hands moving with practiced ease.

The scratch of my pen and the gentle scrape of Sawyer's tools created a soothing melody, punctuated only by the occasional rustle of falling leaves. But the elephant in the graveyard was becoming too big to ignore.

Resolute, I set aside my notebook. "Sawyer." My voice sounded unnaturally loud in the quiet cemetery. "Can we talk?"

He looked up, a wary expression crossing his face. "Sure. What's on your mind?"

I took a deep breath. "About the other night... do you regret it?"

Sawyer's hands stilled. He was quiet for a long moment, his gaze fixed on the repaired headstone. Finally, he shook his head. "No, Josephine. I don't regret it. Not at all."

Relief flooded through me, followed quickly by confusion as he continued, "But I don't think it should happen again."

"Oh," I said, trying to keep the hurt out of my voice. "May I ask why?"

He stood, wiping his hands on his jeans. "I'm single for a good reason."

"Which is?"

Sawyer's eyes met mine, and for a moment, I thought he might actually tell me. But then he looked away, his jaw clenching. "It's complicated. Let's just say I'm not good for anyone right now."

I wanted to press further, to unravel the mystery that was Sawyer King. But something in his expression held me back.

"I understand," I said softly, even though I didn't.

He nodded, seemingly relieved that I wasn't pushing the issue. But as he turned back to his work, I couldn't help but notice the tension in his shoulders, the way his gaze kept flickering towards me when he thought I wasn't looking.

Despite his words, the chemistry between us was undeniable. It crackled in the air like static electricity, making my skin tingle whenever he came near. And I knew, with a certainty that surprised me, that Sawyer felt it too.

The sound of tires on gravel broke the charged silence between us. We both turned to see a sleek red convertible pulling up to the graveyard gates.

A curvy woman with a shock of vibrant red hair stepped out, her heels sinking slightly into the soft earth as she made her way towards us. She carried a professional-looking camera and had a notebook tucked under one arm.

"Hi there!" she called out cheerfully. "I'm Rainie Stephens from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution . I'm hoping you folks might be able to help me out with a story I'm working on."

I glanced at Sawyer, who had stiffened at the word "story." He stepped forward,

offering a polite but reserved smile. "What kind of story?"

Rainie's eyes lit up. "A spooky one! With Halloween coming up, we're doing a feature on graveyards in the South. Detective Jack Terry is a friend. He mentioned this place might have some interesting tales to tell."

I felt a flutter of panic in my chest. The last thing we needed was more attention on the Whisper Graveyard, especially with Rose's empty grave still unexplained.

"I'm afraid there's not much to tell," Sawyer said, his voice casual. "We're just a small-town cemetery. Nothing spooky about that."

The woman angled her head. "But what about the recent vandalism? And I heard rumors about a disturbed grave—"

"Local mischief," Sawyer said easily. "We'd really rather not bring any more attention to the graveyard. We don't want to encourage tourists or thrill-seekers."

The reporter looked disappointed but nodded. "I understand. Mind if I at least take a few photos of the grounds?"

Sawyer hesitated. "We'd rather you didn't."

"But it's a public place, right? Just a couple of quick shots."

He relented with a nod.

She snapped a few photos, then gave a little wave. "Thanks."

Sawyer watched until she drove off, then glanced at his watch. "I should go, too."

My face must have registered disappointment because he hesitated. "I meant what I said, Josephine. It's not you—it's me."

I dipped my chin to acknowledge his words. Call me crazy, but I believed him.

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## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE GENTLE patter of rain against the windowpanes provided a soothing backdrop as I paced the creaky floorboards of the kitchen. My phone felt unnaturally heavy in my hand as I waited for my editor, Bruce, to pick up.

"Josephine, darling!" His voice boomed through the speaker. "Are you still hiding out in the sticks?"

I forced a cheery tone. "Still in Alabama, yes. Did you get my new pages?"

"I did."

I held my breath. "And?"

"They're brilliant, Jo. Absolutely brilliant. Lady Amelia is delightfully feisty, and that stonemason of hers? Whew! I had to cross my legs to read those scenes."

Relief washed over me. "So you like it?"

"It's some of your best work yet. Which brings me to my next question—when can I expect the full manuscript?"

I glanced at the calendar hanging on the wall, its days marching relentlessly towards my deadline. "Well," I hedged, "I've made really good progress. I think I can have it to you by the middle of November. That work for you?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. I swallowed hard.

"The middle of November," Bruce repeated slowly. "That's cutting it close, Jo. Very close. But if you say you can do it, I believe you."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Bruce. I won't let you down... this time."

"I'm counting on you," he said, his voice tinged with the slightest hint of warning. "Now, about this Curtis situation—"

"I'm working on it," I cut in.

"Working on it to what end?"

"To make it go away."

"That's good, but it's reached the point where we might need a statement from you refuting his claims."

"I can do that."

"And a retraction from Curtis."

"I can't see Curtis actually admitting he lied, but I'll see what I can do."

"I believe you, of course, but the publisher had to recall two books last year so everyone's being very careful."

"I understand," I said.

"Okay. Good talk. Keep those pages coming!"

I ended the call and the fake smile I'd plastered on for Bruce's benefit faded. I stared



at the blinking cursor on my laptop screen, mocking me with its steady rhythm.

Mid November was less than a month away, and I was barely halfway through the manuscript.

Then there was Curtis. My mother's offer to pay him off was still on the table, but something about it felt wrong. Like admitting defeat. But could I really afford to keep fighting?

I closed my eyes, massaging my temples. When had my life become so complicated? A few months ago, my biggest worry had been whether my hero's breeches were historically accurate. Now I was juggling curses, empty graves, and a hunky stonemason who ran hot and cold.

I couldn't help but replay our conversation from yesterday in my mind. He said we shouldn't be together, but his eyes told a different story.

Use this for the book , I told myself. Use the confusion, the anticipation, the doubt—and the hope—I was nursing to at least give my characters a happy ending.

With a deep breath, I placed my fingers on the keyboard and began to type.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE RUSTY chain of my borrowed bicycle squeaked in protest as I pedaled into town with a container of eggs in the basket. The crisp autumn air nipped at my cheeks, carrying with it the scent of fallen leaves and woodsmoke.

I pulled up in front of Coleman's Grocery, carefully dismounting to avoid a repeat of last week's egg-tastrophe. As I chained the bike to a nearby rack, I couldn't help but marvel at how quickly this small-town routine had become familiar.

The bell above the door jingled cheerfully as I entered, announcing my arrival to the empty store.

"Morning, Josephine!" Coleman's gravelly voice called. "Got some beauties for me today?"

I made my way to the counter, setting down my basket. "Fresh from the coop."

Coleman's weathered face broke into a grin. "Let's have look-see."

As he inspected the eggs, I found myself studying the older man. Did he know about Rose's empty grave? About curses and vivianite crystals and things that go bump in the night?

"Everything alright?" Coleman asked, catching my stare.

I blinked, forcing a smile. "Just lost in thought."

After completing our transaction, I headed next door to the library, my steps heavy

with purpose. The musty smell of old books enveloped me as I entered, a stark contrast to the crisp outdoor air.

Tilda looked up from her desk, her eyes inquisitive. "Josephine. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I glanced around, making sure we were alone before leaning in close. "The curse," I whispered. "It worked, but things are worse."

Tilda's eyebrows shot up. "How?"

I recounted Curtis's accident and his increased demands for money. Tilda listened intently, her fingers steeped under her chin.

"I see," she said when I finished. "It seems the universe has a sense of humor."

"This isn't funny," I hissed. "What am I supposed to do now?"

She smiled, as if she was enjoying this. "We amplify the spell, of course. Get another vivianite crystal. I'll cast a stronger curse."

I hesitated. "I don't know..."

"Do you want your problem solved or not?" Tilda's voice was sharp.

I sighed. "Fine. I'll get the crystal."

"Good girl," Tilda purred. "You know where to find me when you're ready."

The walk to Sophia's Jewelry felt longer than usual, my feet dragging with each step. A little voice in the back of my head screamed that this was a bad idea, but I silenced

it. I was in too deep to back out now.

The bell chimed softly as I entered the shop. To my surprise, Franny was already standing behind the counter, a small velvet box in her hands. It was as if she'd been expecting me.

"Josephine," she said, her voice tinged with sadness. "Back so soon?"

I approached the counter, trying to keep my voice steady. "I need another vivianite crystal."

Franny's eyes narrowed. "I was afraid you'd say that." She opened the box, revealing the shimmering blue-green stone within. "Josephine, I hope you understand what you're getting into. Once done, it can't be undone."

I nodded, pulling out my wallet. "Thank you, Franny."

I carried the crystal back to Tilda at the library, who took it with only a twitch of her nose.

As I left the library, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched. I glanced over my shoulder, half-expecting to see a figure in white darting between the buildings.

But the street was empty, save for a lone crow perched on a nearby lamppost. It cawed once, the sound echoing ominously through the quiet town.

With a shiver, I hurried back to my bike. The sooner I got back to the Whisper House, the better.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE KITCHEN was alive with the comforting aroma of yeast and flour. Sunlight streamed through the window, catching dust motes that danced in the air like fairy dust. Kelly stood at the counter, her hands covered in a fine dusting of flour as she kneaded a mound of sticky dough.

"Now, you want to fold it over like this," Kelly instructed, demonstrating the motion. "Then give it a quarter turn and repeat."

I mimicked her movements, marveling at the way the dough transformed under my hands from a shaggy mess into a smooth, elastic ball. The repetitive motion was oddly soothing, a welcome distraction from the chaos of the past few days.

Kelly's crystal necklaces clinked softly as she worked, the colorful stones catching the light. "How's that feeling?" she asked, nodding at my dough.

"Like a stress ball," I admitted.

Kelly's laugh was warm and rich. "That's the idea. Breadmaking is as much therapy as it is cooking."

As we worked, the kitchen filled with the earthy scent of fermentation from the sourdough starter bubbling away in its mason jar. The gentle pop of air bubbles escaping the mixture provided a soft counterpoint to the rhythmic slap of dough against the wooden counter.

"So," Kelly said, her tone casual, "any news on the, um, empty grave situation?"

I paused mid-knead, my hands sinking into the soft dough. "Not really. The police are still investigating, but..." I trailed off, unsure how much to reveal.

Kelly nodded, her expression sympathetic. "It's just so bizarre, isn't it? I mean, who steals a body?"

"I know, right?"

We lapsed into silence, broken only by the soft squelch of dough and the distant crow of the rooster. As I worked, I found my mind wandering to Sawyer, to the tension that had been building between us.

"Kelly," I ventured, trying to keep my tone light, "what do you know about Sawyer? I mean, has he always lived here?"

Kelly's hands stilled for a moment. "Sawyer? Oh, he's been around for as long as I can remember. Keeps to himself mostly, but he's always willing to lend a hand when needed."

"And has he always been so..." I searched for the right word, "...solitary?"

A knowing smile played on Kelly's lips. "You mean, has he always been single?"

I felt my cheeks flush. "I'm just curious."

"Uh-huh," Kelly teased, her eyes twinkling. "Well, if you must know, you're the first person I've seen turn Sawyer's head in a long time."

"Oh," I said, trying to sound nonchalant and failing miserably. "I'm sure that's not true."

Kelly shrugged, turning to check the starter. "Believe what you want, but I know what I've seen. That man looks at you like you're the sun coming out after a long storm."

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I focused on my dough, punching it down perhaps a bit more forcefully than necessary.

"Alright," Kelly said, clapping her floury hands together. "Let's get these loaves shaped and into the proofing baskets."

As we worked, the kitchen filled with the promise of fresh bread, creating a homey atmosphere that made the Whisper House feel less like a temporary residence and more like... home.

Once the loaves were nestled in their baskets, covered with soft cloths, Kelly dusted off her hands. "Now we wait. In about four hours, we'll have the most delicious bread you've ever tasted."

I smiled, genuinely excited. "I can't wait."

As Kelly cleaned up, her anti-evil crystals catching the light, I found myself reflecting on the simple joy of learning this old-world skill. For a moment, the mysteries of Irving faded into the background.

But as my gaze drifted to the window, in the direction of the Whisper Graveyard beyond, I knew the respite was only temporary.

For now, though, I was content to let the bread rise and pretend, just for a little while, that everything was normal.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE SOFT scratching of my pen against paper was interrupted by the rumble of an approaching vehicle. I glanced up from my perch on the porch swing to see a delivery truck lumbering down the road, followed closely by a familiar black sedan.

I set aside my notebook and headed towards the graveyard. As I approached, I saw Detective Jack Terry emerge from the sedan, his face set in grim lines.

"Ms. Vanguard," he called out, nodding in greeting.

"Detective," I replied, watching as the delivery men began unloading a sheet-covered object from the truck. "New headstone?"

Jack's expression softened slightly. "For Serena. The vandalism... well, I couldn't leave her marker in that state."

I nodded, a pang of sympathy tightening my chest. "Of course. It's a thoughtful gesture."

We stood in silence as the workers removed the old headstone and carefully maneuvered the new headstone into place. The polished granite gleamed in the autumn sunlight. Serena's name was etched in elegant script.

Once the workers had finished and driven away, Jack turned to me, his eyes sharp. "Any new developments I should know about, Ms. Vanguard?"

I shook my head. "Nothing beyond the usual small-town gossip."



He raised an eyebrow. "And what's the gossip saying these days?"

I shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. "Oh, you know. A third of the town believes Rose has risen from the dead... a third believe Satan worshippers robbed her grave... and a third believe she was never buried in the first place."

Jack nodded slowly, his gaze sweeping across the graveyard. "What's your take on some of the locals? Sawyer King, for instance?"

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of Sawyer's name. "He seems... dedicated to this place. Spends a lot of time restoring the headstones."

"And the Benson sisters? Tilda and Franny?"

I hesitated, thinking of the vivianite crystals I'd transferred between the estranged sisters. "I don't know them well," I hedged. "Tilda runs the library, Franny the jewelry store. They seem... nice enough."

Jack's eyes narrowed slightly. "They were Serena's sisters, you know. She left town because of them. Said there was too much family drama, too many secrets."

"Oh?" I said, trying to keep my voice neutral. "That's... interesting."

"Isn't it?" Jack agreed, his tone casual but his eyes sharp. "Serena never went into details, but I got the impression there was more going on in this town than meets the eye."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. The urge to confess about the curse was almost overwhelming. But something held me back—the fact that I'd look like a lunatic.

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you, Ms. Vanguard?" Jack pressed.

I met his gaze, forcing a smile. "I'm just the temporary caretaker, Detective. I'm afraid I'm not privy to the town's secrets."

Jack held my gaze for a long moment, and I had the distinct impression he knew I was holding something back. Finally, he nodded, turning back to Serena's new headstone. He ran his hand over it slowly in a loving gesture.

"If you do hear anything that might shed light on the vandalism or Rose's disappearance, I hope you'll let me know."

"Of course," I agreed, perhaps a bit too quickly. "By the way, a reporter from the AJC stopped by—she said she knew you."

He nodded. "Rainie. I thought a story about the graveyard might shake loose some information."

"Maybe," I agreed. There might be people who had left Irving—like Serena had—who could shed some light on the goings-on in Irving.

I was oddly relieved when the man made his way back to his car. But the relief was short-lived, replaced by a gnawing guilt. Was I becoming part of the problem? Another keeper of Irving's secrets?

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

I SCRIBBLED in my notebook, perched on the blanket-covered concrete bench in the Whisper Graveyard. Lady Amelia was in the midst of a particularly witty exchange with her stonemason love interest when the crunch of gravel underfoot pulled me from my fictional world.

I looked up to see Reverend Abernathy approaching, his usually jovial face creased with concern. He clutched his ever-present silver flask of holy water, the metal glinting in the late afternoon sun.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Vanguard," he called, his voice carrying easily across the quiet cemetery.

I closed my notebook, offering a small smile. "Afternoon, Reverend. More blessings today?"

He nodded, his eyes darting towards Rose's grave. "Among other things. I've been hearing... rumors. About Rose's final resting place."

I felt my shoulders tense. "Oh?"

The Reverend stepped closer, lowering his voice. "They say her grave is empty. That she's... gone."

I hesitated, unsure how much to reveal. But the secret of Rose's missing body seemed to weigh on me, begging to be shared. "It's true," I admitted. "During that big storm, a tree fell and... well, the vault was empty."

A myriad of emotions flickered across his face too quickly for me to decipher. "I see," he murmured. "Most troubling indeed."

"Do you..." I paused, choosing my words carefully. "Do you have any theories about what might've happened?"

The Reverend was quiet for a long moment, his gaze fixed on Rose's headstone. When he spoke, his voice was soft, almost reverent. "There are many stories in the Bible of people being brought back to life. Lazarus, raised by Jesus after four days in the tomb. The widow's son in Nain. Even Christ himself, of course."

I frowned, not quite following. "Are you suggesting Rose was... resurrected?"

He shook his head, a small, enigmatic smile playing at his lips. "I'm merely pointing out that the line between life and death is not always as clear as we might think. Especially in a place like Irving."

There was something in his tone, a hint of... what? Knowledge? Experience? It sent a shiver down my spine.

"Did you know Rose well?" I asked, trying to keep my voice casual.

The Reverend's smile faltered slightly. "We were... acquainted. She came to me for guidance occasionally."

"About what?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid that's between Rose and God now. Pastoral confidentiality, you understand."

I nodded, but I couldn't shake the feeling that Reverend Abernathy knew more about

Rose than he was letting on. There was a depth to his concern, a familiarity in the way he spoke of her, that seemed at odds with a casual acquaintance.

"In any case," he continued, uncapping his flask, "I think a little extra blessing wouldn't go amiss, given the circumstances."

I watched as he moved among the headstones, sprinkling holy water and murmuring prayers. When he reached Rose's grave, he paused, his hand hovering over the stone. For a moment, I could have sworn I saw his lips move in what looked like an apology.

As the Reverend finished his rounds and made his way back to me, I found myself studying him with new eyes. Was he just another keeper of Irving's secrets? Or was there more to his role in this strange little town?

"Thank you for confirming the rumors, Ms. Vanguard," he said, pocketing his now-empty flask. "I'll be sure to keep Rose in my prayers. And you as well," he added, his gaze sharp. "These are... trying times."

I nodded, not quite trusting myself to speak.

As I watched Reverend Abernathy's retreating figure, I couldn't help but feel that I'd just been given a piece of a much larger puzzle. But how it fit with everything else—Tilda's spells, Sawyer's secrets, the strange happenings in town—I couldn't yet piece together.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE SOFT knock on the kitchen door startled me from my morning coffee reverie. I opened it to find Sawyer, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, looking uncharacteristically nervous.

"Morning," he said, his voice gruff.

"Good morning," I said, unable to stop the smile that spread over my face. "You're getting started early today. Want some coffee?"

"I'm good," he said. "Actually, I was wondering if... you would show me Rose's workshop."

I blinked, surprised by the request. "Oh. Sure, of course."

We made our way through the house in silence, the old floorboards creaking beneath our feet. As we approached the hidden door to Rose's sanctuary, I felt a strange mix of excitement and trepidation. This space had become my refuge, a place where I felt connected to the house's former occupant. Sharing it with Sawyer felt oddly intimate.

I pushed open the door, and the familiar scent of wood polish and sawdust enveloped us. Sawyer stepped inside, his eyes widening as he took in the room. Tools hung neatly on pegboards, half-finished projects dotted various workbenches, and stacks of vintage furniture waited patiently for restoration.

"It's just as she left it," Sawyer murmured, running his hand along the edge of a workbench.

"Not quite," I admitted. "I've been... working on some things."

Sawyer's gaze snapped to mine. "You have?"

I nodded, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "Just small projects. That rocking chair, for instance." I gestured to the chair I'd been sanding and refinishing. "And I started stripping the paint off that old dresser."

Sawyer moved to the rocking chair, his fingers tracing the smooth, newly sanded arm. "Why?"

I shrugged, struggling to put my feelings into words. "It makes me feel closer to her, somehow. Like I'm carrying on her work, you know?"

Sawyer nodded, a look of understanding passing over his face. "Rose always did have a talent for bringing old things back to life."

There was something in his tone, a warmth and familiarity that made my chest tighten with an emotion I couldn't quite name. Jealousy? Longing?

"You obviously knew her very well," I ventured.

Sawyer's hand stilled on the chair. "I thought I did," he said quietly.

I stepped closer, drawn by the vulnerability in his voice. "Sawyer, what aren't you telling me about Rose?"

He turned to face me, and I was struck by the intensity in his eyes. "Josephine, I—"

Whatever he was about to say was lost as his gaze dropped to my lips. The air between us seemed to crackle with electricity. Before I could think better of it, I

closed the distance between us.

Our lips met, and for a moment, the world fell away. Sawyer's arms encircled me, pulling me close, and I melted into his embrace. He tasted of coffee and something distinctly him, a flavor I wanted to memorize.

But just as quickly as it began, it was over. Sawyer pulled back, his eyes wide with what looked like panic.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice hoarse. "I can't... we can't..."

"Sawyer, wait—" I reached for him, but he was already backing away.

"This was a mistake," he muttered. "I shouldn't have come."

And then he was gone, the door slamming behind him with a finality that left me reeling.

I stood there in Rose's workshop, my lips still tingling from our kiss, feeling more confused than ever. What had just happened? One moment Sawyer was opening up to me, and the next he was running away.

My gaze fell on the rocking chair, its half-restored state suddenly feeling like a metaphor for my relationship with Sawyer—a work in progress, beautiful but incomplete, with so much left unfinished.

Had Rose felt the same way about Sawyer?

I sank into the smooth wood of the chair. The workshop, which had felt so comforting just moments ago, now seemed to close in around me, filled with the ghosts of unspoken secrets and unfulfilled potential.



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE ROOSTER'S shrill cock-a-doodle-doo pierced the early morning fog, dragging me from a fitful sleep filled with dreams of Sawyer's kiss. I groaned, burying my face in the pillow. But the persistent bird wouldn't be ignored.

"All right, all right," I muttered, dragging myself out of bed. "I'm coming."

I shuffled downstairs, still in my pajamas, and grabbed the bucket of feed. The cool grass tickled my bare feet as I made my way to the chicken coop. Butterscotch, my favorite hen, clucked softly as I approached.

"At least someone's happy to see me," I grumbled, tossing out handfuls of feed.

The chickens swarmed around my feet, pecking enthusiastically. I watched them for a moment, envying their simple existence. Eat, sleep, lay eggs. No complicated feelings, no mysterious pasts, no earth-shattering kisses followed by inexplicable rejections.

A loud bleat reminded me of my other charge. I turned to see Satan the goat glaring at me from his pen, clearly offended by my chicken-first policy.

"Don't give me that look," I said, heading over with an armful of hay. "You know, for a demon, you're awfully needy."

As if to prove my point, Satan headbutted my leg affectionately as soon as I was within reach. I scratched behind his white ears, earning a contented noise that was somewhere between a purr and a bleat.

The rumble of an approaching vehicle made my heart skip a beat. I looked up to see Sawyer's familiar truck rolling by, heading towards the Whisper Graveyard. Our eyes met for a brief moment, and I felt a jolt of electricity even from this distance.

He kept going, leaving me with a jumble of emotions and a goat trying to eat my pajama bottoms.

"Oh no you don't," I scolded, extracting the fabric from Satan's mouth. "These are my good PJs. You know, the ones with only three holes."

I'd given up on maintaining nice clothes within a few days of arriving at Whisper House.

I made my way back to the house, my mind swirling with thoughts of Sawyer. The memory of our kiss in Rose's workshop played on repeat, followed by the crushing disappointment of his sudden departure.

Instead of heading to the graveyard as I usually would, I grabbed my laptop and settled onto the porch swing. If I couldn't make sense of my feelings in real life, maybe I could work them out through my characters.

Lady Amelia's quill flew across the page as she penned a letter to Lord Stonecraft:

My dearest Logan,

Your kiss has set my heart aflame, yet your sudden coldness leaves me chilled to the bone. What secrets lie behind those stormy eyes of yours? What shadows from your past keep you from embracing the love that blooms between us?

I poured my confusion, my longing, and my frustration into the words, letting Lady Amelia voice all the things I couldn't say to Sawyer. The pages flew by as I wrote, the

fictional world providing an escape from the complexities of my real one.

Hours passed in a blur of keystrokes and emotion. The sun had begun its descent when the sound of Sawyer's truck pulling me from my writing trance. I looked up to see him slowing down as he approached the house, and for a heart-stopping moment, I thought he might stop.

Our eyes met again, and I saw a flicker of... something. Regret? Longing? But then he pressed on the gas, the moment passing as quickly as it had come.

I watched his taillights disappear down the road, a hollow feeling settling in my chest. With a sigh, I turned back to my laptop, where Lady Amelia awaited her happily ever after. But as I stared at the screen, I realized that Lady Amelia's story had taken an unexpected turn. Instead of pining away for Lord Stonecraft, she was packing her bags, prepared to uncover the truth behind his mysterious behavior.

I smiled, feeling a spark of determination. Maybe it was time for this graveyard girl to do a little investigating of my own.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE SHRILL ring of my phone jolted me awake, my hand fumbling blindly on the nightstand. I squinted at the screen. Frida's grinning face stared back at me in the dim light of pre-dawn.

"This better be good," I grumbled into the phone.

"Oh, it's better than good," Frida practically squealed. "It's karma-licious!"

I sat up, suddenly wide awake. "What happened?"

"It's Curtis," she said, her voice dripping with glee. "He had another accident."

My heart skipped a beat. "What kind of accident?"

"Picture this," Frida began, clearly savoring the moment. "He was jay-walking and a scooter mowed him down—broke both his legs!"

"Are you sure?"

"It's all on video—I just texted you a link."

I clicked over and watched the video of Curtis going airborne and landing with a bounce. I winced. "Yikes. That's... intense."

"Intense? It's freaking hilarious!" Frida exclaimed. "I mean, what are the odds? First his arms and now his legs? Did you put another spell on him?"

"Um..."

"You did, didn't you? Oh. My. Dog."

A thrill ran down my spine. Had it actually worked?

"Maybe this will finally get him off your back, you know? Hard to harass you when he's in a wheelchair."

"Hopefully."

"Remind me never to cross you," Frida said. "Gotta run."

I laughed and ended the call, trying to shake off an uneasy feeling. Curtis was quieted, at least for now, and maybe this setback would put him in a compromising frame of mind. I should be celebrating, not worrying about magical consequences. But as thrilling as it was to think that magical spells could work, it also frightened me to the core.

After all, what if someone decided to place a curse on me ?

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE BELL above Coleman's Grocery door jingled as I left with a small sack of items under my arm. The crisp autumn air nipped at my cheeks, carrying with it the scent of fallen leaves and chimney smoke. I took a deep breath, steeling myself for what came next.

The library loomed before me, its weathered brick facade somehow more imposing than usual. I pushed open the heavy oak door, wincing at the loud creak that announced my arrival.

Tilda looked up from her desk, her eyes glinting with interest. "Hi, Josephine. What's new?"

I glanced around, making sure we were alone. "The curse," I whispered. "It worked."

Tilda smiled. "Do tell."

I recounted Curtis's latest accident, watching as Tilda's lips curled into a satisfied smirk.

"The universe does have a wicked sense of humor, doesn't it?"

I nodded, a mix of relief and unease swirling in my stomach. "I just hope it's enough to keep him off my back for good."

"So do I," she said, and sounded as if she meant it.

Since we were now on "friendly" terms, I decided to be forthright. "Tilda, what do

you think happened to Rose's body? You don't really believe she's back from the dead... do you?"

Tilda was quiet for a long moment, her fingers drumming an odd rhythm on the desk. When she spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper. "All I know is that Rose had powers beyond my understanding."

I felt a chill run down my spine. "But... that's impossible."

Tilda's smile was enigmatic. "You mean, like casting a spell is impossible?"

She had me there.

Tilda glanced at her watch. "I'm sorry, but I have to run an errand. By the way, there's going to be an... event in the graveyard on Thursday night. To celebrate the supermoon."

Curiosity overrode my unease. "What kind of event?"

Tilda's eyes met mine, and I saw something there that looked almost like concern. "The kind you should stay far away from, Josephine. Our little group... well, let's just say things might get a bit intense. There's talk of a sacrifice, and I'd hate for you to get caught in the crossfire."

I swallowed hard. "Sacrifice? What do you mean?"

But Tilda was already ushering me towards the door. "Just trust me on this. Stay in the house Thursday. Lock your doors. And don't come to the graveyard."

With that ominous warning, she practically pushed me out onto the sidewalk. The library door closed behind me with an ominous thud.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE KITCHEN was alive with the tantalizing aroma of Kelly's latest culinary creation. I sat at the table, watching in awe as she effortlessly plated what looked like a meal straight out of a five-star restaurant.

"Ta-da!" Kelly announced, setting a dish in front of me with a flourish. "Pan-seared duck breast with a cherry reduction, served over roasted root vegetables and wild rice pilaf."

I stared at the plate. "Kelly, this is incredible. Are you sure you're just a groundskeeper and not a secret Michelin-starred chef?"

She laughed. "Really, it's just a hobby. But I'm glad you appreciate it. Dig in!"

I didn't need to be told twice. The first bite was a revelation—tender duck, perfectly crisp skin, the tart sweetness of the cherry sauce balancing everything beautifully.

I moaned. "You've missed your calling. You should be running your own restaurant."

She blushed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Maybe someday. For now, I'm just happy to have someone to cook for. My uncle wants only meat and potatoes, no spices."

As we ate, I found myself relaxing for the first time in days. The drama with Sawyer, the curse, Tilda's ominous warnings—it all seemed far away in the warm cocoon of Kelly's company and incredible food.

"So," I said, between bites, "any news from town? I feel like I've been out of the loop



lately."

Kelly's eyes lit up. "Oh! I heard Wayne Blakemore is doing much better. They're saying he might come home from the hospital in a couple of days."

"That's wonderful news," I said, genuinely relieved.

Kelly leaned in, curiosity piqued. "Rumor has it that Wayne asked you to read his book. Is it good?"

"It has a lot of promise," I said honestly.

"What's it about?"

I hesitated, remembering Wayne's request for discretion. But surely there was no harm in sharing the general premise. "It's a novel about a witch's feud."

"A witch's feud?" Kelly's eyebrows shot up. "That sounds... specific. Is it based on real people?"

I shrugged, aiming for nonchalance. "It could just be Wayne's imagination running wild."

Kelly took a sip of her water, a thoughtful expression on her face. "You know, now that you mention it, I did hear something about Wayne and Rose once."

I perked up, my fork pausing halfway to my mouth. "Oh?"

"Well," Kelly said, lowering her voice conspiratorially, "I heard that Wayne was sweet on Rose. Tried to win her over and all."

"Really?" I said, thinking back to the passionate prose in Wayne's manuscript. "I had no idea."

Kelly nodded. "Apparently, he was devastated when Rose died. Some folks say he was never quite the same after that."

I felt a pang of sympathy for Wayne. Had he poured all that grief and unrequited love into his novel? It would explain the raw emotion that seemed to bleed through every page.

"That's so sad," I murmured. "I wonder if writing the book was his way of processing everything."

"Could be," Kelly agreed. "Sometimes art is the best way to deal with our demons, you know?"

I nodded, thinking of my own writing and how it had become a lifeline in the chaos of the past few months. "I know exactly what you mean."

We lapsed into a comfortable silence, the only sound the gentle clink of cutlery against china. As I savored the last bites of my meal, I found myself reflecting on Wayne's story. How much of his novel was fiction, and how much was pulled from real life? And if it was based on truth, what did that mean for the witchy goings-on in Irving?

"Penny for your thoughts?" Kelly asked, breaking me from my reverie.

I smiled. "Just thinking about how lucky I am to have found a friend—and personal chef—like you in this strange little town."

Kelly beamed, her cheeks flushing with pleasure. "Right back at you. Now, how

about some dessert? I made a lavender crème brûlée."

As Kelly bustled around the kitchen, I couldn't help but feel grateful for this moment of camaraderie. Whatever mysteries and dangers lurked in Irving, at least I had good food and good company to see me through.

Tomorrow's supermoon was fast approaching, and with it, who knew what new challenges would arise?

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE WIND howled outside my bedroom window, an eerie chorus that sent shivers down my spine despite the warmth of my oversized sweater. This wasn't the mild Alabama autumn I'd expected—instead, it felt like the biting chill of a New England October had blown in overnight.

Leaves skittered across the lawn, their russet and gold hues a stark contrast to the steely gray sky. The branches of the old oak trees swayed violently, their fingers seeming to grasp at the air like desperate, gnarled hands.

I pressed the binoculars to my eyes, focusing on the Whisper Graveyard. The supermoon wouldn't be visible until tonight, but the Wiccan group were celebrating early.

There's talk of a sacrifice.

My stomach churned as Tilda's warning echoed in my mind. Surely she didn't mean an actual human sacrifice?

Through the binoculars, I could make out a group of figures gathering near the center of the graveyard. They wore dark robes that whipped around their legs in the relentless wind. I recognized Tilda's tall form, her pale hair escaping from her hood in wild tendrils.

The Benson twins were there too, heads bent together as they arranged something on the ground—candles maybe? Or herbs? It was hard to tell from this distance. The wind picked up, carrying with it the faint sound of chanting and drums. The words were indistinct, but the tone sent a chill through me that had nothing to do with the

temperature.

The group formed a circle around a figure wearing a long white garment—a shirt, maybe? Candles were lit and passed around, then more chanting ensued. Suddenly, everyone in the group knelt around the figure, then held their candles to the hem of the garment.

I gasped as the person was engulfed in flames.

My heart raced. Should I call someone? Take photos?

Or grab my laptop and leave?

Then I realized the "figure" was an effigy... based on the way it burned, it must've been made from straw. I relaxed and laughed at my imagination gone wild—as if the group would actually make a human sacrifice.

Then I realized the entire house had gone dark—and as silent as death. The steady hum of electricity that usually faded into the background was now conspicuously absent.

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered, then swung the binoculars to see a transformer on a pole sparking fitfully before going dark.

But it wasn't the first time it had happened... in fact, nearly every time the group converged in the graveyard, the transformer blew.

Coincidence?

I thought not.

I sank onto the window seat, suddenly feeling very alone in the big, dark house. The lack of electricity felt like a metaphor for my whole situation here in Irving—I was fumbling around in the dark, barely able to make out the shapes of the mystery surrounding me. I pulled my knees to my chest. For the first time since arriving in Irving, I found myself wishing I was back in my cramped New York apartment, dealing with Curtis drama and looming deadlines.

At least there, the monsters were metaphorical.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE PERSISTENT buzz of my phone pulled me from a fitful sleep. I fumbled for it on the nightstand, squinting at the screen. Kelly's name flashed, along with the ungodly hour: 6:17 AM.

"Hello?" I mumbled, still half-asleep.

A choked sob came through the line. "Josephine? It's... it's Kelly."

I sat up, instantly alert. "What's wrong?"

"It's Wayne," she said, her voice thick with tears. "He... he died last night."

The words hit me like a physical blow. "But I thought he was getting better. They were going to release him..."

"I know," Kelly sniffled. "It was so sudden. They're saying it was some kind of complication, but..." She trailed off, overcome with emotion.

I sat there, stunned. Wayne Blakemore, the earnest bookstore owner with dreams of becoming a novelist, was gone. Just like that. The manuscript he'd entrusted to me suddenly felt impossibly heavy, a legacy I wasn't sure I was equipped to handle.

"I'm so sorry, Kelly," I said softly, wishing I could reach through the phone and give her a hug. "Is there anything I can do?"

She took a shaky breath. "No, I... I just needed to tell someone. It's just so awful, you know? It feels like a dark cloud is hanging over Irving."

Tilda's words slid into my brain.

There's talk of a sacrifice.

Then I gave myself a mental shake. That was ridiculous. Wayne had died in the hospital, from natural causes. It couldn't possibly be related to the Wiccan ceremony I'd witnessed yesterday... could it?

"I know what you mean," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "It does seem like a lot of bad things have been happening lately."

Kelly's voice dropped to a whisper. "Do you think... do you think Irving might be cursed or something?"

If a curse could be placed on a person, it seemed reasonable that a curse could be placed on a town.

Scratch that—neither seemed "reasonable."

"I'm sure it's just a run of bad luck," I murmured. "These things happen sometimes, you know?"

"I guess," Kelly said, not sounding convinced. "It's just... scary, you know? Makes you realize how fragile life is."

"I know what you mean," I murmured, thinking life could change on a dime.

Mine certainly had.

We talked for a few more minutes, with me doing my best to comfort Kelly. But even after we hung up, I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that had settled over me.



I got out of bed and padded over to the window, looking out at the Whisper Graveyard. The wind had died down overnight, leaving behind a stillness that felt almost oppressive. The headstones cast long shadows in the early morning light.

Wayne's death was tragic, but surely it was just a coincidence. People died all the time. It didn't mean something sinister was afoot.

And yet...

I thought of the robed figures in the graveyard, of Tilda's cryptic warnings.

As I stood there, lost in thought, a movement caught my eye. For just a moment, I could have sworn I saw a figure in white moving between the headstones. But when I blinked, it was gone.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. Lack of sleep and an overactive imagination were a dangerous combination. I needed to focus on the real, tangible problems at hand—like finishing my novel and figuring out what to do with Wayne's manuscript.

But as I turned away from the window, I couldn't shake the feeling that in Irving, the line between imagination and reality was blurred. And I was walking that line with every step I took.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

I MADE my way to the graveyard, notebook clutched to my chest. Part of me felt guilty for the sense of relief at Sawyer's absence. His reservist duty had called him away for the weekend, sparing me from the awkward dance we'd been doing since our almost-romance.

I settled onto my usual bench, the cool stone seeping through the fabric of my jeans. The graveyard was peaceful today, the only sound the gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze.

Perfect writing weather.

I had just put pen to paper when a scratchy voice broke the silence. "Mornin', Graveyard Girl."

I looked up to see Muriel, the old forager, her gnarled hands clutching her ever-present walking stick. Today, she wore a patchwork coat that looked handmade.

"Good morning, Muriel," I replied, forcing a smile. Something about the old woman always set me on edge.

Muriel's rheumy eyes scanned the graveyard, a knowing smirk on her weathered face. "Good pickings today," she muttered, more to herself than to me.

I watched, fascinated and slightly horrified, as she made her way to Rose's empty grave. Without hesitation, Muriel swung her legs over the side and dropped down into the open vault.

"Muriel!" I gasped, jumping to my feet. "What are you doing?"

Her cackle echoed from the grave. "What's it look like, girl? I'm foraging."

I approached cautiously, peering down into the vault. Muriel was on her hands and knees, plucking small, pale mushrooms from the corners of the cement box.

"You can't just... go into people's graves," I sputtered.

Muriel looked up at me, amusement dancing in her cloudy eyes. "Ain't nobody using it at the moment, is there? Might as well put it to good use."

A shiver ran down my spine. "But it's... disrespectful, isn't it?"

The old woman snorted. "Girl, you're too caught up in all this." She waved a gnarled hand, encompassing the graveyard. "It's just dirt and stone. Ain't nothing to be afraid of here."

"I'm not afraid," I protested. "If I was, I wouldn't spend so much time here."

Muriel's knowing gaze seemed to see right through me. "Then why you jumping at shadows and watching your back all the time?"

I blinked, taken aback by her perception. "I just... there's been a lot of strange things going on lately."

"Hmph," Muriel grunted, returning to her mushroom harvesting. "Take it from an old woman—it ain't the dead you need to worry about. It's the living that'll cause you trouble."

Her words sent a chill through me, reminding me of Tilda's warnings and the strange

rituals I'd witnessed. "Muriel," I said hesitantly, "do you know what happened to Rose's body? Why the grave is empty?"

Muriel paused, fixing me with a stare that seemed to pierce right through to my soul. "Now that's an interesting question, ain't it?" She cocked her head to one side. "But are you sure Rose was ever here to begin with?"

"There was a funeral."

The old woman just shrugged, a secretive smile playing on her lips. "Lots of things in this town ain't what they seem, Graveyard Girl. Best remember that."

With a grunt, Muriel hauled herself to her feet, her bag now bulging with mushrooms. "Give me a hand out of here, would you?"

I reached down, grasping her surprisingly strong hands and helping her climb out of the vault.

"Thanks, dearie," she said, patting my cheek with a calloused hand. "You take care now."

Muriel turned and shuffled away, her patchwork coat fluttering in the breeze. As she disappeared among the headstones, I could hear her voice carrying on the wind, singing an old folk song I didn't recognize.

I stood there for a long moment, staring at Rose's empty grave. Muriel's words echoed in my mind, adding yet another layer to the mystery surrounding me.

It occurred to me I was spending way too much time in the graveyard.

When had it become a place I needed to be?

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE DAY stretched before me, long and empty. I stood at the kitchen window, coffee mug in hand, watching the sun slowly creep over the horizon. The Whisper Graveyard had been quiet all day, with no visitors and no sign of Sawyer's truck rumbling up the road.

I sighed, annoyed at the pang of disappointment in my chest. This was good, I reminded myself. Space and time to focus on my writing. No distractions, no complications. Just me and my manuscript.

And yet...

I found myself reaching for my phone, scrolling through my contacts. Frida's name was grayed out – she was off on some yoga retreat, probably twisting herself into a pretzel while sipping overpriced green juice. Kelly's number beckoned, but I hesitated. She had enough on her plate with her uncle and the recent loss of Wayne.

My thumb hovered over my mother's name for a long moment. The thought of her sharp wit and sharper criticism was almost tempting in the face of this oppressive solitude. Almost.

With a groan, I tossed the phone aside and stomped upstairs to my makeshift office. Time to be a professional. Time to write.

Hours ticked by in a haze of deleted sentences and frustrated sighs. Lady Amelia and Lord Stonecraft's romance felt flat, their witty banter forced. I couldn't help but draw parallels to my own stunted relationship with Sawyer.

"Focus, Josephine," I muttered, pushing thoughts of strong hands and green eyes from my mind.

By late afternoon, I had managed to eke out a few thousand words. They weren't my best, but they were something. Progress, however painful, was still progress.

As dusk began to settle over the Whisper House, I stretched, my back popping in protest after hours hunched over my laptop. Time for my nightly ritual of locking up the graveyard gate.

The air was cool against my skin as I made my way down the winding path. Shadows lengthened, turning familiar headstones into looming sentinels.

Just as I reached for the gate's padlock, a movement caught my eye. I froze, heart thundering in my chest. There, among the weathered stones, I could have sworn I saw a figure ducking out of sight.

"Hello?" I called out, my voice embarrassingly shaky. "Is someone there?"

Silence answered me, broken only by the rustle of leaves in the evening breeze.

I squinted into the gathering gloom, trying to make out shapes in the darkness. Nothing moved.

"Get a grip, Josephine," I chided myself. "You're letting your imagination run wild again."

I shook my head, berating myself for getting spooked by shadows and wind—a byproduct of spending all day alone with my thoughts. Quickly, I secured the padlock and turned to head back to the house.

That's when I heard it. A laugh. Soft and melodic, carried on the wind. A woman's laugh.

I whirled around, my heart in my throat. "Who's there?" I demanded, trying to inject some authority into my voice.

But the graveyard remained still and silent, offering no explanation for the phantom sound.

I stood there for a long moment, straining my ears for any further noise. But there was nothing.

With a shaky exhale, I forced my feet to move, practically running back to the Whisper House. I slammed the door behind me, leaning against it as I tried to calm my racing pulse.

It was nothing, I told myself. Just the wind playing tricks. Or birds. Or maybe my own loneliness manifesting as auditory hallucinations.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE CRUNCH of tires on gravel pulled me from my writing trance. I peered out the window to see a familiar black sedan rolling to a stop in front of the house. Detective Jack Terry unfolded his tall frame from the driver's seat, his face set in grim lines.

I met him at the door, curiosity and apprehension warring in my stomach. "Detective Terry, this is a surprise."

He nodded, his eyes scanning the property behind me. "Ms. Vanguard. Mind if I come in? I have a few questions."

I stepped aside, gesturing him into the living room. I uncovered two chairs for us. He perched on the edge of an armchair, looking comically large in the delicate antique furniture.

"What can I do for you, Detective?" I asked, settling across from him.

"How well did you know Wayne Blakemore?"

The question caught me off guard. "Not very well. We'd met a few times at his bookshop. Why do you ask?"

Jack's fingers went to his wedding ring, spinning it absently. "Just looking into all the recent incidents in Irving. Seeing if there's any connection."

"Connection?" I echoed. "Between Wayne's death and the vandalism, you mean?"

He shrugged, but his eyes were sharp. "Possibly. And other... events."



I leaned back, studying him. "It's nice of the Atlanta PD to loan you out to Birmingham for this. Must be a slow crime week back home."

A ghost of a smile flitted across Jack's face. "This is more of a... personal inquiry. Off the record."

Hm. "Well, as I said, I didn't know Wayne all that well. He asked me to do a signing at his store, and that was nice. He wanted to write and he asked me read a book he'd written."

He wrote in a small notebook. "What kind of book?"

"Fiction—it was a novel."

He smiled. "Was it any good?"

"I've read worse. Why are you asking about Wayne? Didn't he die of natural causes?"

The big man nodded. "Pending an autopsy. I'm only asking because it happened so close to the grave-robbing incident. I understand Wayne and Rose had dated at some point."

"That was before I arrived," I said. "Are there any leads on the vandalism or the... grave-robbing?"

He closed his notebook and frowned. "No." He pushed to his feet and walked toward the front door. "If you think of anything else—"

"I still have your card, Detective."

"Good," he said, then his expression softened. "Thank you for taking care of the

graveyard."

"It's only temporary," I reminded him.

"Still," he said. "It's... much appreciated."

I inclined my head. "You're welcome."

I followed him out to his car and noticed a bouquet of flowers on the seat. He gave a wave, then headed toward the graveyard, no doubt to leave the flowers on Serena's grave.

The detective's questions, his "off the record" investigation, the way he kept fidgeting with his wedding ring... It all painted a picture of a man who couldn't let go of the past.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE COOL air nipped at my cheeks as I pedaled into Irving. The town seemed unusually quiet, as if a somber mood hung over the quaint streets.

I pulled up in front of Coleman's Grocery, then chained my bike to a nearby rack. The bell above the door jingled cheerfully as I entered, a stark contrast to the subdued atmosphere inside.

Coleman was nowhere to be seen, and his office door was closed. I approached, eggs in hand, and gave a gentle knock. To my surprise, the door swung open, revealing Coleman hunched over his desk, his back to me.

In his hands was the scrying mirror I'd seen before. He was staring intently into its dark surface, his lips moving silently. The door squeaked and he jumped, then whirled around with wide eyes. The mirror clattered to the desk.

"Josephine!" he exclaimed, his voice an octave too high. "I didn't hear you come in."

I gestured to the mirror. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt..."

Coleman let out a forced laugh, running a hand through his thinning hair. "Oh, that old thing? Just checking my hair, you know. Bit vain in my old age, I suppose."

The lie hung heavy in the air between us. I nodded, playing along. "Of course. I've brought some eggs, if you're interested."

"Ah, yes!" Coleman said, seeming relieved for the change of subject. He examined the eggs, then pulled out his receipt book. "These look wonderful. Tell you what, I'll

give you an extra dollar per dozen. Times are tough, after all."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Coleman."

He waved a hand dismissively, but I couldn't help noticing how it trembled slightly.  
"Think nothing of it."

As he tore off the credit slip, I felt the tension in the air. Coleman's eyes kept darting to the mirror on his desk, as if afraid it might suddenly speak up and contradict his story.

"Well, thanks again," I said. "I should be going."

Coleman nodded, relief evident on his face. "Take care now, Josephine. And... be careful out there, you hear?"

I left the grocery store, my mind whirling. What had Coleman really been doing with that mirror? And why did he seem so on edge?

Lost in thought, I found myself walking towards Blakemore Books. As I approached, I saw a familiar figure standing by the door. Dora, Franny's daughter, was carefully hanging a wreath of autumn leaves and white lilies.

"Dora?" I called out.

She turned, and I saw tears glistening in her eyes. "Oh, Josephine. Hi."

"I'm so sorry about Wayne," I said, the words feeling inadequate even as I spoke them.

Dora nodded, wiping at her eyes. "Thank you. It still doesn't feel real, you know?"

I stepped closer, taking in the beautiful wreath. "Is this for the memorial?"

"Yeah," Dora sniffled. "The service is tomorrow in the city park. I thought... I thought Wayne would want something here at the shop, too."

"It's lovely," I said sincerely. "He would have appreciated it."

Dora managed a watery smile. "Thanks. I just wish..." She trailed off, shaking her head.

"Will the store be closing?" I asked gently.

She nodded. "Probably for good. Haven't you heard? Books are a dying business."

The irony wasn't lost on me.

"Thank you for letting me know about the memorial," I said.

She nodded, then sprang a new well of tears and walked away.

I was touched by her reaction to Wayne's death. And I wondered if I died suddenly, if anyone would cry for me.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE CITY park was awash in a sea of autumn colors, the trees aflame with reds and golds. A crisp breeze carried the scent of fallen leaves and the faint aroma of hot cocoa from a nearby vendor. The somber gathering stood in stark contrast to the vibrant scenery, a sea of black amid the colorful foliage.

I stood at the edge of the crowd, watching as familiar faces arrived. Sawyer nodded solemnly as he passed, his usual flannel replaced by a dark suit that seemed to constrain his broad shoulders. Kelly dabbed at her eyes with a tissue, while Tilda and the Benson twins huddled together, with Franny and Dora nearby, their matching black dresses making them look like a murder of crows.

Reverend Abernathy stood at the front, his clerical collar stark white against his black suit. Beside him, a simple wooden podium held an urn containing Wayne's ashes. The sight of it made my throat tighten.

As the service began, Abernathy's rich baritone carried across the gathering. He spoke of Wayne's kindness, his passion for books, his dreams of becoming an author. I thought of the manuscript hidden in my room and felt a pang of guilt.

"Wayne Blakemore was more than just a shopkeeper," Abernathy intoned. "He was a keeper of stories, a guardian of imagination. And though he has left us, his spirit lives on in every life he touched, every book he sold, every dream he nurtured."

Dora's muffled sobs punctuated the Reverend's words. Franny held her daughter close, her own face a mask of grief. Even Coleman, usually so jovial, looked ashen and drawn.

As the service drew to a close, I expected the crowd to disperse. Instead, Reverend Abernathy cleared his throat.

"For those who wish to participate, we will be scattering Wayne's ashes in the Whisper Graveyard, as per his final request."

A murmur rippled through the crowd. I blinked in surprise, catching Sawyer's eye. He looked equally puzzled.

The somber procession moved from the park to the graveyard, a strange caravan of cars and mourners. Sawyer approached me as I unlocked my bike.

"Need a ride?" he asked.

I nodded, suddenly grateful for the company. He lifted my bike into the bed of his truck with ease, and I climbed into the passenger seat. The interior smelled of pine and leather, a comforting combination.

We drove in silence, the truck's engine a low rumble beneath us. As we pulled up to the Whisper Graveyard, I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. This place had seen so much recently – vandalism, empty graves, strange rituals. And now, it would be Wayne's final resting place.

The mourners gathered around Reverend Abernathy once more, the urn cradled in his hands. The wind had picked up, whipping hair and clothes, carrying with it the earthy scent of the graveyard – a mixture of decaying leaves, damp soil, and the faintest hint of something metallic.

"We commit Wayne's earthly remains to this hallowed ground," Abernathy's voice rang out. "May his spirit find peace among the whispers of those who have gone before."

With that, he opened the urn. For a moment, nothing happened. Then a gust of wind caught the ashes, lifting them in a graceful arc. I watched, mesmerized, as the grey particles danced on the breeze, swirling and eddying.

And then, as if guided by an unseen hand, the ashes seemed to gather and flow towards Rose's empty grave. They hovered there for a heartbeat before settling gently on the disturbed earth.

A collective gasp went through the crowd. I heard Tilda mutter something under her breath, her eyes wide. Even Muriel, usually so unflappable, looked shaken.

As the last of the ashes settled, an eerie silence fell over the graveyard. The wind died down as suddenly as it had risen, leaving behind an unnatural stillness. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and I suppressed a shiver.

Sawyer's hand found mine, his calloused fingers intertwining with my own. I looked up at him, seeing my own confusion and unease mirrored in his green eyes.

Something had just happened. Something significant. But as I looked around at the bewildered faces of the mourners, I realized I wasn't the only one who didn't understand what it meant.



## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE LATE afternoon sun streamed through the kitchen window as I cradled my phone between my ear and shoulder, trying to juggle a cup of tea and a plate of Kelly's leftover scones.

"Okay, spill," Frida's voice crackled through the line. "I leave you alone for five minutes and suddenly there's empty graves, mysterious ashes, and more drama than a telenovela. What gives?"

I sighed, sinking into a kitchen chair. "Where do I even start, Frida? It's been... intense."

"Well, don't leave me hanging! Give me all the juicy details."

I launched into a recap of the past few weeks – Rose's empty grave, the strange Wiccan ceremonies, Wayne's unexpected death and even stranger memorial. Frida gasped and interjected at all the right moments, her reactions a comforting reminder of normalcy in the midst of all this weirdness.

"And then," I concluded, "Wayne's ashes just... floated over to Rose's empty grave. Like they were drawn there by some unseen force. It was the creepiest thing I've ever seen."

"Holy crap," Frida breathed. "Jo, are you sure you're not actually living in one of your novels? Because this sounds like prime romance-mystery material."

I laughed, but it came out more like a strangled sob. "Trust me, if I was writing this, the plot would make a lot more sense. I feel like I'm stumbling around in the dark,

missing some crucial piece of information."

"Hmm," Frida mused. "Speaking of stumbling around in the dark, how are things with your hunky stonemason? Please tell me you've at least gotten some steamy graveyard makeout sessions out of all this."

I felt my cheeks flush, remembering the intensity of Sawyer's kiss in Rose's workshop. "Not exactly. Things have... cooled off. On his side, anyway."

"What? Why? Do I need to come down there and knock some sense into him?"

"It's complicated," I sighed. "He's got secrets, Frida. Big ones, I think. And he's not ready to share them."

"Men," Frida scoffed. "Always making things more difficult than they need to be. Well, his loss. You're a catch, Jo. Don't let him make you forget that."

I smiled, warmth spreading through my chest at my friend's unwavering support. "Thanks, Frida. I needed to hear that."

"Anytime, babe. Oh! Speaking of men who don't deserve you, guess who's back to his old tricks?"

My stomach dropped. "Curtis?"

"Bingo. He's back online, spewing his usual garbage. Claiming he's the 'real creative force' behind your books, that kind of thing."

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. "Great. Just what I needed."

"You know," Frida said, her voice taking on a mischievous tone, "maybe you need to

put another curse on him. I mean, the first one worked pretty well, right? Two 'accidents' in a row can't be a coincidence."

"I'm not sure I want to mess with that stuff again. It feels... dangerous."

"More dangerous than letting Curtis tank your career? Come on, Jo. Fight fire with fire – or in this case, fight douchebaggery with witchcraft."

I laughed despite myself. "I'll think about it. But for now, I think I need to focus on finishing my book."

"How close are you?"

"Not close enough."

"Maybe you need Mr. Hard as a Rock to inspire you?"

I sighed. "I don't think that's gonna happen."

"Girl, I was talking about my new vibrator. I'll send you one."

I laughed, giving in to Frida's good mood and happy chatter.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE SHRILL ring of my phone pierced the early morning quiet. I groaned, fumbling for it on the nightstand. My mother's imperious face filled the screen.

"Josephine, darling," her crisp voice carried through the line. "I hope I didn't wake you."

I glanced at the clock – 6:31 AM. "Of course not, Mother. I always start my day at the crack of dawn."

Her sigh crackled through the speaker. "Sarcasm doesn't become you, dear. Now, listen. It's about fucking Curtis."

My stomach clenched. "What about him?"

"He's raised his price. Again." The disdain in her voice was palpable. "But the insufferable little toad will only give the new figure to you directly."

I closed my eyes, counting to ten. "Fantastic. Just what I needed to start my day."

"Well, don't fucking shoot the messenger. I've done my part. Now it's up to you to deal with this... situation." She paused, then added, "And do try to wrap it up quickly, darling. This needs to end—for both of us."

The call ended abruptly, leaving me staring at my phone in disbelief. With a groan, I flopped back onto my pillows. The last thing I wanted to do was talk to Curtis, but it seemed I had no choice.

Steeling myself, I pulled up his number and hit dial. He answered on the second ring.

"Well, well," his smooth voice oozed through the line. "If it isn't my favorite little authoress. Miss me, baby?"

I gritted my teeth. "Cut the crap, Curtis. Mother says you have a new number for me."

"Straight to business, huh? Fine. Call off the lawyers, and I want half a million to go away."

For a moment, I was sure I'd misheard. "Half a mil— Are you insane?"

"Come on, Jo. You know I deserve it. After all, I am the 'real creative force' behind your success."

Something in me snapped. All the frustration, fear, and confusion of the past weeks crystallized into a white-hot anger.

"Listen carefully, Curtis," I said, my voice low and steady. "I had a curse put on you. Those two 'accidents'? That was me. And if you don't retract your statement about writing my book, I'm going to double down. Hard."

There was a beat of silence, then Curtis burst out laughing. "Oh, that's rich. A curse? You've finally lost it, babe. I always knew you had a vivid imagination, but this is next level."

"I'm not joking, Curtis. Back off, or things are going to get a lot worse for you."

"Sure, sure," he chuckled. "Tell you what, why don't you use that vivid imagination of yours to come up with half a million dollars? Then we can both move on with our lives."

The call ended. I stared at my phone, shaking with rage. How dare he? After everything he'd done, he had the audacity to demand more?

I stormed downstairs, my mind racing. I needed to end this, once and for all. No more Mr. Nice Girl. No more playing by the rules.

"You want to play hardball, Curtis?" I muttered. "Fine. Let's play."

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

MY FINGERLESS gloves kept my hands warm as I scribbled away in my notebook, perched on my usual bench in the Whisper Graveyard. Lady Amelia was in the midst of a particularly witty exchange with Lord Stonecraft when the rumble of a familiar truck pulled me from my fictional world.

I looked up to see Sawyer's battered pickup rolling to a stop outside the gate. He emerged, a gleaming axe slung over his shoulder, his face set in lines of grim determination.

"Morning," he called, his voice gruff but not unfriendly.

I nodded in response, suddenly very aware of my unwashed hair and the ink smudges on my fingers. "Here to tackle the fallen oak?"

"About time, isn't it?" He gazed at the massive trunk that still lay near Rose's empty grave. "Can't leave it like this much longer."

I murmured agreement, and for a moment, we stood in awkward silence. Then, as if by mutual, unspoken decision, we both relaxed. Sawyer moved towards the tree, and I returned to my notebook.

The rhythmic thunk of axe against wood soon filled the air, punctuated by Sawyer's measured breathing. I tried to focus on my writing, I really did. But my eyes kept wandering to the spectacle before me.

Sawyer had shed his flannel shirt, working now in just a thin white t-shirt that did little to hide the play of muscles beneath. His powerful arms rose and fell with each

swing, sending wood chips flying. A light sheen of sweat made his skin glisten in the morning sun.

I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry. This was better than any romance novel cover model. This was real, raw, and right in front of me.

Under the guise of observing my surroundings, I watched him from beneath my lashes. The way his jaw clenched with effort, the flex of his back as he bent to move a severed branch, the quiet grunt of exertion as he tackled a particularly stubborn knot in the wood.

My pen moved almost of its own accord, transferring the heat building inside me to the page. Lady Amelia's witty banter morphed into something altogether more... primal.

Lord Stonecraft's strong hands, calloused from his stonework, trailing fire along her skin. The flex of his muscled back as he pressed her against the cool marble of a newly finished sculpture. The rough brush of his stubbled jaw against her neck as he whispered promises in her ear.

I bit my lip, my cheeks flushing with more than just the chill in the air. This was quickly becoming the steamiest scene I'd ever written.

A particularly loud crack jerked me from my heated reverie. I looked up to see Sawyer standing over the last large section of trunk, axe raised triumphantly. He turned, catching my eye, and for a moment, the air between us seemed to crackle with electricity.

Did he know what effect he was having on me? Could he sense the heat of my gaze, the quickening of my pulse?



If he did, he gave no sign. Instead, he simply nodded towards my notebook. "Making good progress?"

I glanced down at the pages filled with my increasingly fevered handwriting. "You could say that," I managed, hoping my voice sounded steadier than it felt.

Sawyer's lips quirked in a half-smile. "Glad to hear it. Wouldn't want to be a distraction."

Was there a hint of teasing in his tone? Before I could decide, he'd turned back to his work, gathering the smaller branches into a pile.

We continued like that for another hour, working in companionable silence. Me, furiously scribbling what was shaping up to be the hottest scene of my career. Sawyer, methodically clearing away the remnants of the fallen oak, unaware (or perhaps very aware) of the effect his every movement was having on my literary output.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, Sawyer finally called it a day. He gathered his tools, nodding a farewell as he headed back to his truck.

I watched him go, my mind still half in the steamy world I'd created on the page. One thing was certain – Lady Amelia and Lord Stonecraft were in for quite the passionate encounter in the next chapter.

And as for me and Sawyer? Well, that story was still being written.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE AFTERNOON sun streamed through the window as I sat at my desk, pen hovering over paper. But instead of writing, I found myself lost in daydreams of Sawyer - his strong hands, his kind eyes, the way he made me feel both safe and exhilarated at the same time.

The rumble of a familiar truck snapped me out of my reverie. My heart raced as I heard footsteps on the porch, followed by a knock. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door, determined to play it cool.

Sawyer stood there, looking as rugged and handsome as ever. But there was an intensity in his eyes that made me catch my breath.

"Josephine," he said, his voice low. "I can't stop thinking about you."

All my resolve to be cool evaporated. "I can't stop thinking about you either," I admitted.

He reached for me and I met him halfway. We came together in a hungry kiss that lasted as we made our way up the stairs to my bedroom, undressing each other along the way. We fell onto the bed and gave up all pretenses of lingering. Sawyer climbed on top of me and made love to me as if it was our first time—or our last? Our bodies were so in tune with each other, I marveled over the sensations he triggered in me. Our climax was so intense, I think we might've levitated. Afterward we talked, laughed, and shared moments of quiet understanding. It felt like pieces of a puzzle falling into place.

I couldn't help but tease him. "Are you some kind of magic man, Sawyer King?"

The moment the words left my mouth, I knew I'd said something wrong. Sawyer's entire demeanor changed, his body tensing beside me.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, his voice carefully neutral.

I backpedaled, trying to lighten the mood. "Just that you seem too good to be true sometimes."

Sawyer sat up, running a hand through his hair. For a moment, I thought he might finally open up, reveal whatever secret he'd been keeping. But then he shook his head, as if clearing away a thought.

"I should go," he said abruptly, standing and reaching for his clothes.

"Sawyer, wait—"

But he was already dressed and heading for the door. He paused, turning back to place a chaste kiss on my forehead. "I'm sorry, Josephine. I just... I can't."

And then he was gone, leaving me alone with my confusion and frustration.

"Ugh!" I groaned, flopping back on the bed. Why did every moment of closeness with Sawyer have to be followed by him pulling away? What was he so afraid of?

As the sun began to set, I reluctantly got up to perform my nightly ritual of locking the graveyard gate. The cool evening air felt good against my flushed skin as I made my way down the familiar path.

But as I reached for the gate, a sudden gust of wind whipped through the graveyard. It was unnaturally cold, carrying with it the scent of decay and something else... something almost metallic.

The trees around me groaned and swayed, their branches creaking ominously. And then, with a sickening crack, a large branch broke free from a nearby oak.

I barely had time to jump back as it crashed to the ground, missing me by inches. My heart pounded in my chest as I stared at the fallen branch, leaves still trembling from the impact.

As quickly as it had come, the wind died down, leaving an eerie stillness in its wake. I stood there, frozen, my mind racing. That branch could have seriously injured me, maybe even...

A chill ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the temperature. It felt like a warning. But from what? Or whom?

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

The shrill ring of my phone pierced the early morning quiet. I groaned, fumbling for it on the nightstand. Bruce's name flashed on the screen, and I felt a jolt of anxiety. Had he hated the pages I'd sent?

"Hello?" I answered, trying to keep the nervousness out of my voice.

"Josephine, darling!" Bruce's exuberant tone filled the line. "You brilliant, brilliant woman. I could kiss you right now!"

I blinked, taken aback. "I take it you liked the pages?"

"Liked them? Josie, I loved them. Devoured them. I haven't been this excited about a manuscript since... well, since your first book, if I'm being honest."

A warm glow of pride spread through my chest. "Really? You're not just saying that?"

"Darling, when have I ever sugar-coated things for you? These pages are fire. The tension, the chemistry between Lady Amelia and Lord Stonecraft... it practically sizzles off the page. And the way you've woven in the mystery elements? Sublime."

I couldn't help but smile, thinking of how Sawyer had inadvertently inspired some of those steamy scenes. "Well, I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Enjoyed it? I'm over the moon. Whatever you're doing down there in that little Alabama town, keep doing it. It's clearly working wonders for your writing."

If only he knew. I thought of Sawyer's strong hands, the intensity in his eyes, the secrets he seemed to be keeping. "I'll do my best," I managed.

"You know," Bruce continued, his voice taking on a more serious tone, "I have to admit, I was worried when you first told me about this little sabbatical of yours. With everything that happened with Curtis, and then you running off to the middle of nowhere... I thought you might be having some kind of breakdown."

I snorted. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Can you blame me? But now... Josie, this could be your best work yet. Something about that town clearly agrees with you."

I thought of the strange rituals in the graveyard, the mysterious empty graves, the curses and crystals. "You could say that," I murmured.

"Well, whatever it is, don't let it go. Inspiration like this doesn't come along every day."

We chatted for a few more minutes about deadlines and marketing plans before saying our goodbyes. As I ended the call, I couldn't help but smile. Not "something," I thought. Someone.

Sawyer's face floated in my mind - his kind eyes, his enigmatic smile, the way he made me feel both safe and exhilarated at the same time. He was certainly inspiring, in more ways than one.

But as quickly as the warm feeling came, it was replaced by a nagging sense of unease. Sawyer was still keeping secrets.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE BELL above Coleman's Grocery door jingled merrily as I stepped out into the crisp autumn air, my pockets a little heavier from selling the morning's eggs. The scent of pumpkin spice and cinnamon wafted from the bakery next door, mingling with the earthy aroma of fallen leaves.

Irving had transformed overnight, embracing the Halloween spirit with gusto. Jack-o'-lanterns grinned from every porch, their flickering candles casting eerie shadows even in the daylight. Fake cobwebs stretched across storefronts, dotted with plastic spiders that seemed to leer at passersby. The crunch of leaves underfoot provided a satisfying soundtrack to the scene.

Children's laughter echoed down the street as a group of elementary schoolers admired a particularly elaborate display of animatronic zombies in the hardware store window. The groans and creaks of the mechanical undead sent a shiver down my spine that wasn't entirely unpleasant.

As I made my way towards Sophia's Jewelry, I couldn't help but notice how the Halloween decorations seemed to blur the line between festive and foreboding. A tattered black cat cutout in a shop window seemed to follow me with its yellow eyes. The rustling of a witch's costume hanging outside the costume shop sounded almost like whispered incantations in the breeze.

The familiar chime of Sophia's Jewelry's door greeted me as I entered. Franny looked up from behind the counter, her usual warm smile replaced by a wary expression.

"Josephine," she said, her tone cautious. "What can I do for you today?"

I steeled myself, approaching the counter. "I need another vivianite crystal. A bigger one this time."

Franny's frown deepened. "Are you sure that's wise? These crystals... they're not toys, you know."

"So you've told me," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "But it's important."

She studied me for a long moment before sighing in resignation. "Wait here."

Franny disappeared into the back room, returning moments later with a velvet box. She opened it to reveal a vivianite crystal nearly twice the size of my previous purchase. Its deep blue-green surface seemed to pulse with an inner light.

"Be careful with this," Franny warned as she wrapped the crystal. "It's more powerful than the others."

I nodded, pocketing the wrapped crystal and heading towards the library. The weight of it seemed to burn in my pocket, a constant reminder of what I was about to do.

The library's ancient wooden door creaked ominously as I entered. The interior was dim, lit only by flickering electric candles that cast dancing shadows on the bookshelves. The musty scent of old paper was tinged with something earthy and herbal.

Tilda stood behind the circulation desk, dressed in full witch regalia. Her pointed hat cast a shadow over her face, and her long black dress rustled as she moved. A broom leaned against the desk, completing the picture.

"Nice costume," I remarked, approaching the desk.



Tilda's lips curled into a knowing smirk. "It's for the patrons," she said, her tone suggesting it was anything but.

I glanced around, noticing we were alone in the library. Without a word, I reached into my pocket and placed the wrapped crystal on the desk between us.

Tilda's eyes widened slightly as she unwrapped it. "My, my," she murmured. "Someone's not playing around this time."

I met her gaze steadily. "Can you do it?"

She nodded slowly, a gleam in her eye that sent a chill down my spine. "Oh yes. This will do nicely."

An unspoken agreement passed between us, sealed with a nod.

As I stepped back out into the Halloween-bedecked street, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd just crossed a line. The cheerful decorations suddenly seemed more sinister, as if the whole town was holding its breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

I SCRIBBLED away in my notebook, perched on my usual bench in the Whisper Graveyard. Lady Amelia was in the midst of uncovering a crucial clue when the crunch of gravel underfoot pulled me from my fictional world.

I looked up to see Detective Jack Terry striding towards me, his face set in grim lines. The afternoon sun glinted off his badge as he approached.

"Ms. Vanguard," he called out, nodding in greeting.

"Detective Terry," I replied, closing my notebook. "What brings you back to our little corner of the world?"

He glanced around the graveyard, his eyes scanning the headstones. "I need to see Wayne Blakemore's grave."

I blinked, taken aback. "Wayne's grave? But he... Detective, Wayne was cremated."

Jack's brow furrowed. "Cremated? Are you sure?"

I nodded, gesturing vaguely towards the center of the graveyard. "There was a memorial service in the park, and then his ashes were scattered here. This is his final resting place, but there's no actual grave."

The detective's shoulders slumped, frustration evident in every line of his body. "Dammit," he muttered. "I was misinformed."

"May I ask why you're looking for Wayne's grave?" I ventured, curiosity getting the

better of me.

Jack ran a hand through his hair, seeming to debate how much to share. Finally, he sighed. "I suppose you'll hear about it soon enough. Wayne Blakemore's death is being investigated as a murder."

The words hit me like a physical blow. "Murder? But I thought... Wasn't it a heart attack?"

"That's what it looked like at first," Jack said, his voice low. "But the autopsy revealed some... inconsistencies. Toxicology came back with some unusual results."

My mind reeled. Sweet, bookish Wayne Blakemore, murdered? It seemed impossible. "But who would want to hurt Wayne?"

Jack's gaze sharpened. "That's what I'm trying to figure out, Ms. Vanguard. Did he have any enemies? Anyone who might wish him harm?"

I thought back to my interactions with Wayne, trying to remember any details that might be important. "Not to my knowledge."

"What about this book he was writing?"

I blinked. "What about it?"

"I'd like to take a look at it."

I nodded, a knot forming in my stomach. "Of course. I'll dig it out when I get back to the house."

Jack thanked me, then turned to survey the graveyard once more. "So his ashes were

scattered here? Anywhere in particular?"

I pointed towards Rose's empty grave. "The wind seemed to carry them over there, actually. It was... quite dramatic."

The detective's gaze followed my finger, his expression unreadable. "That seems to describe this whole town."

As Jack made his way back to his car, I sat there, my mind whirling. Wayne, murdered? And over what? A novel about local legends?

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm*

THE AIR practically crackled with excitement as Edra's tour group gathered at the entrance of Whisper Graveyard. Jack-o'-lanterns flickered along the iron fence, casting eerie shadows across the weathered headstones. Edra herself was decked out in full witchy regalia, complete with a pointed hat and a crystal-topped staff.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she intoned, her voice low and theatrical, "welcome to the most haunted graveyard in all of Alabama. On this All Hallows' Eve, the veil between worlds is at its thinnest. Who knows what spirits might join us on our tour?"

I watched from my usual bench, both amused and unnerved by Edra's flair for the dramatic. The tour group, a mix of wide-eyed tourists and skeptical locals, hung on her every word.

Edra led them through the graveyard, spinning tales of star-crossed lovers and centuries-old curses. But it wasn't until they reached Rose's empty grave that her performance reached new heights.

"And here," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper, "is the final resting place of Rose Whisper... or is it?"

The group leaned in, enthralled.

"They say Rose was no ordinary woman," Edra continued. "Some claim she was a witch of immense power. And on the night of her burial, something extraordinary happened."

I found myself leaning forward, caught up in the story despite myself.

"The very earth rejected her body," Edra said, gesturing dramatically. "Or perhaps... she commanded it to release her. Witnesses say they saw the great oak tree uproot itself, pushing Rose's casket to the surface. And when they opened it..." She paused for effect. "It was empty."

Gasps rippled through the group. Even I felt a chill run down my spine, remembering the night of the storm and the mysteriously empty vault.

"Some say Rose still walks among us," Edra whispered. "That she haunts this very graveyard, waiting to reclaim what's hers. So if you feel a cold breeze on this warm night, or hear whispers when no one's around... well, you might just be in the presence of Rose Whisper herself."

As the tour concluded and the group dispersed, I approached Edra, both impressed and unsettled by her storytelling.

"Quite a performance," I said.

Edra grinned, dropping the spooky act. "Halloween's always good for business. Oh, by the way, I was sorry to hear about Wayne Blakemore. Such a shame."

I nodded, a pang of sadness hitting me. "It's awful. Did you know him well?"

"Not really," Edra said, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. "But I was intrigued by something in that book of his. The mention of an illegitimate Whisper offspring? Well, that got me digging."

My heart skipped a beat. "Oh? Did you find anything?"

Edra leaned in conspiratorially. "I think I know who Wayne was writing about."

"Was it... was it Wayne himself?" I asked, remembering how passionate he'd been

about the local legends.

Edra threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, honey. Wayne might've fancied it was him, but no. It's someone else entirely. A local man named King. Sawyer King."

The world seemed to tilt beneath my feet.

Sawyer was... a warlock ?

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