



Shadowing My Dreams (Haunted Hearts)

Author: *Shane K Morton*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Everyone deserves a happy ever after – or a happy ever afterlife!

Jack died for less than a minute.

Now, he can hear the whisperings of the dead.

Jack- I wouldn't recommend getting hit by a car and dying to my worst enemy. Talk about throwing a damper on my social life! I was just swiping through my dating app when, to my great surprise, I learned that I was not living alone in this house.

Whispering in my ear, bad dreams and shadows that walked through my walls made me question my very sanity. Was this thing always here, or did it follow me home? I loved my house – but to live here I was going to need help!

Archie- I've been using my psychic abilities to help people in West Hollywood for the last few years. It pays the bills, even if most people treat me like I'm insane because I can talk to spirits.

Then I met Jack. He has a ghost problem, and he's also super, incredibly hot, and I can't stop thinking about him.

The ghost in his house is angry and so sad that it breaks my heart. Now, we have to figure out why.

Can I help the ghost find his missing lover or will all be lost?

And more importantly, will Jack ever ask me out?

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PROLOGUE

Jack

They say that death is just one step away, and in my case, it was literal.

There I was, trying to cross the street at an intersection I had walked across thousands of times when BAM! Never had I dreamed of becoming someone's hood ornament at Westbourne and West Knoll! It's such a small residential street in West Hollywood that it was almost laughable. I looked both ways. I had been a Boy Scout in my youth, and this small check of safety had been hammered into me over and over – however... It was right by the turnaround, and I didn't see her as she careened down the street towards me in an electric car that made no noise.

According to the police report, Dora Ethenheimer had dropped her phone and was reaching down to grab it when she collided with something – me. It happened so fast that I barely have any memories, just the jolt and then nothing.

Ten miles an hour was all it took for me to leave the ground and fly into the air a short distance. My body had bruising and a minor fracture on my leg, but my head hit something hard, and according to the report that I eventually received – I died. It didn't stick, and I was only dead for less than a couple of minutes.

Time, man... Time is a real bitch. I was hit by a car on a Friday and woke up on a Tuesday. Of course, it was almost three months later. I had swelling, and they put me into a coma while I healed. I stayed in that coma for over two months, and then one day – I woke up and freaked the fuck out.

Wires and beeping – in a place I didn't know – my brain was foggy, and my muscles ached with fatigue. I started pulling wires and apparently cursed a lot before one of the nurses ran in to find me a chaotic mess.

“Mister Johnson, you're awake? Welcome back.” She hurried over and took my hands in hers as I stared into her gentle brown eyes. My breathing slowed, and I realized where I was. I stopped fighting and let her hold onto my hands. “My name is Bernice, ok? Can you hear me?” She sat down beside me and smiled.

“What happened,” my voice croaked, and my throat burned.

“You've been in a...”

“He's awake! Nurse Roberts! I knew you'd make it back to us, Mister Johnson.” A man in a white coat stood in the doorway and smiled at me. “Someone in the kind of shape you were in was going to be a fighter, and we all had faith in you.”

“I'm a trainer.” The knowledge of who I was leaped out, and my heart picked up its pace. The machine's beeps made me turn my head.

“I know this is confusing, young man. Do you remember anything?” Another nurse walked in and started checking my vitals while the other stayed in her seat and held my hand.

I shook my head.

“You've been in a coma, Mister Johnson. You were brought in after being hit by a car.” White Coat was talking to me like I was an idiot. Shit? Was I an idiot? I was in a fucking coma?

My heart rate rose. “I don't... Oh, God, am I...”

“It’s fine for you not to remember that trauma when you first wake up. Our minds find ways to protect us. It’s important for you to stay calm while we do a full checkup and scan of you, ok? Can you do that for me?” Nurse Robert’s voice was calm as she flipped a switch. I nodded.

“I know he can. We’ve all been taking turns sitting at your bedside and reading to you, young man. You’ve become like a part of our family during this time, and everyone will be so happy that you came back to the world of the living.” Bernice patted my hand.

“How long was I...”

“Don’t worry about that right now. You just lay back and take deep breaths. Waking up in a hospital with all of these monitors can be jarring. But you’re safe, and now that you’re awake, we just need to do a few tests and make sure you’re healthy. You’re in very good hands, and you’re alive.” Bernice’s voice was so sweet and kind that I took a deep breath and tried to relax.

“I can feel my toes.” I wiggled them and raised my hands to my face. “Am I... Was I hurt?”

“A small fracture, but you did hit your head pretty hard,” white coat answered. I guessed he was a doctor.

“How long?” I gasped and turned to Bernice.

“Two months.” She took my hand in hers again.

“Nurse Robert’s? Can you get a second pair of hands in here please? We need to go over everything and get him into another scan as soon as possible,” The doctor ordered. Bernice just smiled and started humming softly.

I was there another few weeks as they gave me every kind of brain scan and cognitive test that they could think of. A miracle – that was what all the doctors and nurses said. Somehow, I had walked away from death without any cognitive damage, and that was not what they had expected. With every test they gave – I came back normal. Eventually, they were all teasing me about my hard head.

It was hard. Walking again had been the most challenging thing for me as my legs hadn't been used in a long time. It took a while for my muscles to strengthen, but they grew stronger quickly, to my therapist's delight. All of my years of sports, training, and building the best body that I could have finally paid off for more than a quick fling with someone whose name I wouldn't remember.

Once I grew strong enough – I was released.

Then, the true healing began.

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1

Jack

“ I seriously wasn’t sure that you’d ever wake up, Jack,” Daveed, my brother from another mother, popped the top of his beer can and grinned at me. “Man, watching you lying there in that hospital bed was hard. Especially when they tried to bring you out of your coma, and you refused to wake up. The nurse kept saying that if it were meant to happen, it would happen in your own time. Guess she was right!”

I grinned at him as I thought about the sweet nurse who kept coming in to check on me. “That sounds like Bernice. She was my favorite out of all of them. She was the first person I saw when I woke up.”

“I don’t remember her name. She sure did move fast, though.” He grinned.

“That does not sound like Bernice,” I chuckled.

“I’m glad you had this beer here and even chilled. I must have left it in your fridge the last time I was over.” He scratched his black, bald head.

“You know I don’t drink that shit, man. So, it had to be yours.” I only drank when I went out. I had an unopened bottle of bourbon on hand in case I ever really needed a drink. But drinking at home all alone was not for me. My dad did that – he was not a very nice man.

“I know you’re happy to be home, finally. I’m glad I don’t have to go to the fucking

hospital. Anymore. Talk about a depressing place.” He took a giant swig of his beer.

“Yes, because it’s all about you, bro,” I chuckled lightly. “It’s weird. I mean, I just ordered an Uber after being there for over three months. It was surreal to leave, I guess. It felt wrong. Like if I got in the car, what was going to happen, you know? My heart beat so fast – I was terrified for a second. Would everything in my life be the same, or had everything changed? I felt... I feel like a ghost in my own life.” I was fucked up. But I had been given some bizarre opportunity at another chance, and I didn’t plan on wasting this one.

“You’ve been through a lot, bro. It’s going to take some time for you to adjust back to the way it was.”

“I guess.” I shrugged.

“It will, dude. You just have to get back on the horse and start riding again.”

“Yeah, 'cause I’m such a cowboy?”

“Bad analogy. Fine – but you know what I mean.”

“I did come and water your plants while you were in the hospital,” he laughed. “I have a black thumb, apparently.”

I glanced around at all of my withered plants and shook my head. “You overwatered them, I think. But they’re not dead. Thanks. I appreciate the attempt.”

“I tried.”

“Hey, you also had Eloise come clean, and that alone was a huge help. I appreciate that, man. I expected an inch of dust over everything and to have to swat away

cobwebs when I came in.” That had been a relief. I had expected the half-dead plants.

“Eloise took care of everything, and she even brought you food and put some homemade meals in the freezer for you. She was really sweet. She thinks a lot of you.” Daveed was being so careful with what he said. He was treating me like I was fragile. Fuck – was I? I didn’t know anymore. I felt fragile. Life felt fragile.

“I do her too. She brings me tamales every so often, and they’re fucking delicious. Hope she put some of those in the freezer.”

“So... How are you actually feeling?”

“I don’t know. Numb, I guess. I mean, I just walked back into a life that’s in fucking shambles. Do I still have a job – clients? It’s been months – I doubt it. I’m just thankful that I had set up direct payments for the mortgage and HOA, but if I don’t get back to work soon, my bank is gonna start laughing when they put those charges through. I may be totally fucked. It’s the not knowing that’s... odd.” It felt good to be truthful. I had always hidden my fears from everyone because I didn’t want to be seen as weak. That no longer felt important. I had changed in some ways, and I needed to discover what those were. I lived – I had time. I had been lucky, but one day, my luck would run out if I wasn’t careful. I knew I needed to be careful.

“I think you should buy yourself a lottery ticket, my brother. You are one lucky son of a bitch. We were positive that you weren’t coming out of that coma, and eventually, your DNR would kick in. It was like walking on eggshells, man. Every time we’d go see you, we prayed that you were still there.”

I leaned forward and picked up my vitamin water. “How’s Maurice? I was sure he’d be with you.”

“Nah, man. He’s... We’re taking a little break. It got a little too real for him, I think.

We still talk and even see each other, but we've cooled our jets." His face fell, and so did my heart. They had been so good together.

"Sorry, man. I love him, but you're my brother. I hope you guys can work it out." I reached over and patted his knee.

"Yeah, me too, sometimes – most times, I guess. It's been almost two years, man. But one mention of moving in together freaked him out. I'm trying to be... cool about it, but when I think about it, I just get pissy. It's not about the fucking mortgage. Either we're together, or we're not. I thought we were good."

"So, you're not pissy about it at all?" I chuckled. "Sorry, bro. That sucks. But look at the silver lining, you can start going out with me again instead of being so fucking boring." I leaned back and crossed my legs. The soreness had finally left from all of the rehab at the hospital.

"Going out with you is practically going out alone. You meet someone fifteen minutes after getting there, and you're fucking him an hour later. What's the point?"

I sighed. "That was old Jack. New Jack might be different. I don't know." I hadn't been a very good friend, not even to my bestie. I was lucky that Daveed had stayed by my side.

"Jack is a ho, no matter what." He laughed loudly.

"I haven't been laid in close to four months, Daveed. Shit, I think I've only masturbated once because, you know, how much privacy you have in a hospital room. The funny thing is – I'm not even really horny."

"What did you do with my friend?"

“Maybe I’m tired of being a fuckboy. I’m about to turn thirty, and I almost fucking died. I think it’s time to grow up, don’t you?” I had been thinking about this a lot – but to say it out loud made it real. I wanted something more than a tumble with a cute boy. I wanted to live a real life.

“Are you just saying this to get me to go out with you?”

“I mean it. I think. Come on, Daveed, I’ve only been out of the hospital for like,” I glanced at my phone, “maybe thirty-six hours? I have no idea what I want except for some Danny’s pizza and a gin and tonic at Mickey’s. Beyond that, I’m a fucking lost cause, bro.”

“You have never been a lost cause, man. You just had a moment of bad luck.”

“And a life of bad choices.” I frowned. “I’m glad that they didn’t convict that lady. She was old, and it was an accident, but I am happy that they took away her license. I’ve been wondering what I’ll say if I see her at Trader Joe’s. She only lives a block away. It’ll be weird, but I’m not mad at her, you know? She fucked up, and I didn’t die.”

“You’re a fucking miracle man. I’m gonna go grab another beer. You want anything?” He stood up and gestured to my vitamin water.

“Dude, I’m in good shape. My muscles are fine, and I’m walking ok – don’t treat me like an invalid,” I huffed.

“Fine, dude. I’m just asking if you wanted anything because I’m going into the goddamn kitchen,” He laughed as he walked out of the living room.

I glanced down at my phone, and something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. I turned to see if Daveed was fucking with me, but the room was empty. I

glanced around. I was sitting there alone.

Daveed walked back in and plopped down on the chair he had been sitting in.

“Dude? You just... You ok?”

“I...” I shook my head and then nodded. Knowing I was giving some fucked mixed signals. “Yeah. I think so.”

“You were all white there for a minute. Looks like the blood is pumping again. Do you feel ok? You sure?” He sat back down and stared at me as if he was worried I had broken down.

“Yeah, it was... I thought I saw something. Honestly, I thought it was you sneaking back in to scare me or something. But it wasn’t... I swear it looked like someone walking between the front door and the window. I don’t know. I guess I’m seeing things.” I glanced back over where I had seen the shadow. Sunlight streamed in.

“Was that a side effect or anything? Shit, man. Are you having a stroke?”

The look on his face made me cackle. “Dude. No. It was... it wasn’t anything, just my imagination or a shadow or something, I guess. I’m not stroking out. I’m in perfect health, remember?” I flexed my chest.

“And I’ve never been happier about anything in my entire life.”

But I knew what I had seen. I swear it was a man walking through the room, but that was insane. No one else was here. I knew that. But if it wasn’t a person, then what was it?

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Archie

“Y ou’re not welcome here,” I whispered into the ether of the old house and waited. The ghost had communicated, but it was broken and difficult to hear. Sometimes, the veils between the Earthly plane and the ghostly one were thick and impenetrable. Other times, they were as thin as the air itself. It depended on so many variables. Not all ghosts were the same.

“I know you can hear me.” I opened my palm and tried to feel the other side. My hand tingled. The veil was fragile, and I knew that my words were resonating with the undead person still lingering within these old walls. “Speak to me. I want to help you find peace. This realm is no place for you.”

I live here.

“You used to. Now, you no longer live. It’s the way of all things. We’re born, we age, and eventually, we pass into the unknown. But you are in between.”

No.

“I am afraid so. You’re trapped in a loop of your own making. You died many years ago. Do you remember your name?”

Beatrice

“Beatrice Cummings?” I held up a death certificate. Sometimes, they could see the here and now, and other times, they couldn’t. Since I had seen Beatrice moving small objects around in the house, I assumed that she could. I had to do a lot of research to find who I thought they might be. “You and your husband Daniel built this house in nineteen-twenty-nine after you moved here from New Jersey. He passed away fifteen years later, but you lived here for another twenty years. You died of natural causes in nineteen-forty-nine at the age of fifty-three.”

Died? I... I remember going to bed last night.

I tried to connect with her without letting her completely in. I had been taken over once before, and I never wanted that to happen again. This spirit was not violent or evil – she was just confused. I wished I could understand how or why this happened. But no one knew for sure.

“See what I know, Beatrice. You passed away in your sleep almost seventy-five years ago. You’ve been living the last day of your life over and over, but you don’t have to stay there. You can move on and cross over to the next realm. This is not the place for you any longer. See what the world now is, Beatrice. See what I know.”

I opened my mind up and pushed my thoughts outward. It was a trick I had learned when I was a child, and one that had served me well. I protected myself now much more than I ever had. But sometimes to communicate, the walls had to be brought down for the spirits to know the truth.

What is this... This is not what I know.

Her energy came together, and for a brief moment, she stood before me. Beatrice had been trapped in her loop—doing the same actions she completed on her very last day of living for too long. Now, as she shimmered into view and all of her swirling soul entered this plane of existence, she looked around and knew that what I said was true.

The look on her face broke my heart.

“I do not know this place.” Her face broke into grief, but there were no tears for her to cry. The dead did not have the substance of the living. “It is true? Daniel? I could have been with Daniel.”

“You still can be, Beatrice. He is waiting for you on the other side.”

“Heaven?”

“Only the dead know. It remains the last true mystery, even to me.”

“How do I... Oh,” she whispered and looked up. What they saw, I had no idea. But the look of calm and peace on her face gave me hope in the afterlife. Souls were real, so why not all of the other stuff we desired to be true? Her form shimmered once again, and I could see her essence fade and float away.

The light. That’s what some called it. I once had a ghost who saw a bridge, and that has made me scratch my head for quite some time. Whatever it was – I hoped that those lost souls I helped found the peace they deserved. The same peace that one day I knew I would also see.

Death was the inevitable outcome for everyone.

I reached out once again with what many psychics called their third eye – I had named mine Barbra. I was a fan and super gay, so, of course, it was named for a diva. Nothing but silence – the way it should be in a house that was clean of the past.

Ghosts usually fall into a few categories. None of this was science because science hadn’t been able to prove that whatwe psychics could see was even true. Some called what we could do a gift – others a curse. For me, it lay in between like many of the

spirits I saw in my day-to-day life. This world was filthy with spirits. It was sad. The world was a confusing place – but what happened after death was riddled with inconsistencies. I had yet to discover a real cause for the affliction of these spirits. Whatever trapped them here remained an unknown.

Oh, the categories!

I usually get ravenous after communicating with a spirit, and it makes my mind wander. All I want is a medium rare steak and a vat of potatoes.

Most ghosts are just echoes of a moment during their previous life. This was what was happening to Beatrice. She only saw the house as she knew it. Her energy passed through the other people living here without her knowledge. She didn't coexist – she lived trapped within this box of her past life. Ghost hunters liked to call these residual hauntings. There was nothing residual about Beatrice, though. That was her complete spirit or essence that was here. She just didn't know what had happened or that she was repeating the same day for almost seven decades.

Ghost Hunters usually have this wrong. Their residual hauntings are usually much more than that – but sadder. In all my time of communicating with spirits, I've only seen one true residual haunting. There was nothing I could do because it was just a figment of reality – a small leftover piece of soul that the deceased could never have back. Most were memories of trauma that they left behind when they passed on. It was probably better for them that way.

The hauntings that were trickier and scarier were the cases where the ghosts knew exactly what they were doing. Ghost hunters called these intelligent hauntings. The spirit did not choose to leave when its time came. Their soul was not always trapped – sometimes, it was just a choice. They never wanted to leave, and I had never been able to truly solve any of those client's problems. The ghost had free will and usually stayed too long in this plane to ever be able to cross over. At least, that's what I

thought. They were angrier and lashed out with reason and forethought.

Hey, at least Beatrice hadn't turned out to be a demon. I don't do that. Not anymore.

I walked out of the room where I had found her essence and opened my mind once again.

Nothing. This house was free of the dead.

"Is it over?" The young man stood from the couch and looked as if he were about to get sick.

"Yes," I sighed. "She is gone. She didn't even know that you were here, Billy. She didn't know that she was dead and had been reliving her last day over and over."

"Jesus, that's sad," Billy wrung his hands. "Sorry, I was so nervous and worried that I'd have to find another rental. Do you know how much a house that's not rent-controlled costs in this place?"

"That I do," I smirked, unsurprised that he didn't actually care about the spirit I helped to cross over. Most clients rarely did. People, as a blanket statement, only actually cared about themselves and their own problems. "Speaking of rent..."

"I can... uh... Venmo?"

"That's fine." I held up my phone and pulled up the app. He held his phone near mine and grabbed the code. A few seconds later, I heard the tell-tale sound that I had been paid. "If you have any friends with an issue, give them my number."

"Does this happen that often? I mean, this is your real job?"

That was a loaded question. “Well, you did walk into my shop, didn’t you?”

“But I mean... Your sign says that you deal with hauntings, but you also do a lot of other things, right? Like Tarot cards and crystal balls... I mean all of that stuff.”

“I can read Tarot when somebody wants it. But I’m a psychic, not a fortune teller.”

“Sorry, I... That came out wrong. I think what I was trying to say was – are there that many ghosts?”

“You have no idea.”

I opened his front door and walked out onto his very brown lawn. It had been a hot summer in Los Angeles, and with the drought, the city had really clamped down hard on sprinklers and unnecessary water use. Even his rose bushes were dying from thirst. I could feel their energy waning. The Earth was constantly crying these days.

Crystal balls? Why does every person in the world think that a psychic is a fortune teller? Even my own mother gifted me with a crystal ball one Christmas when she was actually trying to understand what was happening to me. I had a gift, or a curse, as my grandmother called it. She, too, could feel and see spirits. But my gift had quickly grown well past hers. By the time I was thirteen years old, I understood my place in the world. I had stopped being scared of the ghosts who visited me, and my family had finally stopped trying to suppress my talent.

I was born this way – and born gay, too. I chose to be flamboyant, but I never brought my gifts out for silly party games or tricks. I wasn’t a psychic who could read minds – they did exist. I could only read and see the energy from the living. It wasn’t always very helpful because people’s energies shifted constantly.

But the dead were alive to me as much as any person whose heart still beat. I saw my

first ghost when I was six years old. My grandfather had died recently, and one night, there he was, sitting on my bed the way he always did when it was time for me to sleep. He had read me a story, and I fell asleep in the comfort of his soothing voice – but the first time I saw his ghost... I screamed, and the sad look on his face broke my heart, even at such a young age.

The next night, he came back, and part of me was terrified because I knew he was dead – but another part of me wanted him to appear again. I missed him so much that I lay in bed, hoping I would have one more chance to see him. He came. I could see the mist of him appear slowly in my room. It was fascinating, and my heart raced as his form slowly took shape. I reached out and he did too as he sat down on my bed. There was no shift to the mattress – he had no weight, but my heart leaped, knowing that it was him. My hand slowly went through his.

“Granpa? I’m sorry that I wasn’t there to say goodbye,” my small voice broke.

He pulled his hand back and smiled at me. My gifts were just blossoming, and I didn’t know how to communicate – it was hot to listen. But the smile that appeared on his old face let me know that he could hear me.

“Aren’t you in heaven?”

He pointed upward and then pointed to me.

“Is this good... goodbye?”

He nodded, stood up slowly, and walked to where I sat. His hands passed through me, but a ghostly kiss was his last goodbye. I could see the glow, and then he was gone.

I never saw him again.

But it never stopped afterward. The seal had been broken, and my gifts jumped to the forefront of my small, confused brain. The other spirits were not my grandfather, and most of them never tried to contact me as they wafted through our house. I would pretend that I couldn't see them. It was safer that way. Once they knew, they never forgot.

Growing up was a nightmare until it wasn't, and I had learned to control it to whatever extent I could. My grandmother finally got my parents to understand, and before I knew what was happening, I met the person who would help me on my way as a psychic medium. She taught me everything and gave me lessons to hone my abilities. She helped me be able to control when and what I saw.

She saved my life.

It was a short car ride back to my small office on Santa Monica Boulevard, and I turned my sign on and waited. Someone else would find me soon enough. But for now, I ordered Uber Eats. I couldn't wait to eat.

3

Jack

Something is off.

It's Los Angeles in the fall, but the sun is still bright in the sky. Outside, the temperature is almost eighty, but my house is super wonky. Cold spots just appear inside the house, and it's not the air conditioning that I run throughout the year. I'm incredibly hot-natured, and even in the LA winter, I'm walking around in shorts and a t-shirt. But I actually put a hoodie on today because I'd suddenly get a case of the shivers.

'Someone walked over your grave,' as my grandma would have said. She was superstitious. Southern superstitious – they took everything very seriously. Don't walk over a grave or let a black cat cross your path. Turn and spit if someone gives you the evil eye. What the fuck is the evil eye? No one could ever really tell me.

I'm also sore. My body has been fighting to get back into the kind of shape that I'm used to. I get winded a little faster than normal, and my muscles burn and ache with every circuit I do in the gym. It was lucky that I was in such great shape before the accident, but those months of inactivity did take a toll, apparently.

I still had a job, though! That was great news since I had depleted almost every dollar I'd ever saved. But four of my customers took me back on immediately when I walked back into the gym. Everyone was happy to see me, and it felt warm and comfortable to be back in a place that had been like a second home to me.

Hell, I spent more time in the gym than I ever did at my house. I had worked too much. I planned on keeping my client list small so that I could have time for myself. It felt necessary – which was odd for me. I was young and still had a whole future ahead to look forward to. But I no longer wanted my life to be just work. I wanted something more.

Whatever happened to me in that hospital – or the accident itself – had changed something fundamental about me. Hopefully, it was for the better. I wanted to do other things. I couldn't remember the last book that I'd read, which wasn't about lifting weights or training. I used to love adventure and fantasy books. I still bought all the Percy Jackson books even if I hadn't read one of them in years. Maybe I would travel more? I should if I could get my finances back in shape. I didn't want to go into debt. God, I was lucky to have saved all of my money. I could have easily woken up to a nightmare – no job, house, or life to come back to.

I was the luckiest son of a bitch alive.

But I was creeped the fuck out, though. Things were... weird, and I couldn't quite put my finger on why. The last few days, I've felt... different. My peripheral vision is all wonky, and I should call my doctor about that. I'm seeing too many floaters, which makes me think I'm seeing someone who's not there. When I turn to look – nothing. No one is there, even though I feel like I'm not alone. It's been mainly in the house. But I've also seen the same thing walking to work every now and then.

It's freaking me out a little. It makes me feel like someone is watching me, and it's put me on edge. Last night, while I was sleeping, I woke up in a cold sweat and swore that I had heard someone breathing heavily. Maybe I woke myself up snoring? Maybe I snore now, even though I had never done so before? Maybe it was just a dream that had felt real? Whatever it was – it made me feel like I was a stranger in my house.

Where the fuck did I put my stupid cell phone?

Before the accident, I would have had it on me at all times. But since coming home, I decided to try to unplug as often as I could. I didn't want to feel chained to technology anymore. I didn't need to go on Facebook or Instagram anywhere near as often as I used to. I wanted to take that time back to do something more than scroll.

I'd been putting my wallet, cell phone, and keys on the little table in my entryway. Out of sight meant out of mind. But it wasn't there. I was positive that when I came in a few hours ago, I put it here. But only my wallet and keys lay on the table.

I had to have picked it up without meaning to. Old habits do die hard sometimes, and for years, it had practically been attached to me. Maybe I carried it into the living room where I had been sitting watching HGTV? I dug around in the cushions of my couch and looked under it—nothing.

Fuck... I must have laid it down somewhere weird.

I checked the kitchen. I checked the fridge, the freezer, and my cabinets.

I walked into the bathroom and looked anywhere that I might have put it.

Nothing.

I hadn't been anywhere else. I came home, and the first thing I did was turn on the TV, walk into the kitchen, and make myself a salad. I ate on the couch. I did go to the bathroom once. That's it. It had to be in the living room somewhere...

I walked around the entire space and found nothing. It wasn't like I could call it. I didn't have a landline – I wasn't eighty. I slumped down on the couch, completely at a loss.

Then, a miracle happened. My phone rang. I knew it was Daveed, that sweet bastard,

calling because it was the Darth Vader theme ringtone that I had assigned to him. I jumped up and followed the sound to the base of my stairs.

I hadn't been upstairs at all. I knew that, so how did...

I ran up the stairs as fast as I could. My legs burned with the effort. I stopped to listen, turned right towards the master bedroom, and stopped in the doorway.

My phone was sitting on the windowsill.

What the actual fuck!

I walked over and picked it up – breathing heavily with exertion. “Daveed,” I answered.

“Dude. What’s happening?”

“I... I have no idea. I...” I stopped myself from telling him. Maybe I did come up here and didn’t remember. I didn’t want him to worry; honestly, I didn’t want to worry myself. I didn’t want to have to go back to the doctor, but there was something wrong – I could feel it. Did I really come up here?

“Dude, what the fuck’s wrong. You sound weird.”

“My phone was upstairs, and I ran.” I mean, it wasn’t a lie. “I’m more out of shape than I thought.”

“Sounds like you need to do the Stairmaster,” he chuckled. “You knew it was going to take time.”

“Yeah...” I sighed. If anything else happened, I would tell him. But for now... I just

needed to see if it kept happening, right? “I’m just anxious. This week has been a lot.”

“You tired? Need company or anything?”

“No, man. I mean, yes, I am very tired. But I’m just gonna...” I glanced to the right, swearing that someone had just walked by. “Fuck...” I walked over and sat down on the bed.

“I’m coming over, dude. You sound... You don’t sound right.” He used his serious voice whenever he worried. He had been worried about me a lot. I didn’t deserve him. I barely deserved anyone.

“Ok,” I agreed. I felt totally defeated. Was I going crazy? If two plus two equaled four – something was wrong with me. My phone was upstairs – seeing things that weren’t there – all of it added up to my brain, didn’t it? Maybe they hadn’t found the damage – but I was experiencing it. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

I hung up the phone, slowly stood from my bed, and walked back to the window. The street lamps were burning brightly, making the shadows from the tree outside dance against the ground. The Santa Anna winds were starting. They always made me feel uneasy. A couple of years ago, they broke a branch that almost hit my car. Thank God I didn’t live in the valley.

I turned to walk away and froze. To the left, a shape moved. Human, but... not. Not solid. I didn’t dare move for fear of losing it. It had stopped and was standing against the wall as if it could see me, too. A chill ran up my spine, and I shivered.

Leave .

The bodiless voice hit me like a fucking freight train. Before I could think straight, I

ran downstairs and jumped onto the couch. I pulled the cover over me and tried to make myself as small as possible.

Did that really...

What the fuck was that? Was that real, or was I imagining things? I had never wanted Daveed to get here faster than I did. My brain was trying to make sense out of what I just heard – or imagined – no, heard. It was with my ears, not inside my head. I wasn't crazy. Fuck, Daveed, walk faster. It's only one block.

The knock on the door made me jump off of the couch, and I slammed my knee into the table. I grabbed at it and tumbled to the floor. "Fuck!" I bellowed, and Daveed started knocking louder. "Fuck! Coming."

He had his own set of keys and I heard him quickly unlocking the door. "Dude? Are you ok?"

I slowly picked myself up from the floor. That was going to leave a bruise. "No, man. I don't think I am," my voice shook.

I told him what was happening and how worried I was about this being a part of my injury. Before he could say anything – something crashed upstairs.

We both stared at each other, and I slowly stood up. "You heard that, right?"

"Yeah, man. Something fell." His eyes grew big, and he followed me to the bottom of the stairs.

"I guess we should..."

"Do you have a bat or anything down here?" He whispered.

I shook my head. “Come on.”

We slowly walked up the stairs and looked down the hallway.

“You sure no one’s in here, bro?”

“I don’t think so. I mean... I don’t know, I guess. It sounded heavy, though.” I walked towards my bedroom and stopped abruptly in the doorframe once again.

“Shit,” Daveed’s hot breath hit my neck as he stared around me. “What the fuck?”

Underwear lay everywhere, and the drawer from my nightstand lay on the floor as if someone had pulled it out and thrown it.

“You see that?” I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“I see it.”

“What the fuck,” I huffed. I walked over to the only place that someone could hide and threw the closet door open. Only my neglected dress shirts and polos hung there. “What the fuck is going on?”

Daveed looked like he was about to have a meltdown. “That’s some fucking ghost shit! Nope – black people do not do this. When the house says leave, you walk out the fucking door.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh at him or be happy I wasn’t going insane.

Daveed slept on the couch. I had to beg him to stay.

Nothing else happened all night.

I didn't believe in ghosts. Did I?

Archie

“ You’ll need to burn this all around the house. Make sure that you get it into the corners and closets. If you have an attic space, try to get as much smoke as you can into it.” I waved the stick around to make sure she understood. “You can chant the blessing as you walk with the smudge stick, but without being there and seeing if I sense anything, I can’t guarantee that this will do anything.” I shrugged from behind the small counter at the front of my store, where I sold the hippy-dippy bullshit that most people bought.

“I just want to bless the new house and make sure to get rid of any of the old energy that might be hanging around.” She grinned as I handed her the bag. She was cute but had no idea what she was doing. “This works for that, right?”

“It’s one of those traditions that’s been passed down for generations. If it’s just a blessing that you’re looking for, this should be fine.” She was just another young person doing something she heard about on TikTok. “That is all you’re doing, right?”

“Yeah, I just heard that the lady who lived there before me was pretty nasty, so I don’t want any of her energy lingering around. I don’t need no bad juju.”

“Did she die there?” I asked slowly, wondering if this could be more than she was letting on.

“Oh, God, no!” She giggled. “She apparently moved to Arizona.”

“So, no ghosts? You had said that...”

“Oh, I meant her. Not ghosts. I’ve never actually seen a... I think I would just move out.” She scrunched up her face. “I’ve seen enough scary movies to want any part of that shit.”

“This is exactly what you’re looking for. Blessings to you,” I added happily. “Happy housewarming.”

“Thank you,” she grinned again and then walked out of the store into the bright, sunshiny day that we were having in October. I preferred my fall to be much more gloomy and overcast. I longed for trees to change color and leaves to fall to the ground. Here in WeHo, the palm trees stayed green, and the weather had yet to shift to the cooler climate I preferred.

I missed Vermont. My parents still lived there. I sometimes forgot why I wanted to leave. Here, most of the time, all I did was long for real seasons instead of a perpetual summer all year long. But the East Coast was old and full of spirits. I had hoped that I wouldn’t feel so overwhelmed here, and I’d been right, for the most part. But death was everywhere, and the Grim Reaper didn’t care what season it was or what side of the coast you were on.

I glanced out the window and sighed. Muscle boys in tank tops were walking by and glancing in the window before laughing and walking off. I shuddered. I was used to it. Hell, I was grateful that they had the option of not believing. It was safer for that to be the case. Most spirits could rarely hurt or touch someone, but just the realization that they were real – the experience of knowing that the dead could still walk with us – it changed you to your very core. I had seen too many people go into a deep depression because of that knowledge. Not everyone was meant to see the other side. Most humans weren’t prepared, even if they did think they truly believed.

Believing and seeing – experiencing a real haunting – were two very different things.

The windows rattled and caught me by surprise. Fucking Santa Anna winds! Sometimes, their gusts came so suddenly that they could almost knock you off your feet. It was also a warm wind coming off the deserts, and it sucked. The one thing we didn't need was more heat. Fall was just barely a thought in Los Angeles. It might feel like fall for a couple of weeks, but then it just became LA winter, which meant it could be anywhere between eighty and sixty, depending on the day. At least at night, I could wear warmer clothes.

I could at least pretend. I loved sweater weather and was happiest in a woolly cardigan.

I walked through the small doorway at the back of the shop and grabbed a few more of the smudge sticks. I made sure to keep plenty in stock. At twenty bucks a pop and selling ten a day, they were a decent seller. All of this shit was junk. The trinkets, the crystals, and the herbs that helped people feel safer did almost nothing when faced with real paranormal happenings. Smudging your house could actually piss off the spirits and make them lash out. I tried to guide people, but for those who didn't want to believe, there was little I could do. So, I sold them the crap I carried to keep my small business afloat.

I made most of my money dealing with the real issues of the few people who came through these doors, terrified of what they were experiencing. I wish I didn't have to charge them anything. I wished I could have helped the trapped spirits for free, but I had bills to pay and food to put on the table.

I grabbed as many of the sticks as I could in my arms. I would need to order more soon.

The little bell above my door went off, and I sighed. Please don't want a psychic

reading , I silently begged before walking out and seeing a very handsome, tall, black man standing inside, looking and feeling completely out of place. His energy was scattered and... He was scared. He glanced over his shoulder at the people passing by and laughing on the street. He was embarrassed to be seen in here.

“Good morning. How can I help you?” I asked as I walked past him and over to the shelf. I placed them down quickly and turned to him.

He shuffled in place and stared down at the floor. “My... uh... my friend is having a problem, and uh...”

I took a step forward. He looked so rigid as he stood there with his head held low – he couldn’t look me in the eye. Everything about him emanated grey like a cloak draped over him. He was scared – but it wasn’t for himself.

“What kind of problem? I’m... uh... Archie, by the way.” I held out my hand, and he paused before slowly reaching out and shaking it.

Contact.

He believed in what he saw, but he didn’t know what to do. He felt frozen and was worried about... his friend, I assumed. It wasn’t himself that he was concerned about – I could feel that from his energy. But it was someone close to him. A lover, perhaps?

“Yeah, I... Daveed. Nice to meet you. So, this is your place? You’re a psychic?”

“Something like that.”

“It says that you can help with hauntings on your sign. It says ‘ghost problems – help inside,’ is that true?”

“You have a ghost problem?”

“No! Not me, I...” He held his hands up and waved them around wildly. He really was scared. It consumed him.

“You really don’t have anything to fear. I’m not going to judge you or anything. That’s not my job. But I can’t help if I don’t know what the issue is,” I said calmly.

“I think my friend has a ghost in his house,” he blurted. There it was – the reason for him coming in. I was afraid I was going to have to coax it out of him. He believed there was a ghost himself. He had seen something.

“What makes you think that? Please, tell me what’s happening and I will tell you what it is I can or cannot do.” I gestured over to my counter and walked behind it. Maybe some distance between us would help him.

“Last night, we... I called him, and he said he had lost his phone. He swears that he didn’t carry his phone upstairs. He said he hadn’t gone up there at all, and he had been looking for it. I called, and he followed the sound upstairs to his bedroom. The phone was on the fucking windowsill.”

I nodded. “Spirits have a hard time moving objects. It takes a lot of energy for them to be able to do that. You’re sure that he didn’t go up and forget that he left it there?”

“I... No, I’m not sure. But I believe him. He’s just not the kind of guy who would normally forget something like that, you know?” He sighed heavily and leaned one arm on my counter.

“Go on. Anything else?”

“He’s been seeing shadows moving in the periphery of his eyes – you know – off to

the side.”

“Yes, I... I know what that means.” I smiled, trying to make this easier for him. He was really wound up and having a hard time telling me about it. That was because he believed everything he was saying, and he didn’t want to. It made him uneasy, as it should. There was something in his past that caused this. But what?

“Sorry, I... I don’t know why I’m so nervous.” He laughed but there was no mirth in the sound.

“Are you a believer? In ghosts, I mean.”

“Yes.” He bit his bottom lip and took a deep breath. “I lived in a house that was haunted when I was a kid. Nothing serious happened, I guess. But we could see her every now and then like a fine mist walking through the house. It’s... It was my grandmother, and I’ve never forgotten.”

“You saw something last night yourself, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “More like heard something. We were downstairs, and we heard a loud bang. When we got upstairs to his bedroom, one of his chest drawers was lying on its side, and all of the contents were scattered around the room. It was fucking freaky.”

“Could it have fallen out? Maybe it was loose?” I needed to ask everything. I had been punked a few times and didn’t enjoy it. But I could see that he was not kidding. He was very serious.

“No. It was a body length away from the chest. It looked like someone pulled it out and threw it.”

“Once again, that’s... that would take a certain type of energy. Has your friend

experienced anything else?” The spirit had to have something to feed off of. Usually, it was a person if this kind of stuff was happening. Poltergeists usually thrived on making people’s emotions wild and chaotic.

“He said he heard a whisper.”

I widened my eyes. “Could he understand it?” I asked incredulously. This was very rare for a non-psychic to hear a ghost.

“It said to leave.”

“Interesting.” I walked over to the desk and grabbed my keys. “Shall we?”

“What?” he looked at me wild-eyed.

“I don’t know if I don’t go. You want me to help you, right?”

“Yeah, how much would that be?” he asked slowly and dropped his head again.

“It’s... I don’t know until I know what I’m dealing with. I may get there and decide that this haunting isn’t anything that I can help with. There are limits to what can sometimes be done, and there are certain types of hauntings that I won’t get involved in.”

“Oh! Ok...” He bit his bottom lip.

“Typically, it could be anywhere from two to five thousand, depending on how much I have to do. Does that sound ok?”

“It’s guaranteed?” He looked me in the eye.

“No.” I shook my head. “But you only pay if I can actually help. If I can’t do anything to help, I won’t charge you.”

“I guess that’s... ok... I was honestly just looking to buy a sage stick and hope that it would work,” he huffed.

“It wouldn’t if it’s a real haunting. That stuff isn’t... It doesn’t expel ghosts from your house. That’s just an old wives’ tale. It can actually make it worse. I’m glad you confided in me. Most ghosts are harmless, but if he’s able to manipulate solid things, that’s... concerning.” I hoped he understood.

“What about the hearing it speak thing?”

I shrugged. “Some people are more open to hearing things than they know. I won’t know until we go.” It meant your friend had some kind of psychic energy is what it meant.

“Thanks... I... I’m really glad you took the time to talk to me. I felt weird walking in, and... I’ve always heard that most psychics are fake, you know.” He looked at me bashfully, hoping I wouldn’t take offense.

“Most are. Lucky for you, this is what I do. I’ll be honest with you.” I put my hand on his shoulder, and we stood there for a second before he slowly grinned.

“I... think you will be. There’s just something about you that’s... trustworthy, I guess.”

“Does your friend know that you’re here?” I cocked my eyebrow at him, already knowing the answer.

He shook his head slowly.

Well, this could be weird. “Right... Well, shall we?”

“Might as well get it over with. He’s the type of guy who doesn’t like asking for help. He’s had a rough few months, so he might not be as cool as he normally is, but I know him, and he needs help more than he would admit.”

“I know the type.” I grinned.

I followed him out into the bright sun and turned the sign on my door to closed before locking it behind me. Daveed was pure of thought when it came to what he believed. He was scared for his friend, and truly thought that there was a ghost in the house.

I hoped he was wrong even if I did need the money.

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5

Jack

I tried to concentrate on my book. I'd read a few words about Percy's newest adventure, and then a flicker of shadow would make me turn my head.

Page.

Shadow.

Page.

Shadow.

I reread the same paragraph over and over, but the movement to my side was distracting. I was seeing things when there was nothing to see. If Daveed hadn't been over last night, I'm not sure what I would have thought. I mean, I couldn't have ignored the loud crash from upstairs. I hadn't done that or thrown my clothes all over the place. I knew that as a fact.

But the shadows, the voice, and my phone could all be because of my accident. Brain damage. I had Googled it last night when Daveed went to sleep. Not all damage to the brain appears immediately. The doctors said the bruising was gone. I had no swelling. I was healthy. But what if I wasn't? What if they didn't catch it?

I wished Daveed could have stayed longer. I was grateful that he spent the night

because I was freaked the fuck out. But today, with the sun streaming through my windows, there had to be some kind of reasonable explanation, right? I had forced myself to sleep in my bed – it was mine – I didn't want to run away. But I did want to. I was proud that I didn't. This house was about all I had left.

Daveed said the house was haunted, and I know that he believes it's true. I just... I didn't believe in ghosts. I had spent twenty-seven years never seeing one. Hell, four of those years were spent in this house, and there had never been any kind of infestation of spirits. I had never heard anything or seen anything that I even needed to try to rationalize as normal. It had just been normal.

I missed normal.

But after everything that I had gone through, maybe normal had disappeared. Maybe this was my new normal. I had never been normal. I wanted normal. After last night, I wanted it more than ever.

Yeah, I was fucked up in the head. I should call my doctor and tell him what was happening. They said that if anything abnormal started to show itself, I needed to come back in. This was definitely abnormal. Daveed heard the bang and saw the clothes, but he had not seen the shadows or heard the voice.

Totally fucked. I didn't want to die. I wanted to explore this second chance.

I heard Daveed's keys in the door and laid my book down. He must have finished his errands.

"You back?" I called as I heard the front door open. "You wanna go grab some lunch?"

"That's not usually the first question I'm asked?" I jumped from the couch and spun

around.

Daveed chuckled and looked like a cat that'd been caught with the pet mouse in its mouth. I narrowed my eyes as I took in the new visitor that Daveed had brought with him. He was pretty fucking cute. He was short and really skinny. He had definitely never spent any time in the gym, that's for sure. But he had such a handsome face. Wide blue eyes and a perfectly bowed mouth – he was quite nice to look at. But his hair made me a little weak in the knees. So shockingly red it was almost too bright for the eye. I had a thing for gingers and always had. Why was he here with Daveed?

“Is this the new boyfriend?” I teased.

“Oh, yeah... I...” Daveed stuttered. Something was going on.

The redhead put his hand on Daveed's arm and glanced at me. God, his freckles had freckles. “Daveed is not my boyfriend. In fact, we just met today.”

“Ok... What's going on here?” I tried to sound light even if I felt very, very heavy and naked standing in front of him. Why?

“This place is...” He shuddered and looked up towards my staircase. “You definitely are not living here alone.”

“Oh, shit... You did not bring in a fucking psychic, did you? I don't believe in that shit.” I groaned loudly.

“I can see that. You only believe in things that your five senses show you, right? But not everything on this earth can always be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, or touched.” He grinned at me. “Such a vibrant, bright red energy coming off you. Not everything can be fucked either.”

“Hey, I...” He was spicy. I hadn’t been ready for that.

“Totally resembles that remark,” Daveed chuckled. “He’s totally a player.”

“Used to be, maybe.” I narrowed my eyes at Daveed. I felt stripped bare as this guy stared at me as if he could see right through me. God, he was good, and Daveed had fallen for his bullshit.

“There’s something else, though... underneath all that red is... strange... indigo? I wouldn’t expect that, but it could explain what you’ve been seeing.” He walked around in a small circle and looked back to the stairs.

“I appreciate this, Daveed, but this is really not necessary. I’ve been to a psychic before and was told that I had a...”

“You were told that you had a curse placed on you, and they wanted you to buy a bunch of candlesto burn, right? They told you that burning the candles would break the curse. It was bullshit . It’s always bullshit.”

I laughed and looked at him stupidly. “How did you...”

“That wasn’t a psychic thing. That was because I know the tricks that they use. I’d say half of the Earth’s population was walking around with a curse if they were correct. Most are not real. I am .”

I stood my ground and crossed my arms. “Read my mind then,” I said much more forcefully than I had intended. “I mean, if you’re real.”

“I’m not a mind reader. Most psychics aren’t. That gift is rare, thankfully. But that doesn’t mean I’m not what I say I am.” He smiled, and I almost fucking melted. It should be illegal to be that cute.

“What do you say you are?” I asked, challenging him.

“I read and see energies, and because of that, I also can see and communicate with spirits.”

“He’s a medium,” Daveed nodded.

“Not quite.” He held a hand up and waved it gently as if he were feeling the air. “I don’t do seances or anything like that. I just see and hear.”

“I…”

He took a step towards me. “You don’t have to say anything right now. I’m Archie, and you are?”

“Jack. Daveed really shouldn’t have brought you here,” I said sternly.

“Yes, he should have talked to you first.” He nodded. “But I’m here now, and I can feel that you are not alone in this house. The energy is…” He put his hand in the air again and turned towards the stairs. “Can I go upstairs?”

“Why not?” I shrugged. He was here, so why not have a little sport with the cutie? It would be fun. “Help yourself.”

He turned and walked up the stairs stopping halfway and holding his hands up in front of him. “Weird.” He continued up the stairs, and Daveed and I followed behind. He headed straight to my bedroom and stopped in the doorway. “It likes this room.”

“It?”

“I don’t know what or who it is yet. I can just feel its energy permeating the air – the

walls, even. Interesting.”

“What?” Daveed asked so seriously that I snorted.

Archie glanced at me with a look so reprimanding that he activated a kink I didn’t even know I had. My cock twinged as I stared back at him. His eyes were the color of a clear sky and shone brightly from his alabaster face.

“It belongs here. Huh... How long have you lived here?” He walked further into the room.

“I’ve owned the place for four years,” I answered.

“And did you ever see or hear...”

“Nothing. It just started.” I looked at Daveed and shook my head. He just stared back at me and put his finger against his lips.

“Why?” He walked around and placed his hands against the windowsill. “Why now? Why were you sleeping and awoke? Huh... I can totally feel... him... Yes, him. He’s been here for a while, but something shifted. Why are you suddenly so active?”

“Do you normally just throw random questions out? People buy that shit?” I huffed.

“They’re not for you. But I’m not getting anything back, either. He is very aware, and... He’s angry, but I can’t tell why. It just is here lingering in the air with your own anger.” He turned to look at me, and my hackles rose.

“I’m not angry. You got that all wrong.”

“Do I?” he smirked.

“I’m the most grateful son of a bitch there is.”

“Huh... Ok.” He shrugged. That small gesture made my anger rise.

“Don’t just... Ok, me! I’m... You’ve made me angry, but I’m not...” With a simple glance, he made me shut up. The power and strength that I felt from him was... I stood there slack-jawed.

“You had something taken away from you recently, and you try to ignore what you actually feel, but it’s there - like an armor around you.” He stepped towards me. “You’re... You feel so alone and scared, but you cover it up with a bravado that nothing has changed. But everything has changed, hasn’t it? You’re changing, and it scares you.”

“That’s some half-cocked psychic bullshit. You could say that to almost everyone,” I could barely whisper the words.

He took one more step towards me. “Who is Bernice?”

“What?”

“You have someone watching over you that... She’s not here – here. But she’s been with you.”

“She was...”

“She was his nurse,” Daveed answered.

“I don’t think that’s... it.” Archie shook his head.

“She was. I was in the hospital, and she was the sweetest of all of them.” I grinned,

thinking about her.

“Interesting... A nurse, you say. You carry some of her energy around you. But I don’t think she was your nurse.” The sound of his voice sent a chill up my spine.

“Why would you say that? You don’t know me.”

“She’s dead. I’m sure of that. She’s been dead quite some time. Her energy is thin, but it’s there intermingled with your own.” He walked around me. “I can even hear her... so dim but still there as if she has... She’s not your ghost, though. Just a ghost you’ve already met. Residual energies can attach to the living.”

I crossed my arms and totally pouted. “I could call you on your bullshit right now. All I have to do is make a phone call.”

“I’ll stand right here,” Archie said so smugly I didn’t know if I wanted to kiss him or throw him out. I was about to choose the latter. “So, shadows off to the side that you can see, but when you look – they are gone. A voice that only you could hear, and objects actually moving in your house. What does all of that add up to?”

“That I might need to go to the hospital because I’m having a psychotic break?” I knew I sounded stupid. Daveed had seen and heard the aftermath. It had happened, but... I didn’t want to believe any of this.

“Maybe? Are you going to call and ask about that nurse or not? We can get things done here a whole lot faster if I don’t have to listen to your snide comments. Belief is essential if we are going to work together.”

“I never said that I was... Hell, I can’t even afford you, I’m sure.”

Daveed put his hand on my shoulder. “This is my gift, dude. If this shit’s real, we

have to do something.”

“Man, I...”

“Will you call and see if Archie’s right? If he is, then...” Daveed pleaded.

“He’s not lying,” I replied knowingly. “Fuck.”

“I don’t lie. I’m also not always right.” He shrugged smugly.

“See, he’s already giving himself an out.” I pointed at him. It wasn’t my finest moment. I was being a petulant child because if he was right...

“I’m right about this.” He smirked. “It makes sense that she was a nurse. Her energy is very green and motherly.”

“Fine.” I turned and walked out into the hallway and dialed the number for the hospital. I added it to my contacts just in case, but I had hoped I would never have to call it. This was different, though. It was to prove that Archie was a fucking fraud. I went through the menu and finally got transferred to the operator.

“Hi, can I please be transferred to the nurse's station on floor seven?” I glanced over at them as Daveed stared at me. Archie wasn’t paying any attention to me at all. Instead, he was walking in circles around my room.

“Hold on,” the tinny voice answered. I took a few steps down the hallway and turned back to the door.

“They’re transferring me,” I announced saw both of them standing on the other side of the doorway, watching me.

“Floor seven, how can I help you?”

“Is Nurse Bernice Carpenter in today?” I talked loudly for their benefit.

“What?” She sounded surprised. “No, she’s not.”

“When will she be back? This is Jack, and I...”

“Oh, Jack! This is Nancy. Are you feeling ok?”

“Yes, I’m... I was just thinking of Bernice and I...”

“Honey, you never met Bernice. You must have heard us talking about her when you were in your coma. It happens. But she died a few years ago. Are you sure you’re...”

I hung up the phone and turned to look at them. I could feel the color drain out of my face, and I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat.

“When did she die?”

“A few years ago, she said. I... She was there when I first woke up. She held my hand.” It had happened. It had been real. I wasn’t crazy. But if I wasn’t crazy, then...

“I’m sure she did,” Archie replied sadly. There was no joy in his winning, and it caught me off guard. “I wish I would have been wrong. She feels like a very good person – a true nurturer.”

“How did I... I think I need to sit down.” I pushed gently past them and sat down on my bed. “I...” I thought back to the moments I had spent with her. All of the other nurses who came in and checked my vitals had never said one word to her. I hadn’t thought about it, but... “She was dead. I... You really think I have a ghost?”

“Yes. I think I can help you and him if you let me.”

“When can you start?”

“I think we already have.” He grinned.

Damn, he really was cute.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

6

Archie

I t's absolutely infuriating how hot Jack Johnson is. For a moment, I enjoyed watching him discover the truth – how it made him feel – the pain it caused. The way his ego shattered as he came face to face with his reality. Then I remembered that Jack wasn't him. No one was, even if they may have a few things in common. Jack wasn't Pedro.

He was just another dumb, muscle-bound jock boy. But damn... His hair was so black, and his eyes were so brown... I mean, sure, his face looks like some painter created the most beautiful man in the world – his body looked like it was about to rip out of his clothes just by moving. Who needs clothes that tight? It's just... He's an exhibitionist; aren't all of those gay boys? He's used to smiling and people falling all over themselves to make him happy.

It annoys the living shit out of me. People like him are... They are what's wrong with gay culture. I bet he goes out every night and bangs a new twink before going to another place and finding someone new. I... I'm much more aware now than I was when I first moved here.

Pedro was gorgeous, and I fell instantly in love with him. Insta-love is a real thing, and when he kissed me, I lost myself. I couldn't believe that he seemed to feel the same way, but after six months of what I thought was happiness – things shifted. His energy got all twisted up, and I tried to ignore it. I wanted to be happy and... I knew in my heart that things were falling apart, but I held on, hoping that this was just a

speed bump and we could work through it.

We didn't. He left me a note and the key to my apartment. He didn't even have the balls to do it in person. I saw him a few times after that, and he would turn to his bros and laugh. I should have made a scene – I deserved it – but I couldn't.

Fuck him. Fuck all boys like him. That included Mister Jack Johnson. God, even his name sounded stupid.

Let those thoughts go. You have work to do, and you're here to help an innocent soul, not obsess over some himbo. I cleared my thoughts once again and cracked my neck.

This was uncomfortable – sitting here on the floor with my legs crossed. I should have gotten a pillow off his bed, but... The window seemed to have the most energy for some reason, so if I was going to connect, it would probably be here.

I opened my mind and released my energy. I placed my hands on the windowsill and concentrated as I felt for the residual source of the spirit. If I could find that, perhaps I would be able to find him.

He was silent.

I had been sitting here for almost two hours, and I had learned almost nothing. The energy was male and angry. It left a red tinge wherever he had been, and the house was full of it even though it had faded everywhere but the bedroom. Maybe he died here. This was the master room, but was it always? I had asked Jack to find out as much about the house as he could, and he had already contacted the city of West Hollywood to find out anything that might help us.

It was frustrating. I wish that I could do exactly what most people think when they hear the word "psychic." It would be easier to just open my mind and know

everyone's thoughts. However, it would also be terrifying and chaotic. Reading energy made my day-to-day existence hard enough. Passing someone on the street who was sick, and not saying something was... I usually said something, and they looked at me like I was insane. But maybe I helped a few before it was too late. Cancer was a dark hole of energy, and it radiated a deathly hum of impending doom. How could I not say something? My life would be easier if I could learn to shut my mouth, that's for sure.

I could shield myself in some ways so I could exist like everyone else. But it always broke through, eventually. Being out in public for long periods of time was exhausting and complicated.

Wait!

“Who are you?” I had felt a flash of something.

I waited.

Nothing came back to me. But he was here, and he was hiding. Why would he hide from me? What was it? This wasn't normal, but it wasn't also unheard of. Some spirits were weak and could barely communicate as it took every ounce of energy to find form or speak back to me. Others had their own reasons. I had once found the spirit of a little boy who had been murdered, and it had been so horrible – he hid, and it took days to finally get him to trust me enough to come forward.

Was this something like that? I had looked at the police records for this address, and there had been nothing to find. No murders had happened inside. At least, none that the police knew about.

The window... It kept drawing me here as a focal point. Why here?

I let down my guard once again and felt for the energies. I closed my eyes, and my inner vision flashed. A hand on the windowsill – a cup of coffee – another hand holding his, smaller but masculine – and a...

The vision ended as forcefully as it came. Angry energy, but not the kind of angry I often found. It wasn't lashing out because of the new owner... It was internal, as if the anger was directed at itself... himself. Why? I was missing some key part of this story, wasn't I? The spirit was not new – the energy was wiser and older... not that old, not ancient. Not recent. When? "Give me something?" I begged.

"What do you need?"

I fell over and spun around.

"Sorry, I... I didn't mean to..." Jack stood there in an obscenely short pair of gym shorts and a black tank top that only a himbo could get away with.

"Don't do that?" I huffed as I stared at him. He looked like he had just gotten off a cover shoot for some stupid health magazine. Jesus, I may think he's a prick, but his dressing like that should be illegal. Those arms were a thing of beauty, and I'm sure they would feel great wrapped around me as they crushed my heart into tiny pieces.

"Sorry. You've just been up here a bit, and I thought I'd... Do you want anything?" I was taken back a little. This may have been one of the only nice things he had ever said to me.

"I'd love to get this spirit to actually talk to me. But that is proving quite difficult." I sighed and rolled my neck.

"Are you hungry? I could make you a..."

“No.” I shook my head quickly. I had told him not to interrupt me. “I can’t eat while I do this, it... I’ll grab something later when I’m finished. But a... Do you have a bottled water or something? I’d take that.” My throat was dry.

“Sure. Give me a second.” His stupid smile brightened his handsome face, and I had to stop a small gasp from showing. I swallowed it down as he turned and walked away.

Fuck...

I rolled myself over and slowly stood. I heard a few snaps in my hips and spine. That was better, but... I stretched my hands above my head and leaned to the right and then the left. The pops sounded like gunshots to me.

This room was so full of energy, so why couldn’t I communicate? Maybe I was overthinking it. He didn’t want to communicate. He knew that I was here, but... He chose to stay silent. This would take time, maybe? Time I would have to spend up in Jack’s bedroom.

Get the himbo out of your mind. Fuck, I had a type, and that type was not good for me. Hot guys only used other people. I knew this to be true. They couldn’t be trusted.

At least he came to check up on me. I mean, that could have been bad if I were actually communicating with the spirit. Being interrupted could be dangerous. I would have to make sure that my client understood and followed my directions. But his checking on me was sweeter than I would have assumed he would be.

“All I have is some vitamin water. I’m trying to build my muscles back up.” He held it in his hands as he walked to me.

I stared at him, wondering what his body looked like before. Wasn’t this already the

best that it could be? He had to be a fucking beast. Jack... This all started with Jack.

“What do you mean you’re trying to build your body back up?” I asked quizzically. He was the key to all of this somehow.

“I’d been unable to work out for a while.” He shrugged. He was avoiding the question.

“The hospital? What was uh... Sorry if that’s asking too much. Maybe you don’t want to tell me, or it’s none of my business.”

He looked down at the floor and frowned. “It’s not something that I really want to talk about. I’m trying to move on, you know? How did you know that my nurse was... not my real nurse?”

“How did I know that she was a spirit? They leave traces of energy, and she has given much of herself to you. She must have really liked you,” I answered. It was true. She had felt like he was worthy of her attention for some reason.

“If I went there, would I see her again?” He sounded so sad it broke my heart.

“I... There’s not really a straightforward answer to your question. Maybe? Spirits are everywhere for the most part. Some are bound to a certain place, and others aren’t. Your... What was her name?”

“Bernice.”

“Right. Bernice. She was a nurse and probably was very great at her job and she loved it, so when she died, that was the place that she attached to. Or, she could just be visiting. I wouldn’t know until I actually knew.”

“Why would...” His shoulders slumped. “Is going to the light like a real thing?”

“Poltergeist?”

“Exactly,” he chuckled, and it lit up his stupidly handsome face. “I’ve always loved horror movies.”

“Death doesn’t seem to be that straightforward. But I don’t know, to be honest. I’m still alive, and... It’s the last great unknown for each of us. What we see or experience seems to be different for almost everyone. But going into the light, if that is actually a thing, doesn’t truly mean that a spirit can’t still come and go if it chooses to. It’s rare, though. Most spirits, when they leave this Earthly plane, stay wherever they go.”

“That really didn’t answer my question,” he walked towards me slowly.

“I can’t answer it if I don’t really know. Most of the disembodied that I speak to have never left. I’ve only known one to come back after moving on, and that was... not something I really want to talk about.” I glanced away.

“It was bad?”

“You have no idea.” I reached out to take the water, and our fingers touched.

The world shifted, and I grabbed his hand tighter. From the look on his face, he was experiencing the same thing as me. The room shrunk and then expanded as the veil between our worlds collapsed into itself and pulled us through.

“Can’t you just leave me alone!”

We turned towards the sound, and sitting by the window was a middle-aged man in a

robe.

“Hello,” I whispered – freaking the fuck out. Never in my life had I...

“I don’t want you here. Go!”

I felt Jack’s hand pull against mine, and his hand fell from my grasp. The world shifted once again, and we stood there gasping.

“What the fuck was that?”

“I think we really have to talk. But...” I ran to the bathroom and shut the door behind me. This was going to be bad. I spent the next few minutes puking from the energy of that spirit. He was sick... so sick... Now, so was I.

7

Jack

“What the fuck just happened?” I had run downstairs – like a coward, as Archie locked himself in the bathroom. I could hear him retching as I quickly descended to the first floor. I was not sleeping in there tonight! That was... “What was that?” I paced maniacally, unsure of what to fucking do.

He stepped off the last stair and into my living room. “That was a surprise.” His alabaster skin was blotchy, and the sheen of sweat clung to his forehead. “I hadn’t been prepared for... I have never had that happen before, not in all my years. It was like we traveled, spiritually, into his plane of existence. It was... Sorry, it really took a toll on me. I will need to put up guards when we do that again.”

“Oh, I am definitely not doing that again!” I threw myself down onto my comfiest chair. It took everything I had not to call the realtor right now and put this house on the market while I hid away at Daveed’s. Maybe I would just set fire to all my stuff in case the spirit attached itself to... Wait! No. This was my house. A house I sweated and bled for. Was I just going to give it all up and run away like a little bitch? I worked hard to be able to buy this place.

He walked slowly over as if he were trying to keep his feet steady on the ground. Whatever had happened had taken quite a toll on him. His pretty face was even whiter than usual. “I can’t quite understand how that happened. I had been sitting up there and trying to connect, but I had found only trails that led to nothing, for the most part. All of that changed when... It was you. You were the catalyst, Jack.

Why?” He looked at me so confused that it caught me off guard. I did that? No...

“You think I did that?”

“No – yes – maybe – perhaps all of the above. I don’t know. It happened after we touched. I could feel it, so I gripped onto your hand tighter to see what was happening, and then everything – the world shifted.” He wiped at his eyes. “Sorry, I’m... I don’t get shaken easily.”

“That world was...” I pulled my knees up and held onto them. “It wasn’t black and white, but it was very dim and grey as if someone had adjusted the color. I hated it.”

“It’s the in-between. I’ve seen it in my mind’s eye, but that was... We were there, in spirit anyway. How? Why you?” He looked so perplexed – so adorable that I burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry, it’s... You’re very cute when your confused,” I immediately wished I could have taken it back. I glanced away from him.

“I’m going to ignore that you think I’m cute, and...” He looked flustered. It was a good look for him. “Anyway, it... that had something to do with you. I know that because I felt it when we touched. The crackle of psychic energy that boosted my own – it came from you?”

“I am not a psychic. Trust me.” I shrugged.

“Oh, I don’t think you are actually a psychic, but I think you have something more than you understand. I mean, it makes sense. You saw and interacted with the nurse. Seeing a ghost doesn’t mean that you have any ability. But I think you saw her so well because you could. This spirit has been here much longer than you. His energy is intertwined with the house, but you never knew until recently. What changed?”

I swallowed hard. “I... I died.”

His eyes widened, and his mouth actually fell open as he looked deeply into my eyes.

“Are you trying to read my mind?” I muttered.

“I told you that I can’t do that, but... your energy makes a little more sense to me now. You died?” He let the information soak into him.

“Yep. It was horrible, I guess. I don’t really remember it.”

He looked back at me with such sympathy. “This was recent. Your hospital stay. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t want to talk about it. I understand. But I think you’re going to have to, Jack. If you want me to be able to help you, I think that you’re going to have to learn to help yourself, too. You’re open in some way. You’re seeing things. That’s what you and Daveed told me. But are you seeing things outside the house?”

I nodded. “I... I’ve seen some shadowy movement a few times on the street. But mainly, it’s been in here. Why?”

“Dying can open a path to the other side. It doesn’t mean that you’re like me or anything, but it does mean that you may be a conduit of sorts. Spirits need energy to manifest, and they can get it in so many ways. They can drain batteries that you have lying around or are using. It’s easier if they are being used, of course.”

“Oh, of course.”

“They can also use the electricity that courses through your house or your body. You might be the energy source that this spirit is using. I... I don’t know, Jack. But I think you need to tell me everything so I can try to piece the puzzle together. Ok?”

“Fine,” I huffed. God, he was frustrating and bossy. But I couldn’t poke a hole in his theory. I felt it as soon as we touched. A shift in the very fabric of the air around me – the warmth of his hand in mine like an electric current that had wrapped around our touch, binding us. “I fucking think I hate the supernatural.”

“I wish I didn’t know anything about it, sometimes.” The look on his face made me melt. It was so honest and sincere.

“Is it hard to... do what you do? I mean, I’m still super confused about what it is you do.”

“I talk to ghosts, Jack. That’s all you need to know.” He smirked.

“Is it? Cause after that... I’m not so sure. You can say it was me, but you were a part of that, too, and you know it.”

“It was... our energies intermingling, I think? Honestly, I’ve never had anything like that happen, so... I don’t know.” He shrugged and leaned back on the sofa.

“So, I died. I was hit by a car, and according to the eyewitness, I flew through the air and hit my head hard. I died in the ambulance, is what I was told, for almost two minutes before they brought me back. My brain was swollen, you see. They put me in a coma, and when they tried to bring me out of it, I didn’t come back – until I did. I woke up after three months in the hospital like nothing had ever happened.”

“You said something about muscle loss...” He frowned.

“Yeah. They said that because I was in such good shape already, I bounced back quicker than they had expected. I was walking a couple of days later. They had expected more atrophy in my muscles than I had, and my body rebounded faster than expected. When they released me, they told me that I was normal, and that was pure luck. No brain injuries or body issues. Just a normal boy who was the luckiest son of a bitch around.”

“But...” He smiled warmly. Maybe he was starting to warm up to me. I sure was him now that I... had seen the other side. He was the real deal, and he was here helping me, even though Daveed was paying him. He was still here.

“Well, I was apparently talking to a ghost in the hospital, so there’s that.”

“When you got home. When did you first think you saw something?”

“The first or second day I was back. I don’t actually remember. I... I thought it was Daveed coming back into the room, but he hadn’t been there. I just assumed it was a shadow.” Fuck was that the ghost we just saw?

“You see these shadows a lot?”

“More than I would have liked. I assumed it was a vision problem from the brain injury that they hadn’t found. They said that things could still happen, you know? I was trying to deny it until... Well, I heard it... him. I heard him. Then the underwear and drawer thing... I don’t want to believe any of this.” I huffed.

“I know, and I understand why. Do you remember anything after the accident? Do you remember dying?” He asked slowly, as if the question might upset me. Maybe it would have if had been anyone else, but we now shared something big that tied us together.

“That’s... I don’t really like that question.” I pulled my legs tighter against me.

“I wouldn’t either, but I have to ask it.”

I shook my head. “I don’t, thankfully, remember anything. There were no bright lights or people waiting for me... At least, I don’t remember. I felt pain, and then I woke up in the hospital. That’s all I know.”

“Dying is sometimes enough, Jack. It can open the door to the other side. Do you... uh... trust me?”

I laughed. “Are you crazy? I don’t really know you, so...”

“Sure. But I think you’re going to have to. You died, and it was violent. Your body was thrown and damaged. That small time that you spent in-between could have made you a gateway. It at least allowed you to see and hear to some extent. I can help you close that if you’ll let me.” He leaned forward, and I felt my body relax. I didn’t want to see. I didn’t want this. Could he do what he said?

“I... That scares me. But seeing scares me even more.” I let my legs slide onto the floor, and I sat up.

“So, you’ll trust me?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You always have a choice, Jack. But first, we need to help your friend move on. He’s... I don’t know why he’s trapped here or chose to stay, but it will take both of us to figure that out. I can see that much.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Yes. But I think you’ll make the right one. You’re not the only one in need here, you know.”

“He didn’t seem to want help.”

“They never do. Not at first, anyway. He’s attached to this place for some reason, and we need to figure out why. The gateway has already been opened for him – you did that by just being here. Your energy is as much all over this place as his is. Now, it’s intertwined together. I think that for me to be able to help either of you or both of you is now the same thing. I can take away your ability to see or hear him, but he would still be here. I don’t think he ever crossed over, to be honest. But now, you’re you, and he can use you whether you want him to or not.”

“Fine,” I nodded in total nonagreement. But he made a fair point. If I had a ghost roommate, which I did not want under any circumstances, I didn’t want to be scared of what might happen when he got angry. I didn’t want to pick up more underwear and drawers. What if he destroyed my kitchen next? “There’s knives...”

“What?”

“Yes. I will do what you ask. But if I start to feel uncomfortable...”

“I’ll never ask more of you than what you’re willing to give. I promise.” He held out his hand.

“I am not shaking that. That’s how we got into this.”

He laughed, and it soothed my mind. “I think we’re going to have to touch a lot, Jack. You’ll get used to it.”

I wasn’t sure that was true. He was too fucking adorable. But he talked to ghosts... I

would have to keep my libido in check. If that happened when our hands touched – imagine what our bodies on top of each other might do. No matter how cute I found him, Archie had to be a non-starter.

But God, he had pretty lips. I made a fist and held it up. He grinned and brought up his own hand and we quickly bumped. The world stayed as it was.

8

Archie

“I have the file that you sent me. It’s pretty thorough.” I flipped open my laptop and typed in my passcode – RedRuM. I had a thing for horror movies, which I knew was a little too on the nose. I kept that to myself.

I hit enter and waited as my laptop spun to life.

“You’re gonna need my wifi. It’s...”

“Wait. My computer is a little slow.” I groaned.

“I think you mean old. It looks like you’ve had it for... I mean, I’m not even sure they make this size anymore. It’s almost a fucking desktop,” He teased, and I deserved it. It was old and slow, but I had bills to pay, and this still worked.

“Quit teasing. It works it’s just... Yeah. It’s pretty old.”

“No shit. I could get haunted by a second ghost as we wait for this shit to work. I could just grab mine. I didn’t know I was dealing with a grandpa.”

“I am not a grandpa,” I demanded.

“Well, you definitely don’t look likemy grandpa.” He leaned over my shoulder and quickly backed away. “Sorry, I... Sorry.”

“I hope I don’t look like your grandpa. I’m only twenty-six.”

“Then I’m your elder . That means you have to respect me.”

“Should I call you grandpa?” Dammit! Stop flirting.

“No, I think it fits you. You have an old-fashioned sense of... buying computers.”

“You’re confusing me,” I said frustrated. God, he was so hot and then... cold and then hot. He was making my head spin, and I needed to focus on the spirit, not the hot boy.

“I don’t think it’s too confusing.”

“Are you... flirting with me?” I turned around and asked directly.

“I... Uh... yeah. Old habits die hard, and you’re... fairly easy on the eyes.” He grinned, and my toes fucking curled in my shoes. He made me weak in the knees just because he was so fucking hot, but then I got to see his real personality, and it wasn’t as shitty as I first thought.

“I... You think I’m... We really need to keep this professional, Jack. So... as hot as you are, I don’t think it’s... uh... a good idea to...” Fuck.

“You think I’m hot, huh?”

“You’re an ass.” I turned back to the computer.

“Look, it’s just... I’ll try to keep it in check. I mean, I’m terrified to touch you so...”

“Well, there is that.” I’m repulsive. I know it. Even if that’s not what he meant, and I

know that wasn't what he meant, it still got under my skin.

"You need my password yet, Gramps?"

"Oh, I... Yeah." I clicked on my wifi. "Which is it?"

"Daddy69," he grinned.

"You're fucking with... Oh, you're serious," I groaned as I saw that exact wifi pop up as available. "Password?"

"8Inches!"

"Are you..."

He grinned.

"You may just fucking kill me." I moaned, partly with desire and partly with annoyance.

"I'd be gentle," he held his hands up. "Sorry, cute boy and I flirt. I'll try to stop myself. I did say that I'm never touching you again, didn't I?"

"You're going to have to, probably. But we'll deal with that and my wounded ego another time," I sighed. "Here is the attachment that you sent me. Let me open it."

"Should I order dinner while we wait? Your computer might take... Oh, it's opening."

"You really are as big of a dick as you... appear, aren't you?" I snickered.

“I was. I... uh... don’t want to be that guy anymore. I mean, dying changes a person. I guess? I’ve barely left my house since I got back. I’m trying to be more present and take better – make better choices. I never realized how lonely I was until I was lying there in the hospital, and the only person who came was Daveed. I was a crappy friend, and I tried really hard not to be someone’s boyfriend for long. I... Sorry, it’s... nice to actually say that to someone.”

I was shocked. He was really opening up and that could be super dangerous for me if he kept saying things like this. “Change is good.”

“As long as that change doesn’t come with dying, I’d agree with you.”

I read one of the documents. “So, your house was built in nineteen-twenty by the original owner. They sold it in the late forties. Then that person sold it a few years later.” I scrolled down. “There were a lot of sales between forty and sixty. Oh, here is an owner that bought it in seventy-four. He didn’t really look like a disco gay, did he?”

“I have no idea what... Oh!” He laughed. “Disco! He had short hair. He wasn’t wearing bellbottoms. Maybe?”

“Pamela Myers owned it from seventy-four until ninety-four, and then she sold it. There’s an address here.” I opened my browser and typed in one of the many websites that helped me with my investigations. I typed in the name and address and waited.

“What are you... Shit! That has so much information. Can you do that for anyone?” He gasped.

“There’s no such thing as privacy if you’ve ever signed up for anything, got on the internet, or have an address. Big Brother can always find you. This is a website that

connects to all the public records. I can even find your credit history if I need to, or your porn history if I were interested.”

“God, I hate this world. Maybe I am the grandpa? Who watches porn when you can just fuck?” he leaned a little closer but was careful not to touch me.

“I’m glad you’re finally seeing things my way. You are older than me.” I held up my hand. “Hand me my cell phone, please. It’s on the other side of you.”

He picked it up, and I saw how careful he was in putting it in my hand without touching me. It was totally for the best. I may have softened on him a little, but he was still the kind of guy I shouldn’t give the time of day to. A player stayed a player – leopards didn’t change their spots. But his aura also couldn’t lie. He didn’t either. He believed what he said. He wanted to change. Maybe I could be... STOP!

“He was definitely wearing more modern clothes,” I suggested. “You can usually spot something before the sixties pretty easily.”

“Well, you maybe.” He chuckled. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never really cared about fashion too much. I prefer jeans and tank tops.”

“Yeah, I know.” I rolled my eyes. “I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you in a shirt with sleeves since I met you.”

“I mean, I’ve been home. I’m not sure I’ve even worn jeans.”

“You haven’t. It’s been gym shorts the entire time.”

“You noticed,” he answered playfully. “I figured you needed something pretty to look at.”

“I... Will you please stay focused? I’m gonna call this last known number.”

I punched in the number and waited as I put the phone on speaker so Jack could also hear.

“Hello,” an older male voice answered.

“Hi. This is... Jack,” I Lied. “and I am calling with a very weird question. You see, I bought 11254 West Knoll a few years ago and...”

“My mother used to own that.”

“Yes, I’m aware that Miss Myers owned it. I was wondering if she may be able to help me out with some history from when she was the owner.”

“I’m... sorry. Mom passed away about six years ago.”

“Oh, I’m... I’m the one who’s sorry. I didn’t know.” Fuck. I hated making someone feel bad and someone’s mother dying was...

“I was fairly young when she first bought it, but I might be able to help answer your question. Thank you, by the way. She had been sick for quite some time. It was a blessing in the end.”

“Did she live here when she owned it?”

“Oh, no. We lived up in the hills. Mom rented the place out. It was her income property. She also owned a couple of others in West Hollywood, too. Those rents helped pay for my college, she said. She sold the one you live in first. Said that it was time to let it go.”

“We’re actually looking for the name of someone who used to live here. We’ve been doing a little reno and came across some stuff – some photos and would like to return them to their original owner. It’s hard to tell if it’s the seventies, eighties, or nineties, to be honest. You know how the film was back then?”

“I still have most of her files. I could see if she has that list of names. I used to visit with her every now and then, but I can’t remember much. She had quite a few tenants through there over the years.”

“Makes sense. It would... I would really appreciate any help that you could give. A list of names would be perfect.”

“She kept almost everything, and I’ve yet to... go through any of her file cabinets. But I have them in my garage. I’ll look and see what I can find.”

“Thank you. Do you have my number?”

“Uh... 3407?”

“That’s it. Thank you, and we really appreciate you looking for us.”

“I’ll see what I can find tonight when the kids go to bed. Happy to help.”

I ended the call, and Jack smirked at me.

“What?” I sighed.

“You are a very good liar.”

“Am I gonna get grounded?” I couldn’t stop myself from playing along. He was wearing me down with his fucking charm.

“Nope. I think you deserve a prize.” He nodded. “Thank you. I don’t remember why I ever doubted you.”

“Let’s see if you feel that way later.”

“We’ll see.”

9

Jack

“ I t’s been two days, Jack,” Archie started as soon as I let him in the door. “I’m not saying that he won’t call, but I think we need to move forward.”

“What does that mean,” I swallowed, knowing what it was he was about to suggest.

“You know what we have to do. When I go in there alone, the veil is too thick. I don’t understand it if I’m being honest, but together we broke through. Maybe we could again?”

I froze even thinking about it. “I’m not sure that’s something I want to do, Arch.”

“Arch?” He cocked his eyebrow at me.

“It’s...” I grinned. I had been telling Daveed everything and had started calling him that. He was easy to believe in and like – I liked him. I was dealing with what that meant.

“I’ll accept it.” He smiled and walked closer to me. God, he smelled like lavender. It was intoxicating. I wanted to grab him and sniff his neck.

“I’m scared to do that. I’ve been sleeping on my couch.” I pointed to my pillow and blanket, all balled up in the corner.

“If we do this, it might mean you can start sleeping in your bedroom much sooner. It was always going to come down to this. I think that you might be the catalyst, Jack. Your brush with death and the energy that has seeped into this place from you helps me to see. This spirit doesn’t want to be bothered, and he’s cloaked himself somehow. But your energies intermingled somehow over the years. You’re the key. Do you see?” He sounded exasperated.

“Cloaked? That sounds like a sci-fi movie. Is this Star War...”

“I know. But it’s all I’m coming up with.” He threw himself down on the arm of the couch.

“It seemed to hurt you last time.”

He looked at me with a look of surprise. Did he really think so little of me? “It... wasn’t pleasant. Whoever that person was – his misery and pain are like an anathema to me.”

“An... whatta?” I chuckled.

“It’s like kryptonite if I were Superman.”

“I think you’re much more Lois Lane. I’m...”

“Sure, muscle boy, you can be Superman. But can we try this, Jack? Please?”

“I do like it when you beg.” I ran my hands through my hair as I thought about it. Touching him again would be nice – but it came with a pretty shitty side effect of seeing ghosts. But he had gotten to me more than I cared to admit. I knew that Daveed was paying for this, and I appreciated it because I was fucking tapped out at the moment. Hopefully, none of my pipes broke during this exorcism or whatever it

was because I could not afford that shit.

But Archie was here, and he was really trying to help me. It felt like he cared. It was nice to feel that feeling from someone. I had denied it for too long.

“Fine. But if I can’t... If I try to let go, break contact, ok? I need to know that I can get out if I need to.” I sounded like a coward. I was fucking terrified to go back up there – to touch him – to see that again.

“Agreed. I would never...”

“I didn’t mean that you... I’m scared, Archie. All of this just freaks me out. I don’t want it, and I can’t wait for you to help take it away if you can.”

“I understand, Jack,” he mumbled, looking down at the ground. “But it’s the only way.”

“I said fine. Let’s do it before I fucking chicken out.” I slapped my chest like I used to do when I was pumping myself up for a big game.

“When this is over, I’ll try to close your path to the in-between if I can. I promise.”

“Lead the way, ghost boy.” His face fell, and I instantly regretted calling him that. I didn’t want to hurt him, not unless he wanted me to. But he spoke to dead people, and man... that was a hard thing to get over. I was super attracted to him – admittedly – but how do you get past something like that? It was terrifying.

I followed him up my stairs and into the bedroom. I hesitated as I got to the doorway and slowly stepped through as if something could happen at any moment. It had been quiet, and I hadn’t had any poltergeist activity or disembodied voices. I had only seen shadows, and that hadn’t been very often. It was almost easy to forget about if I

hadn't been living in fear the entire time.

"What should we do?" I stood there trying not to shake.

"Let's sit on the bed."

"I knew you were going to try to get me naked sooner or later." I couldn't help myself. Jokes were my go-to when I got nervous and I was freaking out.

"Not the time for jokes."

"I'd say communicating with the dead was a perfect time. Do we keep our clothes on?"

"Are you going to be serious?" He looked at me, and I felt like he just slapped me.

"Yes, sorry. When I get nervous, I... make jokes. I'm done." I sat down slowly on the bed and placed my hands on my knees.

"It's ok. I know you're scared. You're not an idiot. Now, I'm going to sit beside you and keep my hands on my lap. When you're ready, Jack, I want you to reach over and take my hand. That way, you're in complete control. Ok?" He sounded so calm, as if he did this every day.

"Sounds... horrible, but yes. Thank you."

He sat down beside me so close our legs were just a breadth away from each other. "I need you to be ok with this. All of the control is yours. Just give me a second to... I'll nod when I'm ready. Ok?"

"Got it."

He shut his eyes, and for the first time, I wished that I could do what he did. If I could read his energy, maybe I would know more or understand him better. I'm sure his energy was as beautiful as he was. I waited and glanced around the room that I knew like the back of my hand – which was a very odd saying if you asked me.

He sighed heavily, and his head nodded. I raised my hand and held it above his. It was now or... well, he was right. It was always going to come to this somehow, wasn't it? I took a deep breath and steadied my nerves as best I could. My heart was fucking racing.

I placed my hand on his and let our fingers intertwine while my palm rested on the top of his hand.

Nothing happened.

“I don't...” Holy fuck.

The room melted like we were being pulled through a wormhole, and I almost let go of Archie, but I didn't. Instead, I gripped his hand harder. I could feel the steady thrum of his heartbeat as the room came back into a sepia filter. I always hated those Insta filters.

The man appeared in a small chair by the window, and he didn't look happy. “You have to be fucking kidding me. Why have the Marys come back? I told them to leave.”

“Hello,” Archie managed through gritted teeth. “We're here to try to help you.”

“Did I call nine-one-one? I don't think so.” He turned away from us and looked out of the window.

“Who are you?”

He turned back to us quickly. “Who the fuck are you? You’re the one who barged into my fucking death .”

“I live here,” I whispered. “This is my home.”

“Hmm... Is it? Why does that matter? Why do I care who pays the rent.” He laughed, and it sounded so sad and pathetic.

“I own it.”

“Oooh... touch her. She’s a homeowner.” He was so mean. He was so gay that flamboyant wasn’t enough of a description. Figures I had a gay ghost in WeHo.

“Why haven’t you moved on? Why are you staying here?” Archie sounded breathless, as if even forming words was hard for him.

“It keeps me out of the sun. I’d hate to have to haunt a graveyard. I’m afraid it’d make me look fat. Get the FUCK OUT!” he roared and stood up slowly from his chair. “I just want to be left alone!”

“You’re not staying out of the way, are you? You pulled a chest of drawers out and threw things around this room. Being left alone goes both ways.” Archie raised his voice.

“God, the drama. She’s so serious. I had a bad day. Sue me. Where’s Drew? GET OUT! I JUST WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE! WHY CAN’T YOU FUCKING LEAVE ME ALONE!” He rose from the ground and floated towards us. “GET OUT!”

My hand flew from Archie's, and the room shifted slowly back into view as the spirit faded into ether. Archie immediately ran from the room, leaving me alone. A cold chill crept up my spine, and I booked it into the hallway. I could hear him retching from the bathroom over and over again. I felt like such a coward. This was my fucking house, wasn't it?

I stepped back into the room and passed through a cold spot that almost made my teeth chatter. "We're leaving, ok? I'm just waiting for..."

"Sorry, I..." Archie opened the bathroom door. "I feel pretty fucking horrible. My stomach is in my throat."

"Wanna drink? I just want to go back downstairs." I glanced nervously around the room in case he decided to start throwing things again.

"A drink sounds great. Do you have a bourbon?" He wheezed.

"I have an unopened bottle." I held out my hand and immediately pulled it back. He looked so weak, and I couldn't do anything to help. If we touched again... "Sorry."

"Not a very good idea, apparently. Let's go downstairs. I can feel his presence, and he's quite annoyed. Honestly, this is the most I've ever felt from him. But he's still hard to see." He brushed past me, and for a second, the color faded from the room. "Sorry."

"Are you going to be ok?"

"Just weak, Jack. Bourbon, please."

I turned and walked back onto the hallway, and as soon as I was through the door – it slammed hard. I almost jumped out of my skin.

“He has a real attitude.” Archie placed a hand against the wall and steadied himself.

“He called us Mary’s. He has to be gay, right?” I laughed. “I have a catty gay ghost.”

“Oh, I think we can say yes to that. He’s the cattiest ghost I’ve ever met. What a fucking attitude.”

“Do you always get sick?” I asked as we walked down the stairs. I had to stop myself from helping him. I really wanted to. It was like he was the sun and I was being pulled into his gravitational field.

“No. I usually don’t. There’s... something about him that he’s holding onto. He was very sick in life, and it... permeates my senses. Whatever was happening to me is how he felt, I think. Maybe it was chemo? That makes people sick, right?” Archie took a slow, deep breath.

“Yeah. But what happened to you seemed pretty violent. You got that from him?”

He nodded and walked down the last stair, holding tightly to the railing. “It was not pleasant. I tried to hold it back as long as I could. I would’ve had to break the connection myself, or I was going to ruin your rug, and I do not want to puke in front of you.”

“Who’s Drew?” I joined him at the bottom and watched him wobble a little. I reached out and placed my hand on his lower back to steady him before I could think better of it. Nothing happened. It had to be skin-to-skin. That was good to know. “That’s what he said, right? Drew?” Now I knew how to touch him without going into that sepiatoned bullshit world.

Archie pulled a small tape recorder from his pocket and walked over to sit on the couch. “I should have it all here if we’re lucky.” He rewound the very out-of-date

recorder, and I could hear the ghostly whisper.

“Oooh... touch her. She’s a homeowner.” His voice sounded small compared to how it had sounded in the room earlier. I went over and sat down a few inches from him to hear better. It was barely a whisper.

“Why haven’t you moved on? Why are you staying here?” Archie’s voice was unmistakably clear and loud.

“It keeps me out of the sun. I’d hate to have to haunt a graveyard. I’m afraid it’d make me look fat. Get the FUCK OUT! I just want to be left alone!” The sound of his voice on the machine made me shiver. It was too fucking eerie. It was exactly how you would expect a ghost to sound on a tape recorder. I had watched a few of those ghost hunter shows and always hated that part.

“You’re not staying out of the way, are you? You pulled a chest of drawers out and threw things around this room. Being left alone goes both ways.” Archie sounded so butch.

“God, the drama. She’s so serious. I had a bad day. Sue me. Where’s Drew? GET OUT! I JUST WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE! WHY CAN’T YOU LEAVE ME ALONE! GET OUT!” Archie stopped the playback.

“Well, we got it. I’m sure he said, Drew.” He nodded.

“Why does he sound that way?” I was totally confused.

“We were in the in-between with him. There he was clear, but his reality is only ghostly whispers.”

“And the door slams. That was concerning. I almost pissed myself.” I chuckled.

“He’s pissed. Maybe you should stay with Daveed tonight.” He sounded like he was worried about me.

“Oh, I am not staying here – I don’t think. Daveed’s at a conference in San Fransisco, so I could stay there.” I shrugged. “I mean, it is my house, though. Do I just leave that easily?”

“You don’t have to try to act strong, Jack. He was wearing a polo with an alligator on it. Did you see that?”

“No. I tried hard not to look at him,” I frowned. “Sorry, I was scared as soon as I saw him. I could only glance. I am not as brave as you.”

“It’s ok. But I think he must have died in the eighties. He seems to be waiting patiently for all these years. I guess he was peaceful until you came back from the hospital. Your newfound energy imbued him enough for him to start interacting. How long has he been here waiting? I felt so much anger, but it was directed inside, and it felt as if it were at himself. It was strange.”

“Oh, a drink! You wanna get out of here? Maybe go have a drink and some dinner anywhere else but here?” I practically begged.

“Dinner? You sure you want to do that?” He looked at me so seriously that I understood what he meant.

I nodded. “Well, I know it’s a little like a date, but... yeah. I do.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“I mean, I’m starting to run out of reasons not to. How about you? Every time I touch your hand, I... Yes, I think I do.” I swallowed the truth and stood there, hoping I

wasn't a complete idiot.

"You are totally annoying."

"That's not an answer."

"Pretty people always expect to get their way."

"You think I'm pretty? I prefer handsome. I'm very masculine." I raised my arm and popped my bicep. It usually worked.

"That you are. But see that right there is what I'm..." His shoulders slumped, and he turned to look at me. "Sure. I'd be happy to get out of here and have dinner with you."

"God, you intrigue the shit out of me. It's like you got inside my head somehow. There's so much I want to know about you." I slowly placed my hand on his leg over the fabric of his pants. Nothing happened. My idea was right.

"We are working together."

"We don't have an HR department, sorry."

"Smartass."

"Besides, I hope that this isn't some kind of forever thing. I mean, the working together part."

"Shit."

"What?"

“Maybe I'm running out of reasons too.”

10

Archie

How the fuck did I get here? Was it his chiseled face and jawline? I swear I could cut myself on it. Don't even get me started on that stupid chin dimple. But it was really his soulful brown eyes that made me melt. No... That's a lie. It was that stupidly muscular body. Why did I have to have a type that was never good for me?

I was skinny and pasty. I wasn't ugly, and I knew that. But I glowed in the fucking dark. It wasn't usually the way to a man's heart.

We had nothing in common. He definitely spent all of his time in a gym. He was a trainer, for fuck's sake. This wasn't even what he considered his best body, but his body seemed to be about the best body I'd ever seen. My ex was also a muscle boy, but he paled when compared to Jack.

So? Why were we here?

"You're not eating very much?" He had cleaned his plate already. Steak and a salad, which figured.

I pushed around the fish and rice with my fork. "I'm still a little... I get hungry – ravenous, actually, whenever I connect because it takes so much energy out of me. They drain me because I feed them the energy they need to manifest or to speak to me."

“You’re like a living battery?”

I nodded. “When I have to be. That’s not always the case, though. Some ghosts use other sources because that’s what they’re used to. But usually, yeah. I’m their battery.”

“But this time is different?”

“Yeah. His sickness... Whatever it is has been hard to expel. It takes me a little longer to recover.” It felt like I had been beaten. My body still ached, and my head was threatening a migraine at any moment.

“I don’t understand that. I thought, I mean, in movies, people who die don’t stay sick. I can’t think of an example right now, but... Star Wars! Kenobi wasn’t cut in half as a ghost.” He looked so pleased – it was adorable.

“That’s a movie and not real... ghosts. But I’ve never met a sick ghost until now. It’s like he’s wrapped himself up in it somehow.” I didn’t understand what I had felt from him.

“Like a shroud?”

“Exactly. It’s not normal. But spirits are never normal. It depends on... them, I guess.” I shrugged and pushed my plate away. I didn’t even want to look at it.

“Have you always been able to see ghosts?” He asked so casually as if he didn’t see me as a freak. Most people did when they found out, and especially when they saw me interact.

“I was really young. I was six.”

“That had to be scary. You were just a child.” He looked concerned and it filled me with a warmth I didn’t expect from him. He was continually surprising me.

“I was terrified. I had just attended my grandfather’s funeral and saw him in the coffin – which was already scarring for me. Then, that next night, he walked into my room and sat on the edge of my bed just like he always used to. I screamed, and the look he gave me broke my heart even more than it already was. I was ready when he reappeared the next night. I wasn’t scared. I knew it was really him. He had wanted to say goodbye – he did – and I never saw him again. He went to wherever it was he went.”

“That’s really heavy.”

“For a six-year-old? Yeah. But it never ended after that. I knew what they were, and my grandmother told me that they couldn’t hurt me, so I stopped being scared. She also was sensitive to the dead, but her gifts weren’t as developed as mine, even at a young age. I now know better. I was able to get help from someone who could teach me how to shield myself when I needed to. Dealing with the supernatural takes a toll in a lot of ways.” Exhaustion mainly, and right now I was truly running on reserves. But I wanted to be here. I wanted to know more about him, even if I knew it might be a bad idea.

“I bet. I almost shit my shorts as I ran away.” He snorted.

“That was smart. Not all spirits are... kind.”

“It seems like mine is a master at throwing shade.”

“Agreed. Now, you.” I placed my elbows on the table and leaned on them. “Tell me something about you.”

“I... What do you want to know?” He smirked. “You already know my wife’s password.”

“Tell me about growing up,” I offered. I was dazzled by him even if I should know better. But his energy wasn’t bad. It was just scattered. But the colors were those of kindness and sexuality mixed with the fading hues of his death. “What was young Jack like?”

Hi sighed and leaned back in his chair. “He ate and breathed football and soccer. It was all I thought of. My dad was a high school football star, and he expected the same from me since I was his only son. So, I played, and I was pretty good – but not as good as he was. Not as good as he wanted me to be. We don’t really get along. I moved out the minute I graduated, took all of the money that I had saved for college, and moved here. God, it was a stupid thing for me to do. But it was what I wanted, and looking back, I guess it was what I was supposed to do.”

Suddenly, his bravado made sense. It was all a cover for the wounded person he was. “Did you go to college?”

“No. I got a job at the gym almost immediately. I was in perfect shape and eighteen – they hired me on the spot, and I learned from the other trainers what I needed to know.”

“A pretty face and a hot body opens doors.” I giggled.

“I really like it when you tell me I’m hot. It does things to me,” he growled, and I almost fell off my chair.

“Stop flirting. We have a ghost to save,” I begged. If he kept flirting, I wasn’t sure I would make good choices.

“See, you keep saying things like that. I just want him out of my house.”

I took a second to respond so he might understand. “He’s hurt, somehow. Lost in a way, even if he doesn’t know it. There’s something tying him there, and he needs help. He’s a soul in need, Jack.”

“You really are a very good person. I see you, Arch. The way you try to take care of everyone and, I guess, everything. I bet you even save cats from trees,” he chuckled. “It’s very attractive and... It makes me want to know you.”

“You’re talking biblically, aren’t you?” I flirted back, unable to stop myself.

“Yes. But I’m really talking about you.” He leaned forward and began to slide his hand across the table before pulling it back. God, I wanted to touch his hand again.

“Tell me something else about you. I’m... sorry about your parents, Jack. That’s hard.” I changed the subject back to something safer.

“They don’t even know about the accident. They have no idea that I died. I don’t think they get to know that anymore.” He was so matter-of-fact about it.

“Your mom?”

“She took Dad’s side. She was never very good at having a thought or emotion of her own. When I left, they made it clear that I was no longer welcome. Their choice – not mine. But it’s also their choice to either open the door back onto my life or not. I assume they have chosen since they never used the number I gave them.” The small hint of regret in his voice made me want to hold him.

“You moved here to WeHo at eighteen? I assume you knew you were gay?”

He chuckled loudly. “Oh, yeah. I learned that quickly in middle school when I got a crush on my best friend. I knew better than to say anything to him about it. He was definitely straight. But it wasn’t the tits of the cheerleaders I was looking at. It was the asses of the football players,” he smirked.

“God, no wonder you became a man whore,” I chuckled.

“Hey, I...” He stopped and nodded. “I deserve that title. It’s true.”

“It’s totally in your energy field. Sex radiates off you.” I blushed.

“Still? Huh? I was eighteen and eager to start my life and there were many men who threw themselves at me. I was a go-go boy at Mickey’s for a little while. I didn’t actually enjoy it, though. Got great tips.” He grinned. “But that’s all behind me. Is it weird that dying changes you?”

“I think that if anything could – It’s a jolt to your very essence.” I smiled at him warmly.

“You use very pretty words that I might have to google later. I have a bad high school education and a limited vocab. Sorry, Arch, but this is me. I think I want to be worthy of someone like you, though.”

“Someone like me?”

“Can I touch you here, or is that dangerous?” He leaned forward again.

“Tell me more about the new you. What is it you want, Jack?”

“I used to go work, go out and dance my ass off and then bring a boy home to fuck. It was a regular thing. But since I got home, I’ve... I put away my cell phone and

deleted Grindr. I limit my social media to just a few minutes a day, and I don't keep my cell phone on me any longer. I started reading a book. I have always loved to read, but over the last few years, I stopped, so I started again. I haven't gone to a bar. I haven't hooked up with anyone. I'm... I think I'm tired of trying that hard, and I tried very hard. But I have no idea what it was I had even been trying to do except be wild. I don't want that any longer. I want a home life and security again. I want what I should have always wanted – a good life that I'm proud of. I make good money; I just blew through all my savings when I was dead. The shopping in the afterlife is amazing," he laughed deeply, and I felt my toes curl.

"That sounds like you're a changed man."

"I am," he answered happily. "I'm... I like knowing you. I think you're someone who would be so good to know – biblically and in life. You're so strong and self-assured."

"Am I? I think that's just a front I put on. I'm terrified of too many things." I was honest with him. I couldn't see a reason not to be.

"What kind of things?"

"Things like you." I glanced away. "We should get out of here. Tomorrow is going to be a long day of trying once again to get your ghostly roommate to cross over. You ok with that?"

"I'm just supposed to let that go and let you change the subject, right?"

"Yes, please."

"Ok... You never did answer my question, though. Is it safe for us to touch here?"

I glanced around the restaurant and opened myself up. It was clean of spiritual

energy. I nodded.

Jack stood up, came over to my side of the table, and held out his hand. I took it and let him gently pull me up. His arms wrapped around me, and he leaned forward. “I’m gonna kiss you now. You can stop me if you don’t want me to.”

I tilted my head up towards him, and his lips gently touched mine. It wasn’t a peck, but it was more chaste than I would have expected of him. I wrapped my hand around his neck and opened my mouth. His kiss grew hungrier, and his tongue slowly pressed into my mouth. I moaned into the kiss, and he slowly pulled back.

“I think this might have been our first date. I fuck on the second.” He grinned at me. “I do like you, Arch. I don’t want to be something that you’re scared of.”

“I’ll consider it.”

He walked me outside and I watched him walk away toward what I assumed was Daveed’s house. I turned and headed home. Somehow the moon shown brighter than it ever had.

I was life’s biggest fool, but the damage was already done.

11

Jack

“Good morning,” I opened the door and grinned at Arch. He looked even better today than he did yesterday, and I had to stop myself from asking him to go to his place and have my way with him right there. That was something that old Jack would do. I wanted a chance at something more. Slower might be better even if it was harder, and making me very hard in the process.

“Hi,” he replied bashfully.

I stepped outside and gestured for him to step backward. “Is it safe?” I held out my hand. “I really want to kiss you.”

“I don’t know,” he said huskily.

“Why don’t we...” I stepped forward, wrapped my arms around his waist, and pulled him into me. “see?” I bent down and tilted his chin up. Our lips met, and I stayed there for a second with my eyes open. Nothing changed. Then I kissed him the way he deserved to be kissed. Deeply – passionately – the way I wished I had kissed him last night. God, the thoughts that zoomed through my head as I tried to go to sleep were all of him and what I wanted to do with him. How I wanted to hear him laugh and moan as I entered him.

I was still a man whore. At least it wasn’t only my pleasure I was concerned with.

He placed his hands on my chest and I ground myself against him. My cock strained at the fabric of my shorts. "I'm fucking dying here," I whispered into his mouth.

"Stop, Jack," he giggled, and his voice sounded like the purest of bells. "We have work to do. Once we do this, we can do... that. Maybe?"

"Implication noted. But maybe? Oh, definitely. I just have to get my uh..." I gestured down at my hard cock. It stood out straight as it pushed against the fabric. The waistband stretched with its effort.

"That's uh... wow. I don't think I've..." His blush was fucking hot.

"It'll fit. Trust me." I chuckled and turned back to my open front door. "You coming? You soon will."

"Stop. I have to concentrate, and you make me... you make that hard to do." He said so bashfully that I had to stop myself from kissing him again.

"More hard?" I smirked. "Harder? I don't think it will get much harder, Arch."

"God, you're horrible. We went on one... uh..."

"Date? You can say the word."

"Fine. Date."

"You had fun. I know I did."

"Yes, it was good to get to know more about you. You're not exactly as I thought you were."

“Well, I hope you’re ok with how I am because you did just let me play tonsil hockey.”

“God, you’re such a bro.”

“I think you like that, too.”

“I do not.” He clapped his hands and looked up the stairs. “We have work to do, Jack. I have information that will help us now that he sent over all the information.”

“You found out something.”

He nodded. “His name is Isaac Nelson – I think. It makes sense for that to be him. The previous owner kept all of her records, and he sent me a ton of scanned papers. No wonder it took so long. I should send him a thank you. Maybe a Doordash certificate.”

“What did you find out?”

“Isaac died in eighty-four. It doesn’t say anything more than he had been sick and died of natural causes. Maybe it was cancer? Maybe it was something else. But he died in the house. California law makes you tell new tenants or any kind of sale of property when someone has died in the place within ten years. It’s on all the records.”

“Why wasn’t I told that?”

“Are you listening? It’s only within ten years of the death, and you bought this place decades later, Jack.”

“He is the only person that I could find who died here. It has to be him.”

“What are we going to do? You’re gonna make me go back up there and touch you, right?”

“At least you get to touch me.”

“True.”

“Are you ok?”

“Knowing he’s a gay man and sarcastic as shit makes him less scary to me, you know? It’s like he’s... I don’t know. Family? A part of the gay family. So am I. I woke up today feeling like he wasn’t a threat. He’s just angry and sad.”

“Alone for all these years.”

“Yeah. Instead of being scared, I think I may be invested. You said something last night that made me... He deserves a happy ending, doesn’t he?”

“He sure does. Hopefully, we can give that to him. Knowing his name and a little about him will help. Maybe we can reach him in some way this time?”

“Now?”

“No time like the present.”

I followed him up the stairs and noticed that he was wearing shorts today. His white legs were peppered with what looked like the softest of red hair and freckles. I bet his whole body was covered in freckles, and I wanted to trace them into different patterns with my finger after I made him moan my name. I had it bad, and I was just diving into the deep end. How weird that I wanted this – him – something more than a fantastic fuck and a see you around. I wanted the always around part with him, and I

hoped he felt the same way. I wasn't even freaked out by it – and old me would have definitely been freaked. Hell, I would have denied it.

“Are you ready?” Archie held out his hand and without even second guessing myself I took it and held onto him firmly. The world shifted and we stepped into the in-between where a disgruntled gay ghost was already shaking his head at our presence.

“Are you serious? Why has the friend's of Dorothy committee reconvened. I thought you understood that I didn't want to participate in your gay games.” The ghost, Isaac (maybe), was on fire today. I hiccupped my laugh back, and we stepped into the room. I glanced over at Arch, and the color was already draining from his face. Honestly, he didn't have much to drain with his iridescent skin.

“Isaac Nelson,” Archie said calmly. “Is that your name?”

“Oh, God,” he sighed. “They think we're friends.”

“You're dead, and we're alive, but we don't have to be enemies.”

“Well, tell me something I don't already know, please? I'm dead? How will I ever go on living with that knowledge,” he chuckled. “Oh, wait! I don't have to because I'm fucking dead.”

“And stuck in this place. Why have you stayed behind?”

“You're very bland, and you're destroying my peace. Seriously, you should find a tanning bed because your pasty skin is glaring and hard to look at.”

“Why did you stay? Tell us, Isaac, we want to help. It's what we do. We're not here to...”

“Annoy me? Too late.”

“We’re not here to force you to leave. You’re staying here for a reason – what is it?”

“Love, you little fool. I have stayed here staring out this window, waiting for love. Now, will you please leave, or are you going to continue boring me to death?”

“Love? You’re waiting for someone.”

“How astute. Give the big lug a ribbon for stating the obvious.”

“You died before he did, and you’re sitting here waiting for him to come back to you. That’s very romantic.”

“Call me Jane Austen, and I’ll call you Edgar Allen Poe. I mean, you do speak to spooks. Boo!” he teased, but he was anything but scary to me now. He was actually quite funny, and in life, I would have liked to know him.

“You’re waiting on your lover? What was his name? Maybe he’s still alive, or maybe he crossed over, thinking you would have done the same. You’re waiting here, but you have absolutely no idea, do you? That’s so sad. Let us help you. Please?” I walked closer to him and pulled Archie behind me. He was dragging his feet.

“I hope he lived. Waiting for him here has been... I’m not usually this put out, but when you’ve been put to pasture, and no one seemed to care – It was a disheartening death. One of thousands upon thousands by now, I’m sure.”

“You had AIDS?” I realized what he was saying.

“Had being the operative word. There is no AIDS in death, just loneliness and pensiveness like a boy holding onto a secret. All of us gays held onto a secret that we

were too scared to let people know. Those secrets were as toxic as the fucking disease. They both rot you from the inside. Only one of them kills you, though.”

“Do you know what year it is?”

“Why should I fucking care?”

“You died forty years ago. The world has changed so much. Being gay isn’t... We don’t have to keep that secret anymore. Not like we used to. Now, kids come out much younger than even my generation did. Things got better.”

“AIDS? Is HIV still a thing?”

“Yes, but it no longer is as it was either. People can now live with HIV, and we have real drugs that keep you undetectable.”

“WE even have a drug to take if you’re having sex that helps prevent you from getting it,” Archie added and gestured over to the bed. We walked over, and he sat down. “If you aren’t sick – why do you still carry it with you?”

“Hmm... Do I? I didn’t know. I’m dead and feel nothing but my own emotions, and even they’re more muted than they were in life. It’s hard to even work up a good hissy.”

“You are free from disease, Isaac. Let it go – please? It’s tearing me apart.”

“How?”

“Let go of the past and your anger. Whatever – whatever you are punishing yourself – you have to let it go.”

“You make it sound so easy. You have no idea what I did.”

“I think I do. You were living your life the best way you knew how – like every gay man in the seventies and eighties. You were punished by that fucking disease for living. It wasn’t God’s plan or retribution for sin; it was just something that happened, and we were its first victims. You can choose to stop being a victim.”

“We can’t stay any longer. Isaac, you’re hurting him.”

“I... I’m not trying to, I... Fuck... He was so hot, and I never even knew his name. I knew it was risky, but at the time, I only knew a couple of people who had gotten sick. This was, in the beginning, understand. The problem was we didn’t understand anything. No one was giving us real information. He didn’t have a condom – I hated them, anyway. I know how I got it, and I’m so scared that Drew died the same horrible way that I did.”

“What was Drew’s last name? We’ll see what we can find out. We want to help you, Isaac.”

“Parker. Drew’s name was Andrew Parker.”

I let go of Arch’s hand and he fell over on his knees. He was weak and I helped him up and slowly walked him to the bathroom.

“I... I don’t think I’m gonna... Get out!” He gestured, and I understood. I turned and shut the door behind me.

Andrew Parker.

“I hear you, Isaac. Rest and let go of your pain. It’s going to be ok.” I spoke to the windowsill and smiled at the fact that I just had a conversation with a ghost, and I

wasn't running for my life like a little asshole. It was because that the very cute boy who was puking in the bathroom had been by my side, and I trusted him.

I trusted him enough to do this, and I would do it again as long as he was by my side.

12

Archie

“Have you found anything yet?” I huffed as I watched Jack doing something on his cell phone.

“No. I don’t see Andrew Parker on Insta or Facebook. I mean, I see plenty of Andrew Parkers, Drew Parkers, and Andy Parkers, but none that say they live in WeHo or Los Angeles that would be close to the same age. I found one who was a gun enthusiast that might be around seventy. But come on... I doubt that’s him. He’s in Riverside. No gay guy leaves WeHo for Riverside.” He grinned at me, and I felt my face flush. He liked me, and it made absolutely no sense.

“I’m searching the database, and there were a lot of Andrew Parkers who died in the last forty years. Most of this doesn’t tell me much of anything except for the how he died part. Most of them were, of course – wanna take a guess?”

“Natural causes?” He cocked an eyebrow at me, and I was glad I was sitting down. I liked him, and that also made absolutely no sense. But I did, and it scared me much more than a silly ghost.

“Let me try to see if I can find any kind of last known residence.” I typed in his name on my people search and laughed when I saw the number of people who fit my criteria. “Well, that is overwhelming. This would take me a long time to go through.”

“I think you need an assistant for this. A ghost finder – sounds like a cool job

description that only very strange people would apply for.”

“So you want the job?”

“Funny. This is very frustrating. I think I know how we can make it a little more fun, though.”

He came over and sat down by me.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting closer.”

“That is a very bad idea. I’m wearing shorts, and so are you. If our legs touch...” He pushed his knee into mine, and the world slowly faded into the muted hues, but before it could fade all the way in, he removed his leg from mine, and the world turned back to color.

“Technicolor baby. It’s like the Wizard of Oz, isn’t it? The moment that girl opens the door, she steps into a world of technicolor.”

“You’re so stupid,” I snorted. “That girl?”

“Yeah, Dorothy. That’s right?”

“Yes, stud. You got a hundred percent on the gay card test. Can you tell me the actress's name?”

“Uh... Judy Garbo?”

“Wrong answer.”

“Do I win a prize?”

So, I did something stupid. I leaned in and kissed him. The world muted – I broke apart – the world faded back to ours.

“Does that make you feel bad? When we touch?”

“I could so make a joke right here, but no. It takes a little bit of time and I think some kind of proximity to him for me to feel ill.”

“So I can do this,” He reached over, grabbed me by the neck, and kissed me deeply. I shut my eyes so I didn’t see the other side; there was only his lips, and then... He withdrew, and I smiled as the room filled back with color. “That is so fucking weird but cool. If I were a kid, I would have driven my family crazy making this happen over and over.”

“So, we’ve come up empty, but we have names. Maybe we can find some older guys at the bar and ask around? Maybe they knew them?”

“They’d be between sixty and seventy, probably. I’ve had some of those guys slide dollars down my g-string when I used to dance. But that doesn’t mean they knew them or they even lived here back then. I think we’re reaching. Fuck!” The look on his face was priceless. “He died before he could even surf the web. Maybe before there even was a web.”

“Some places digitized, and with a refined search, maybe we could come up with something. If I could narrow down the years of Drew’s death, this wouldn’t be so much to sort through. But he could have died a year or two later than Isaac.”

“Or he could still be alive? It didn’t sound like Isaac even knew if he had been sick. This is crazy. There has to be a better way.”

“We just need to... clear our minds. Think of another way to look at this.”

“Maybe we should take our minds off it for a little bit.”

“What do you have in mind?”

He bent over and kissed me again. The world shifted in and out. He pressed his lips to my ear. The world shifted.

“I think we should go into my backyard. I have something I’d really like to show you,” he whispered before nipping at my ear.

The world shifted back.

“Do you?”

“I really do. Maybe if we relax, we can come back to this with a fresh perspective.”

“You want to get fresh.”

“In my backyard. When I touched you on my front porch earlier, nothing happened. So outside is...”

“Safe? You are anything but safe to me.”

“I would never let anything ever happen to you. I promise.”

“I know you think that you...” I chuckled. “Ok.”

“Ok?”

“I could change my mind at any moment, so...”

He grabbed my hand, and the world went sepia. We ran through his kitchen and toward his back door. As soon as we walked outside, the world stayed muted, but it was because it was dark. I still felt the shift.

“I just want to get you completely naked and explore every inch of you,” Jack grinned. But the look on his face was anything but mirthful – it was full of desire. And I was the object of his lust. My mind spun. How could he... “Clothes. Now,” he ordered. “I have a seven-foot privacy fence, and I want you moaning so loud the cops come.”

“You're shameless.”

“I'm horny. It's been months since I've... Strip.” He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it onto a chair. I gasped as I saw his body in the moonlight. He was even more gorgeous than I had imagined, and I had imagined a lot.

“It's almost a full moon,” I slowly pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it onto his. I started to cover myself up but thought better about it. For this to ever be – I would have to let him see me as I truly was. Skinny, pale, freckled, and frail. My chest was almost concave, and it was so skinny.

“God, I love the way the moonlight makes your skin almost glisten. You're so beautiful, Arch. I wish you could see yourself the way I see you. Strong and powerful, unafraid and daring, gorgeous and unique – a one-of-a-kind type of man. You're amazing.” He slid his shorts down and kicked them aside. “Now you.”

I did as I was told. But I couldn't take my eyes off him. Jesus, I was scared of that. There was no way it was going to fit inside me. I grimaced as I stared at him – it. My mouth watered.

“Tonight is all about you,” he said gently. “I just want to make you happy. Can I do that?”

“I think you make me happy,” I mumbled stupidly. My cock, so much smaller than his, hardened as I looked at him. “It’s just so big,” I gulped.

“I told you that it would fit, Arch. But not tonight. I mean, we don’t have anything to... I was on PrEP. But I just started taking it again. No condoms and no lube... I guess we’ll have to find something else to do,” he chuckled. “You know what I’ve always loved?” He walked over and took me in his arms. Our hard cocks pressed into each other. His above my belly, and mine on his thigh. He was so much taller than I was – so much... He was huge all over. “Making out is a very underrated thing, don’t you think? Your mouth on mine as our hands explore each other. Your cock in my mouth as I taste you. Mine in yours, if that’s what you want. Do you want?”

“Fuck, yeah,” I moaned and literally shuddered as I reached down and grasped it in my palm.

“God, I want you.” He bent his head down and kissed me, and I breathed him inside myself. His kisses tasted so sweet and pure, even if they were anything other than that. They were hungry and needful, and I needed it – I was hungry for it. I was tired of denying myself the one thing I had grown to want – him.

His tongue slid against my own as I opened my mouth, and the kiss became wilder and stronger. My hands slid up his sides, and I pressed them against his very hard chest. His hand slid down my back, and he cupped my ass in his palms. Figures he was an ass man. I had very little ass for him to grab, but he used what he had.

He was an amazing kisser. I gasped for air as he continued his assault on my mouth. His tongue was frenzied and then slow before he pulled back and nipped at my bottom lip – laughing with joy as I moaned against him.

I stroked his cock in my hand – so big and girthy and proving that his password was anatomically correct. Nine inches was a very massive cock. But he was also girthy and uncut. I pulled on his foreskin and gently twisted it, eliciting a groan from him before he nipped at my lips again.

“You have a choice.” He winked at me, and my knees wobbled. “You can get on the hammock, which could be dangerous but fun, or you can sit in that chair or lie in the grass.”

“I don’t think I care.”

“Wanna go for danger?”

“What have we been doing? I’ve been flying so close to the sun that my wings are already singed.”

“I have no idea what that means, but it sounds very pretty. Swing it is.”

He picked me up, carried me over to his hammock, and carefully set me down in front of it. I grasped the sides, and he slowly sat me down. My feet dangled off the side. He got down on his knees, and for a second, my mind shut down. Jack was here to please me. It didn’t seem to compute in my brain for a second. He liked me, and I was having a hard time understanding why – then he pressed his lips to my cock, and all I could do was lay back in the hammock and give myself over.

He was so wet and hot – his mouth was fire as he slid me slowly inside. His tongue rolled around the head of my cock as he took all of me inside his mouth. His nose tickled my pubes, and he stayed there for a second before slowly pulling back and grasping the base of my cock.

This was a dream. A moment that defied all expectations as I gave myself over to it.

Beat by beat, the music played in my head as he made me soar beyond the moon and into the stars. His fingers grasped my balls and gently pulled, and before I could even think, I was coming into his mouth. “Sorry, I...”

“What did you think I wanted? God, you taste so spicy.” He licked at my head and sucked on it as he withdrew as much of my cum as he could from my still engorged shaft. “Wanna know what you taste like?” He rose up and kissed me. My cum intermingled with his saliva as I relished in the throes of the perfect little death. A moment like no other.

“My turn?” I asked coyly.

“I’m not sure you could handle this. You said it was too big, right?”

“You said it would fit.”

“Do you think it will fit, Arch?”

I fell to my knees in front of him and swallowed him immediately as far as I could, making sure to keep my lips tight against him. He tasted like such a fucking jock. The musk of a man that made you weak in the knees just by being in your presence.

I drew back and slowly circled his large head with my tongue – swatting at his slit as I slowly stroked him. I sucked on the tip and pulled the foreskin as far as I could with my lips as I stretched it and then slowly chewed it before pressing my tongue inside his foreskin and swiping my tongue against his slit again.

His moans told me that he enjoyed it. He placed a hand against the back of my head, and I let him press his cock into me. I couldn’t stop myself. I glanced up and almost choked as I watched him. His head was thrown back, and his eyes were closed, but the view of his body was almost too much. My cock stopped softening and began to

harden again at the beauty of this fucking god.

I opened my mouth and pressed my hand against his. He got the picture. He began to thrust into me, and as he did, I let my hands explore as far up his hard torso as I could. My fingers slid all over him as I felt the hard ridges of muscle.

He pumped into me, and I knew he was being careful, so I pushed myself further against him and gagged a little as he hit the back of my throat. Thrust by thrust, he quickened his speed as I let him fuck my mouth. I gave myself over, opening my throat as much as I could to take as much of him inside as possible. I needed this so badly that my body vibrated with desire.

Our aura was so red and vibrant in the night as I gave everything I could to him.

“I’m gonna...” I grabbed his ass and impaled myself on him. His cum, hot, salty, and tangy, poured into my mouth and down my throat. He slowly slid himself out and knelt down in front of me. “You are...”

I grasped him by the back of his head and kissed him. “I like the way you taste.”

We lay there in the grass as the moon continued to rise.

It was the most beautiful night I had ever seen, and I spent it in his arms.

13

Jack

“Dude, why are you smiling so much? You still got a fucking ghost in your house.”

“It is what it is. He’s not really that scary.” I kicked back in my comfy chair and chuckled at the thought of my smartass houseguest.

“You’re insane.” He rolled his eyes. “When there’s a ghost – you get out.”

“How was the conference?”

“Boring. I almost fell asleep giving my presentation. Why did I choose a job in finance?”

“Don’t forget that you’re also a slumlord. But I think it’s because you like boring?”

He sighed. “I guess I do. Why did I have to be good at math? And I am not a slumlord. You’d be lucky to live in one of my places.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah... You’ve always been smart. It was one of the reasons I instantly liked you. You were challenging and kind.”

“You liked me because I was doing shots at the bar and offered to buy you one. For five seconds, I thought we were gonna fuck. But after those five seconds, I knew that was not happening.”

“We were young.”

“And very dumb.”

“I think you should call Maurice.”

“I talk to Maurice. We fucked before I went to the conference.”

“I think you should talk to Maurice, not fuck him.”

“Actually, he fucked me, but we also talked.”

“And... You two are so good together.”

“We’re... talking. I don’t know, man. When did you decide to be the matchmaking fairy?”

“I guess today. I like Maurice. He’s a good guy and he makes you even better than you already are, D. I just want you to be happy, and you’re happy when you’re with Maurice.”

“I know. But that’s not the way it is right now. Maybe someday, when he works through his feelings of inadequacy and abandonment. It’s not now, though, Jack. I’m not giving up on him, though. Not yet.”

“Promise?”

“What the fuck is up with you? Are you possessed?”

“Maybe?” I shrugged and giggled. “I like him.”

“You’re in love with the ghost? Dude? What?”

“Not the ghost, dumbass, though he’s actually ok. I don’t mind him as much anymore. He’s kind of funny.”

“You’re talking to the ghost?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, Arch is helping me. We’re trying to find a way to release him into the wild, I guess.”

“I am so fucking confused right now.”

“So much has happened since you left. But we can talk about that later. I want to talk about Archie.”

“You’re into the ghost guy? I am a little surprised by that, to be honest. I wouldn’t say he was usually your type.”

“I had a type?”

“He’s cute, I’ll give you that. But you usually liked hard-bodied twinkles that we’re looking for a good time and nothing more. That does not seem like Archie.”

“It’s not.”

“I mean, I only met him when I brought him to you, but he seems like a good guy – nice and compassionate. Someone that you could easily break if you weren’t careful.”

“You think he’s too nice for me?”

“I think that he’s probably more fragile than most of the guys you destroyed.

Remember that one guy who followed you around after you ruined him for other men, apparently? He annoyed you so much that you finally had to tell him that it wasn't serious and you didn't want it to happen again. I still remember his face after you told him."

"I know. I... I don't want to be that person, D. I want... I don't know but something has changed in me, you know? I don't want to be that person just looking for a quick fuck and nothing more. Archie is amazing and I think I'm totally falling in serious like for him – with him."

"Be careful. He seemed like a very nice boy, and nice boys can get hurt easily."

"You don't think I'm worthy of him?"

"What? I never said that. You've always been worthy, J. You just haven't always been careful. Do you know what I mean? Thinking of other people's feelings wasn't one of your strongest suits, man. You're not mean or even selfish – you just weren't always thoughtful of how your actions affected others."

I hung my head and let his words wash over me. "I know. I realized something during this whole ghost thing. I'm a lot like Isaac in many ways."

"Who is Isaac?"

"The ghost."

"Oh, well, that explains everything."

"I'm lonely, Daveed. I have been for a very long time, and I never took the time to understand why I wasn't content – happy, even. I was just trying to fill a hole that had been there for too long. Arch makes me feel seen and needed. He makes me want to

be a part of something bigger than just myself.”

“Good.”

“That’s it?”

“What do you want me to say, man? Look, I want you to be happy more than almost anyone. You’re my best friend, and I love you. I’d do anything for you. But your track record of relationships is zero, bro. Now you tell me after a few days...”

“A week.”

“Ok, a week – that you’re falling for the ghost psychic dude. It’s... I liked him. I did. I do. But it’s just a surprise. I want you to find someone and fall in love. You are an amazing guy, and I think I’m one of the only people that you’ve ever let see that side of you. I’m glad you’re sharing it with someone else. I’m just surprised it’s ghost boy.”

“Because he’s not my type?”

“I mean, sorta, yeah. But there are ghosts. He’s a psychic who speaks to ghosts. It’s a little out there, right?”

“You’re the one who brought him to me.”

“To help you with your ghost problem, yeah. Trust me, after what I saw, this place is seriously haunted.”

“You have no idea.” I laughed. “Look, I will agree that I was as surprised as anyone. But it’s happened, and I really want to see where this will go.”

“That alone proves the man is a miracle worker. So you can handle the ghosts?”

“I seem to be doing ok with the one I have.”

“The psychic thing? That would freak me out if he could read my thoughts.”

“He doesn’t read thoughts – he reads energies.”

“Same thing.”

“Maybe? But yeah, I think I’m good.”

“Are you looking for permission or something? It’s your life, man. Just don’t hurt ghost boy. He seems like he would be fragile.”

“Yet he’s so strong. I really like him, Daveed. I would never hurt him.”

“Not intentionally. But you have hurt people, man. You just never took the time to think about it.”

“I know. I had a lot of time to think about all of this lying in the hospital. You know you were the only one to come and see me? Well, Maurice came with you a couple of times, but no one else ever did. I asked the nurse one day and was surprised by the answer. Just the tall and handsome black man and his boyfriend are how I found out that no one cared enough to come to see if I was still alive.”

“That’s...”

“They would have come to the funeral if I had died. Some of them, anyway. But not many. I didn’t deserve for any of them to come see me, D. I hadn’t been a very good friend to anyone besides you, and even then... I wasn’t as good of a friend to you as I

should have been.”

“You’ve never treated me bad, Jack.”

“But I didn’t go out of my way to tell you how much I loved you either. To show you how much you mean to me.”

“I knew, though, man.”

“I want to do better with this second chance, D. I want to deserve someone like him. But he does scare me so much. I’m getting attached to him, and I can’t stop thinking about him. I think he could hurt me just as badly as I could ever hurt him.”

“That’s... I love you, J. You’re my best friend, and all I want is for you to be happy. He’s cute.”

“He’s hot,” I stood up and walked over to him and sat down beside him on the couch. “I’m gonna hug your sorry ass now.” I wrapped my arms around him, and he squeezed me tightly. “I love you, Daveed.”

“I love you too, Jack.”

“So... Let’s talk about something else. I just made it very deep and depressing in here.”

“My renters are crazy over on Agnes Ave. Those crazy gay guys broke up. You know, the ones who are always complaining? Anyway, one of them just rented my other house a block away on Ben. I think he just wanted to spy on his ex. They were always fighting, apparently.”

“Another place? Holy shit.” I jumped up and ran over to my computer and turned it

on.

“Dude? What’s happening right now?”

“You may have... You made me think about searching for this person another way. It’s Isaac’s lover Drew that we’re... Hold on.” I held my finger up as I typed in my password.

“You are making no sense right now.”

“Or perfect sense. If this is... You may be a fucking genius, Daveed Humphrey. I will let you know in... Where is the file that... Oh, here.” I scrolled down the list of names and laughed when I saw it. “Fucking Andrew Parker. We had the answer all along!”

I ran over to him and kissed him on his cheek.

“What the hell is happening?”

“Magic, baby. I think it’s magic.” We had the answer all along. Andrew had rented another place from the same landlord after Isaac died in eighty-four. Living here must have been too much for him. We had a name and an address; now, all I needed was Archie. I quickly picked up my phone.

“You have really gone fucking crazy.”

14

Archie

I grabbed Jack by the arm and stopped him on the small, windy street at the edge of Sunset Plaza. He was a man on a mission. “This is a giant leap. Just because I found his records, and...”

“But he died here,” he whined. “If Isaac is waiting for him, there’s a good chance he’s waiting for him too.”

“Maybe? The choices of people still astound me.” I shrugged.

He reached for my hand, and our fingers intertwined. “Would you cross over? If you were in love with... someone, and you died first, or would you stay and wait for them?”

“It is something that seems very romantic.” We slowly started walking toward the house at the top of the small hill. “I don’t know. How can someone know what they would do when they die? Maybe not everyone is given a choice?”

“I hope I would. I want to be in that kind of...”

“Stop. Don’t say that, Jack.” I squeezed his hand. “If you were mine and you died before me, I wouldn’t want you turning into Isaac. I’d want you to be at peace, whatever that was for you. We have no idea what happened to Drew, do we? What if he loved Isaac, but then he found someone else and loved them just as much? What if

he found another love? It's not a finite thing, you know? We have no idea what we are walking into if anything. He may have moved on. Most people do, Jack. It's not the norm for a spirit to stay here. They're the fly in the soup, right?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he chuckled and pulled me slowly up the hill.

"The fly in the soup theory. It's an abnormality. Flies sink or get stuck. Most people with soup never have a fly in it, but some – the few – find a fly. God, my legs are on fire." I panted as I walked.

"I am totally lost. I have never heard of this theory."

"Earthbound spirits are fairly rare. Most people die and move on. It's the rare few that stay. There's just been thousands of years of human history. I've also discovered that some spirits choose to come and go, which blew my mind. How do they do that?"

"Oh, I see. That's..." He stopped as he thought about it. We were on an incline, and I was afraid that I would topple over at any moment. "So out of the roughly five trillion people..."

"Come on." I pulled, and we continued our ascent. "It's actually eight and a half billion as of this year."

"Ok, smarty pants. I think it's very hot that you know that. So, if one percent stayed, that would be?"

"Over eight million people," I sighed. "I don't think it's that high. But, yes."

"That's a lot of ghosts. So, if you looked at this from a generational thing and said,

maybe point five percent for every generation over the course of human history... Fuck."

"It's a lot of fucking ghosts." I frowned. "I see them almost everywhere. There are very few places where ghosts don't at least pass through. Older places – you know, most of the world besides the Americas, have many more ghosts than we do because they have so much more history. I once went to London on a getaway and stayed in my hotel for most of it. Their streets were crawling with the dead. It made me so sick to be surrounded by them. It was overwhelming." We finally made it to the top of the fucking hill, and we stood in front of a small cottage with a red front door. I pointed to the house. "Looks like we're here."

"It's cuter than my house." Jack frowned. "Drew upgraded."

"How are we going to do this ghostnap?" I scrunched my face up and stared at the house. "I'm still confused as to how this is supposed to happen unless we break in when no one's home. I wouldn't survive prison."

"We're not going to jail. I'll take care of everything. I'm very charming." He let go of my hand and pulled out a pamphlet from his back pocket.

"I'll give you that."

"Trust me." He opened the small kissing gate, and we walked onto the property. Roses lined the flowery walkway.

"This is... maybe a little more dangerous than what you're used to, Jack. If I can make contact and allow him inside, I won't really be me in the way that you know me anymore – not until I release him into your house." I stepped in front of him at the base of the small porch. He needed to really understand what I was planning on doing.

“I can’t believe you can even do this. Is it possession? Wait, are you going to be possessed?” His eyes widened with concern.

“In a way, but not in the way that you think. We’ll be sharing my vessel – my body. Our two souls will be cohabitating in a way. I have to make sure that he’s... willing to do this, of course, and I have to decide that I feel safe enough after finding him. Reading a spirit’s energy is a little harder than a human’s, but I can do it. You’ll have two ghosts in your house,” I chuckled. “Super spooky.”

“Not for long, I hope.”

“Fingers crossed. This is dangerous, Jack. But I think it’s the only way. But – and that’s a very big but, by the way – I must find him inside the house. If I can’t locate him or talk to him, we’re back to square one. We’ll have to find another way.”

“According to the obituary we found online, Drew died five years ago at home. He owned this house that he bought from his landlord ten years earlier. We have to have hope that he’s in there, Arch. I just feel it – I know he is. You don’t forget how someone like Isaac loved you. I’m sure of it.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me slowly up the stairs. My feet were heavy – I can readily admit that I was nervous about the whole thing. What I needed to do was dangerous if I let the wrong spirit in. But I didn’t see another way. It’s not like you can catch a ghost and screw the cap on. This wasn’t fucking Ghostbusters.

“Ready? It’s showtime,” Jack chuckled as he rang the doorbell.

“Hold on!” A male voice said in a sing-song.

Jack winked at me and pulled his tank top over his head. He stuffed it in his back pocket, and it hung out like a small tail. “I did my research.”

The door opened slowly, and a forty-ish-year-old man stood in the doorway. The little man gasped as he caught sight of Jack. The way he looked at him made my stomach churn. “Well, I... How can I help you, Sir?”

Jack shamelessly flexed his torso. “I’m here to see if I can help you, actually.”

“Are you a shirtless handyman? I am looking for someone new to take care of the lawn and garden.”

“That’s not what I do, unfortunately. I’m a shirtless trainer, and I’m very hands-on, and I’m offering a free try-out to new clients. I work out of Gym Bros down on Santa Monica, but we also do private one on ones in house for those people who don’t like going to the gym. No weights necessary.”

“Working out? I’ve never been into that.” He patted his small gut.

“It’s because you don’t like going to the gym. The people there and the lifestyle of meatheads who look down on newbies are the real reasons, though, right? You’re what, in your thirties?” God, he was laying it on thick. But the guy was totally buying it.

“Well, I... maybe. I mean, I used to get on the treadmill at LA Fitness. But I didn’t go very often, so I gave up my membership.”

“Memberships are not the way of the future. No one wants to pay a monthly fee. I think you would excel at the in-home training. And I can totally tell that you used the treadmill. Your legs look amazing.”

“Oh, I... Thank you!”

“Can I come in? I can show you some of the things that we might do if you chose to

do some in house workouts with me? I could also use a glass of water. That walk up the hill in this heat made me real thirsty.”

“Of course.” He was flustered, and his face was turning red. “I’m not really dressed to work out.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll do it, and you can watch. There’s no need for you to get sweaty until you decide to. I’m already sweaty enough for both of us,” Jack laughed, and I had to suppress a giggle. He was so fucking stupid, but it was working. The guy was practically salivating in front of us, and I didn’t blame him.

“Oh, of course. It is really hot out.” He stepped aside, and we walked in.

“This is my friend, Arch. He’s here to answer any questions you might have about... uh... billing. I’ll just follow you into the kitchen for that water, and Arch will hang out in the living room. He’s not into muscles,” he winked at me, and I threw my hand in front of my mouth to hide my grin. He knew exactly how much I was into his muscles. But his plan had worked, and I had a few minutes alone to try to see what, if anything, was inside this house.

“Do you like the way my abs look? How about my chest? I think I’m pretty massive, and all I do is this program that I’m about to show you. I hope you don’t mind my sweat...” He followed the guy into his kitchen, and I went over to sit down on the couch.

I didn’t know how much time I might have. I cleared my mind and opened myself up broader than I usually did – casting out my energy to feed any spirits inside the house. I connected automatically, but it was vague. The spirit wasn’t strong and had faded over the years. Five years... I could feel him.

“Drew?” I whispered, continuing to push my energy forward.

Nothing.

“Andrew Parker, if you are here in this house, I have a message for you. Isaac Nelson is waiting for you. Are you still here waiting for him? I feel you, Andrew. Are you trapped in the house?”

Who are you? His voice spoke into my mind. He was too weak, even with all the energy I was giving him, to manifest.

“Someone who can reconnect you to Isaac. Are you Andrew?” I felt for him through the void and could sense a small presence on the other side. I was assaulted by images in my mind. It was who I hoped for, but he was not a strong spirit. Perhaps not strong enough to accomplish what I needed him to do. “Come to me, Drew. I feel you watching. I hear you.”

Isaac is still here? I thought... lost to me. A flash of Isaac sitting in a chair by the window. The of him lying in a bed as he was close to death.

“No. He’s still in the house you once shared. He’s been waiting for you for over forty years. Can you manifest? I need you to cross through so I can help you,” I tried to keep my voice down because if that guy heard what I was saying, we’d get thrown out no matter how hot he thought Jack was.

I felt the veil shimmer. He was not a strong soul. I doubted that the gay guy who lived here even knew that Drew was present and still lingering after his death. He was so insubstantial that I wasn’t sure I could accomplish what I needed to do to reunite them.

I pushed energy into the void and could feel myself weaken. Jack would have to carry me out of here if this didn't work. But for a second, a glimmer in the void appeared. Connection.

Isaac? Where is he?

“You did wait for him?” I could feel the desire and love that Drew had for him. It enveloped him in the same way that Isaac’s sickness did him.

Yes. He was my only real love.

“You have to find form, Drew.”

He was so broken.

“He’s finally whole, and all he needs to find happiness and cross over into the light is you, Drew. He’s waited for you. Do you want to see him again?”

Yes.

“Find your form. Feed off of me, Drew. I came to bring you to him.”

I tried to leave. But I cannot.

“You can. I can take you to him, but you will have to trust me, and I will have to trust you. Can I trust you?”

I want Isaac. Please?

“He wants you too. He’s been waiting all alone, and he’s been so sad. But he will be so happy to see you again. You are all he’s been thinking about.”

Why didn’t he find me?

“He is also stuck in the place he knew. It happens, Drew. This was your home. It

belonged to you, and you became attached to it. Isaac is in the home you shared, the only place he felt that was ever a home to him. I can take you.”

I dropped my shields and stood up. My knees shook as I stood in this very tackily decorated house and offered my body to this sad and lost soul. I was so weak – I had given so much to Drew so he could cross through the in-between to this realm of existence.

“Find form, Drew. Manifest,” I pleaded.

I...

“You have to,” I raised my voice as loud as I dared. It was now or never.

I...

I pushed all the rest of my energy into the void, and he shimmered into view.

“Quick, before I’m too exhausted to accept you. Come into me, Drew. Share my body and take possession of me.”

He glided across the room, barely a mist hanging in the air, and entered me. The static of our two souls intermingling inside me caused the lights to flicker.

“Am I safe?” he whispered. “Do I have form?” My voice and my lips made the words, but it was not me who spoke.

Yes, I replied from inside my mind. I was still in control in some ways but not in others. I carried a passenger inside me, and his spirit lay on top of my own. I wrapped myself in as much protective energy as I could. But I had almost nothing left. I was as weak as Drew.

“Now what? I’m so tired... I don’t know how long I can stay here.”

Jack! I screamed, but it was only in my head. Only Drew could hear me.

“Jack?” Drew realized what I needed. He knew my thoughts as well as I knew his. So many visions of happy time – of pain and despair – it overwhelmed me until I didn’t know which memories belonged to who.

He quickly poked his head in. His body was glistening with sweat.

“Nice,” Drew laughed.

“Drew? Archie?”

Yes

“Yes.”

“Ok. It was really nice to meet you, but we have another appointment.” Jack quickly put his hand on our back and ushered us out the door without even waiting for the guy to respond.

“I think I’d like to...” The guy's words were cut off as the door slammed.

“Drew, are you inside my boyfriend?”

“Yes. He... I think he loves you.”

“Good. Because I love him too.”

I shivered inside myself. But his words gave me warmth. I had a boyfriend.

15

Jack

“ I don’t think we can make it.” Archie/Andrew grabbed my arm as he stumbled near the bottom of the hill. I scooped him up in my arms and carried him to the car. Archie had given me the keys and I helped him inside. “Thank you.”

“No...uh... worries, Drew?”

“Yes. I seem to be the one in charge of his... Archie’s speech. It’s hard to concentrate with both of us in here. Our memories are intermingling to the point that I don’t know if they’re mine or his. I’m sure he feels the same way. ‘Yes,’ he said.” He sighed heavily. “He cares for you.”

“I think I love him. Now let’s get you to Isaac.” I drove fast to my house, and we didn’t speak for the entire five-minute ride. It freaked me out that Archie wasn’t really Archie at the moment. The things that he could do scared and amazed me. He allowed himself to be possessed for me – for Isaac. He was too good for me, and I knew that I had work to do ever to deserve someone like him. But I wanted to be the person he needed. I had never wanted something so badly in my life.

It scared me as much as this situation did.

I had to be strong.

I pulled in front of my house and ran around to open the passenger door. Archie

looked so weak and frail. I pulled him up and scooped him into my arms.

“Archie says you are very strong. He likes this side of you,” he groaned as he laid his head on my shoulder. “He also just told me to shut up. He’s embarrassed. But when you’re as old as I am, you know that the only important thing is love, and it can be taken away in a moment. So, hold onto it,” he wheezed.

I opened my door, carried him over the threshold, and sat him down on my comfy chair.

“It was nice to have a voice again,” he moaned, and Archie sat back and unhinged his jaw. A loud moan escaped from his mouth, and he slumped over. “Jack?” he whispered. “I need water and something to eat. Now, please.”

“Is he gone?”

“Yes. Now it’s up to them.”

“Are you ok?”

“I will be. Your house recharges me just as much as I charged Andrew. He’s really nice. His memories were so... They lived a happy life together until they couldn’t any longer. He never really recovered from losing Isaac. He never found real love ever again. It was so sad and mournful – yet hopeful because of us. We did this.”

“You want a sandwich? I’m not sure what I have. Turkey?”

“That’s fine. I’m just gonna sit here for a while.”

I ran into the kitchen and pulled out the bread, meat, and cheese. I had no idea what he wanted on it, so I added some mayonnaise and mustard the way that I liked it. He

said he was usually ravenous after ghostly encounters, and this was fucking possession, so I added extra meat and cheese until I practically made a goddamn Dagwood for him. I put it on a small plate, grabbed some vitamin water from the fridge, and carried it back to him.

“Can you sit up, babe?”

“Babe?”

“Well, Drew practically told me that you were in love with me, so I think it’s time we get to some terms of endearment, don’t you?”

“Andrew was too chatty.”

“He barely spoke.”

“We were drained. Your house is a living battery, though, even for me. It’s strange. Your energy is so strong and healthy, so full of life.” He took the plate from me and took a giant bite. “Oh, God... So good.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” I teased. “Unless it’s full of me, then you can talk all you want.”

“How could I with that monster – Jesus.”

“It’ll fit. Trust me.”

“I’m counting on it. I can still feel them, but it’s weird... so weak. Why was he so weak?”

Archie took another huge bite and followed it with a drink of vitamin water.

“Are you feeling a little better, babe?”

“I am, Hulk.”

“That is not a term of endearment.”

“Hmm... It is to me.” He paused and looked toward the stairs. “I can feel frustration... But I can also feel Andrew getting stronger. He’s feeding off this place, the same as me. But... it’s your energy, Jack. He’s not finding... Something’s wrong.”

“You have to be kidding me. You got possessed, for fuck’s sake, and you’re telling me it’s not working?”

“I don’t know. It’s... not what... God, it’s overwhelming, Andrew’s anger.”

The air in front of us shimmered. Slowly, a form took shape. Not a shadow, but something else.

“Andrew,” Archie slowly sat up and put his half-eaten sandwich down on the small table in front of him. “You’re stronger.”

Enough.

“Something is wrong. I could feel it.”

Isaac? Nowhere.

“He’s upstairs in the bedroom,” I can feel him there.

Why? I can’t find him.

“Hmm... This is... Dammit! I’ve seen this before, but not very often. Isaac’s shifted into a different plane – one that belongs only to him. That’s why I... I should have thought about this. It’s why I can’t see him when I’m alone. My natural energy hums at the same frequency as the in-between, but sometimes, when a spirit gets trapped in a place of its own making, it’s solitary, and contact is...”

“English, please. Talk to me like I’m stupid,” I snorted.

“They’re in two different places. Andrew is in the place where most spirits who choose the Earthly plane stay. Isaac is in a place of his own making. He’s confined there – I’m not sure that it’s even a choice any longer.”

“How can we...”

“You will not like that answer, Jack. We have to help him to cross out and into our world. I’m afraid that if he could, he would already have. He knew that we were trying to find Andrew.”

Isaac was always stubborn. The form faded until there was only a mist hanging in the air.

“I have an idea, and it’s a very bad one.”

“How could he touch my dresser and throw all my clothes around if he’s not on this plane?”

“Maybe his dresser was in the same place. You and Isaac have a synchronicity that only you have. It is why I can see him when I touch you, but I think you’ve always been able to, Jack. You just didn’t know how. His energy and yours have spiraled together over the years.”

“I... I do not like where this is headed.”

“I know.”

Please.

“Fuck my life. All I wanted was normal, you know. I just wanted a ghost-free house, and now I have two.”

Please.

“We have to bring them together. This is the only way.”

“You’re not strong enough for this, babe. You can barely stand.”

Archie stood slowly. “I’m... recovering. It wasn’t having Andrew inside me that made me so tired. It was all of the energy I had to give him to even form. I’m replenishing. Your house is so full of energy, and now Andrew isn’t as weak. I’ll be ok, Hulk.”

“We really need to work on your terms of endearment.”

“We’ll have time.”

“I’m counting on that and holding you to it.”

“I know.”

“So what do we do?” I asked, knowing that I was going to hate the answer.

“Isaac is trapped in a world of his own making. His despair and loneliness, the

sickness that he had when he was living, have shrouded him. He will need help crossing through.”

“I really hate this.”

“I’ll be there to guide you, but I won’t be alone. Isaac will know – he will see Andrew’s spirit inside me – I hope. That should be enough for him to agree.”

“Agree to... Me?”

“Yes. I’ll let Andrew back in, and then the two of us will touch. Isaac will want to cross over, but to do that, he will need your help. Your auras and energies are so tightly interwound that only you can help him escape, Jack.”

“I have to let that bitchy ghost possess me? No fucking way! I wouldn’t even know how.”

“I’ll guide you. We can do this, I promise, Jack. Together I think we could do anything, don’t you? They deserve to be together.”

Like you two, Drew managed. Please?

“Imagine waiting for someone your whole life but never being able to find them when they are standing right in front of you. But you can’t see them or touch them. It would drive you mad.”

“How do I do this?”

“I think you’ve always been able to. You just didn’t want to interact with him. I’m not the one who pulls into his plane, Jack. It’s you. It’s always been you. All you have to do is clear your mind and want it. Call to him, and he will answer. Then try to

see him. When you try – you will slip through. It's your energy there as much as his now. Your soul will naturally take you if you want."

"I'm scared to..."

"I know. You would be a fool if you weren't."

"Will I get sick like you?"

"I don't think so. That's just my natural ability and empathic soul, which makes me sick. You're not me – you're you, and you are so much stronger than you know. It's not just your body, Jack. It's everything that you are."

"I can do this?" I whispered.

"I know you can. I trust you enough to get possessed – again. I have faith in you."

God, no one had ever said that to me before. I slowly stood up on shaky knees and reached down inside myself to screw my courage as tightly as I could around me. I could do this – I somehow knew I could, and that scared me. I didn't want this to be my life. I didn't want to be Archie. But I also felt a warmth and strength I had never felt before. He had faith in me. That was enough, wasn't it? I knew in my heart it was.

I bent down and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "What do I do?"

"I'll take Andrew back inside while you are making contact. I'll come in and sit down beside you on the bed and touch you – Well, Andrew will touch you in my body. I think that should be enough. Connect with him. Don't be scared of it. It's... We've done it before, Jack. Inside you, you already know how."

I kissed him again on top of his red hair and quickly ran my fingers through it. When this was over, and it would be over soon, I hoped, I would be able to touch him in every way I wanted and needed without making the world wonky.

“I got this. See you soon?”

“Yes. Andrew, are you ready?”

I walked up the stairs, and my feet were heavy with the fear I was trying to control. I could do this – I knew I could. But it still was so unnatural to me. I was doing this willingly. I was planning on letting a ghost inside me, and what the actual fuck? Would it change me? Would I still be the same person after?

Archie wouldn't let me do this if he didn't think it was safe.

I opened my bedroom door and sat down on the edge of my bed facing the window. No wonder he looked out of it. It overlooked the tree-lined street where people walked every day. When he was sick, this was as close to normal as he could have gotten.

I tried to push my emotions down – dampening them because I knew my fear of the unknown would only get in my way. I had to open myself up to it – to him. “Isaac?”

I felt him like a shadow all around me, but nothing happened. ‘Want to see him,’ Jack had said. I needed to really want to go where Isaac was waiting. I want to see Isaac. I have good news for him.

“Isaac? I found Drew. He's here.” I reached down with all my courage and willed myself to be open to this experience. Archie was counting on me, and he couldn't help me. I had to go there on my own so he could bring Drew with him.

The room dimmed, but there was still a block. Me – I was the block. “Push through,” I gritted my teeth, and the air parted and dissolved in a way I had never seen before. But I was so proud of myself that I forgot to be scared, and I willingly and knowingly let myself slide into the in-between where Isaac waited – staring out the window.

“I did it.”

“Ooo... touch her. Are you here with good news, or am I trapped in this closet forever?” He looked so sad and hopeless.

“No, Isaac. I have something to show you.”

I felt Archie’s weight on the bed even if I couldn’t see him. This ghost and spirit shit was too fucking much. A guy like me wasn’t supposed to know as much as I did or do as much as I’ve done. Archie’s hand on mine. Our fingers interlocked, and he faded into our world.

“Hi, Zac, I’ve...” Archie/Drew choked up.

“Is it really you?” Isaac stood up with a look that almost made me weep. Hope – he felt hope. “I waited for you, but I got lost, I think.”

“No, I got lost. I couldn’t come to find you. I tried so hard until I just stopped and suffered in silence. But they brought me here to you. They gave us a second chance.”

“Drew can’t stay here, Isaac. His soul’s energy is on a different plane than yours. It’s very confusing, so please don’t make me get into it. Archie could tell you, but he’s the transportation for your boyfriend. If you want to be together, you have to leave this place forever, Isaac. I can help you, but I’m scared. Don’t prove Archie wrong, ok?”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“You have to possess me, and I have to bring you into our world. You’ve trapped yourself here, man. But I can free you if you’ll let me.”

“I want to be with my love – with Drew.”

“It’s what I want to.”

“What do I do? I’ve never possessed someone before. Please tell me it’s not like the Exorcist.”

“No,” I actually laughed. Maybe I was going insane, but their second chance at happiness reminded me of my own. “All you have to do is slip inside me. I have to let you, and I’m willing to. But you both have to promise to leave once we’ve slipped through. Understood?”

“I will do whatever is needed to be with him again.”

I held up my other hand and gestured for him. I cleared my mind and tried not to be scared. “I’m willing, Isaac. Let me free you from this place and your pain.”

Have you ever tried to squeeze through a space that you knew you would never fit into? That’s what I felt as Isaac took possession of my body, and the room faded back into color. I saw him looking at the world through my eyes. I felt the tear as it fell down my cheek. I felt him laugh – heard him laugh as he turned to stare at Archie, but only saw Andrew.

“I’m free.”

16

Archie

“Drew? Andrew?” The voice was Jack’s, but the words were not.

“It’s me. Is it really you?” My hand reached up and stroked Jack/Isaac’s chiseled face. But it was Drew who touched him. It was odd to be a stranger in your own body. “Zac?”

“It’s me... It’s strange to be in here. It feels so... I missed having a body, and I didn’t even realize it.” He laughed. “I can’t believe we’re together again.” He reached up and took my/Drew’s face in his hands. There was something so sweet about this that it felt like watching one of the sweet and saccharine Hallmark movies through my own eyes.

“After all these years, and in the same room where we used to sleep as I curled up on your shoulder.”

“The same room where I died. The party was over... No wonder you left.” Jack/Isaac glanced quickly around.

“It was too much.”

“I know... I...” Jack/Isaac stopped and frowned. “Just a few minutes more, please. The alive person inside me is whining about me getting the fuck out of him.”

“His name is Jack, and he cared enough to come get you so we could be together again.” I/Drew took Jack/Isaac’s hand and held it tightly. “They’re good people.”

“Still? After all that we’ve been through – you still have a heart of gold?”

“I’m still me. Losing you took that away for a while, but I found myself again. Now I’ve finally found you.”

“I’m sorry that I...”

“You do not need to apologize for the past, Zac. I forgave you the moment I said I did all those years ago. I never held onto it. We were young, and it was a different time. So much has changed. Did you know that gays can get married now?”

“Seriously? I sat up there and wondered if Reagan had killed us all for a very long time.” Jack/Isaac’s eyes narrowed as he thought about the past.

“It was a long time ago now. I wish you could see how the world has changed. Not all of it was good, but so much of it was.”

“When did you die?”

“Time had no meaning after I died.”

Five years, I thought, knowing that Drew could hear me.

“Oh, sweet Archie said it was five years ago.”

“You got old. I’m so glad.” Jack/Isaac slid his hand on my/Drew’s thigh.

“My face sagged. I wasn’t a fan.”

“I wish we could... Do ghosts have sex? I just want to touch you. Oh!” He laughed.
“Jack said don’t you dare. He’s a total boner killer.”

“Me too. To feel you is so... I know it’s his body, but I can feel you inside him.”

“Did you ever get sick? I worried so much about it.”

“I survived the plague, Zac. I don’t know how, but I never got it.”

Hello. It’s time, Andrew. Tell him that it’s time for you two to find your happiness. It’s time to leave and for you to cross over where you belong – where you’ll be happy.

“I know,” the words came out of my mouth, but it was not me who said them. “To feel something again. His heart, I know it’s Jack’s, but it feels like home. Just a few minutes more, please?”

What does Jack say? He’s scared, I’m sure. He’s not like me.

“Jack?” My hand caressed his arm. Apparently, Andrew liked muscles, too.

“He says, ok. He’s fine, but it’s very weird.” Zac spoke through my love. My love – just like Isaac had always been Drew’s. I loved Jack, and I either had to jump in with both feet or walk away. I knew that I could never leave if there was a chance at our happiness. Our puzzle pieces fit.

“Archie is thinking about love. They’ve only met recently, but he loves Jack.” I wish that Drew hadn’t spoken that aloud.

Don’t.

“Jack feels the same way. He’s much more worried about Archie than he is about himself. He just told me to shut up.” Jack/Issac laughed. “Young love...”

“Love should never be kept hidden. Once you feel it, you should share it. Remember our youth? We were stupid and fearful.” I/Drew reached over and placed his lips against Jack/Isaac’s. Such warm lips.

“A kiss? I almost forgot what it felt like. Can I?” Jack/Isaac was asking permission to the other. “Jack said it was fine. He would never complain about kissing Archie.”

Our lips met once again, and this time, the pent-up passion of years burst through. Hands roamed gently over our borrowed bodies as our tongues brushed against each other. A fire in the pit of my stomach – desire shot through both of the souls occupying my body. My own hummed with need and want. A craving that I knew I would never be able to abandon.

It’s time, Drew, I moaned as our lips gently pulled apart.

“Jack liked that.”

“Archie did, too.”

Jack/Isaac pulled his shirt off and threw it down on the floor. “Jack is very proud of his body. He doesn’t mind showing it off. He’s telling me that he’s ok if we go a little further, but in the end, it has to be only him and Archie. A last taste of flesh for us. Is that ok with your body?” Jack slowly stood up and put his thumb in his waistband.

If Jack says ok, so do I. But this is... weird.

“One last Earthbound fantasy before we discover the next part of our journey.”

“Together, finally.”

“Together for always.”

Jack/Isaac pulled his gym shorts down and kicked them away. His meaty cock was already hardening, and I could feel the excitement radiate off of Drew as he stared at it.

“Wow, that’s... Good for you, Archie.” I/Drew chuckled as he stared at Jack’s cock.
“Can I?”

Yes.

I/Drew pulled our shirt off and stood before pulling our own shorts down and standing naked in front of our lovers. Jack/Isaac’s hand found our cock, and they started stroking it. We did the same, and soon our cocks stood at attention.

We bent down and lovingly placed our lips against Jack/Isaac’s tip and licked at it. To share this through the mind of another was so confusing. Our thoughts muddled and our heart raced. We opened our mouth and slowly slid his tapered helmet into our mouth, moaning at the taste. Jack/Isaac smelled of musk and man – the sweat from his earlier workout permeated our senses, and I was shocked by how hot I found it.

We took more of his thick shaft in our mouth, and I was impressed by Drew’s ability not to gag as it slowly slid down our throat. Our nose buried itself in Jack/Isaac’s pubes.

God, I want him , I moaned.

“My turn. One last taste of you before we go. Jack is losing his mind with the things he wants to do to Archie without us here.” Jack/Isaac huffed.

We slowly and sadly pulled our mouth off of their cock. I/Drew wiped a tear off of our cheek.

Jack/Isaac got down on their knees and grasped our cock in their hands. They kissed our helmet and licked up and down our shaft. “Red pubes are very hot. Jack is screaming at me to hurry up. I could be a pissy little asshole, but...” They took us in their mouth and slowly sucked and savored us as he bobbed up and down on our shaft. Our cock throbbed with pleasure.

Please Andrew?

“It’s time, Zac. Stop sucking the cock, and let’s find our own place.”

Jack/Isaac slowly pulled themselves off our cock and stroked it one last time before standing and grasping each other in a tight embrace.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes. I’m sorry I was a pissy little bitch, boys. Being dead was not a ride on the disco stick. But thank you for everything,” Jack/Isaac said sincerely.

“On the count of three,” we said.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

The room glowed through my eyes, and I felt Andrew release himself from my body. As I stood there vacant, I reached out quickly, searching for their energy. It was gone.

They had crossed over.

“That was... Did we just have ghost fellatio?” Jack chuckled. “What the fuck? That was – kinky.”

“They’re gone.”

“We’re not.” Jack took my cheek in his hand.

“No, we’re not, and we’re...” I glanced down at our very hard cocks.

“Totally naked with hardons, and my ghost roommate has left forever.” He winked at me.

“We’re alone.”

Jack ran over to his nightstand and opened a drawer. Lube and a condom landed with a thump on the bed. “I am so fucking ready. Are you?”

“I think we’ve talked enough.” I grinned. I had never wanted anything so badly in my life as I did him inside me right now.

“I am going to make you feel possessed all over again,” he chuckled as he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me onto the bed.

I lay on my back, and he crawled on top of me. His cock stared at me angrily as he shifted himself. His mouth slid down my shaft, and I reached up and took his in my hand before guiding it into my own. He adjusted and had to raise his hips because it was too big for me to... I slurped on his cock, hungrily. The taste of his sweat, the musk overpowered my senses in all the best ways, and I reached up and grabbed his ass in my hands.

He pulled himself off, and I heard him spit. A wet finger slowly found my hole before his mouth found my cock again. We savored each other as we lost ourselves in pleasure. Mouths – cocks – my hole as his finger slowly slid into me. It was a moment so momentous that I knew it would change everything between us. It locked something in place as we gave everything to each other.

I took as much of him inside my mouth as I could, and he slowly thrust in and out as he bobbed up and down on my cock. His finger sent shivers of pleasure up my spine as he slowly pressed it in and out. I ground into him. It was too big – but I trusted him. He had said that it would fit, and I knew it would.

After a few moments more, I grunted and groaned as his finger stretched me. He knew what I wanted, and he rolled off me. He jumped up from the bed, his cock slapping his abs with a loud pop as he pulled me towards the edge of the bed and rolled me over. I got on all fours. His hands pulled my ass cheeks apart, and his tongue found my hole.

Holy shit!

So hot and wet as he pressed his tongue inside me. His breath tickled my skin. Fuck – he was good at this. Why didn't that surprise me? I lay my face down on the bed as my moans echoed through the room with pleasure. His tongue slowly left my hole, and I felt empty.

I heard the pop of the lube and felt a trickle of it as it ran down my crack. A finger – so far inside me as he pushed the lube into me. It wiggled, and I groaned. Another finger, and I whimpered. My hole stretched and locked around his thick fingers. God, he was so fucking manly that I was practically in heat.

I heard the tear of the condom.

“Jack,” I moaned.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes...” I was breathless with anticipation. I knew this was going to hurt, but I had never wanted to feel pain as badly as I did right now.

“It’ll fit, babe. Trust me. Just give it a few...”

I felt the tip of his cock against my hole, and I grunted as I pushed open for him as he slid it in. My hole burned with pleasure and pain. One inch at a time, he slid himself into me so slowly and carefully that it made me feel more loved than I ever had in my entire life. After this, I knew I would only belong to Jack. I was giving him everything that I had.

“God, it’s... Fuck that is thick.”

“I’m halfway there, babe. Just breathe.”

“Halfway? Are you fucking with me?”

“Nope... Breathe.” He pushed himself further. After a few more moments of him slowly pushing, stopping, and pushing again, I felt his pubes brush up against my ass. “I’m there.”

“I feel like I’m about to explode,” I whined. “Fuck, you’re... It fit. But I’m about to climb off the fucking bed.” I bundled up his cock in my palms as he rotated his hips, and his cock stretched me ever so slowly.

He bent down and kissed my neck as he left himself buried deep inside me. My hope ached – throbbed – clenched around his thick shaft as my body rippled with pleasure.

His hot breath on my neck, his lips, and his fingertips on my skin caused me to shudder as my cock throbbed with its own need.

“I’m really going to fuck you now,” he whispered and rose off of me.

I threw my head back and howled as he slowly pulled out and then pushed back in. My body rearranged itself from the inside as his cock impaled me over and over. I literally crawled on the bed, and he held me in place with his strong hands as his fucking cock took me to places I had never seen. I lost time as he had his way with me. My body vibrated with a kind of pleasure I had never known.

He pulled out and rolled me over before throwing my legs over his shoulders.

He glowed with a red aura that encapsulated us both in its glow. A pure energy of lust and sex that dimmed all the other lights in the room. The look on his face only made him more beautiful as he slid himself back into me. I was so full of him that I threw my head from side to side as he took me.

Slow and easy and then rough and hard, his cock sawed me in half as his muscles rippled. I couldn’t take my eyes off of him. He crawled up on me, and I bent in half as he continued our journey to another world filled with only the two of us and the pleasure that we were each giving. I gave away all control to him, and he took it willingly – this Greek fucking god of a man was mine, and I wanted to hold onto him until the end of time. Until our own souls left our bodies, and we journeyed into the unknown together.

Yes, I would wait for him. How could I not if I were the first of us to go?

“Fuck... You are so tight and... I’m gonna...”

I stroked my cock furiously as he let my legs down off his shoulders and slowly

pulled out of me. He took the condom off and crawled up on top. I opened my mouth, and he placed his cock against it as he stroked himself.

My cum splattered my abs, and his shot out forcefully onto my lips. I licked at it and swallowed as much as I could. He placed his cock on my lips, and I sucked on his head. His moans mingled with mine before we both sighed heavily.

“That was...”

“Everything,” he replied.

“So... Isaac said you loved me?” I grinned.

His face lit up. “Well, Drew said that you loved me first.”

“I love you.”

He bent down and licked his cum off of my chin and then kissed me deeply. The taste of him made me moan.

“I love you, too,” he whispered.

17

Jack

When your world has been turned upside down, you either thrive or drown. I had turned into an Olympic fucking swimmer! My world was brighter than it ever had been. And I owed it all to the bitchiest ghost in the fucking world. Without him, I would never have met Arch. Without him, who knows if I would have slid back into my old ways.

Dying changes you, I guess. It made me a better man. Archie made me want to stay that way. Weeks – it had only been weeks, but it felt like my entire life – my new life, anyway. The old version of me had been put away like a book you never wanted to read again. I had fun, but I also knew how lonely it had been. Now, my life hummed with a newfound energy that inspired and motivated me.

I felt bicoastal at the moment. Archie and I house-hopped between our two houses every night. I also provided him a little muscle with his job. That was the biggest shock of all to my system. The things I had once feared so much were now almost like a craving. Seeing the world through Archie's eyes had expanded my own view of life and death – of the good that can come of helping another when they were in need. That included ghosts.

Thankfully, any ability I might have once had disappeared when Isaac, the very gay ghost, left my house for good. I hadn't seen anything since then, but I now knew that humanity didn't walk this planet alone. The dead were also here, and I had a boyfriend whose entire purpose in life, besides loving me, was helping those spirits

find peace.

He was amazing. He was beautiful, and he was all mine. I was his. A synergy that had changed both of us forever. I couldn't imagine a life without him. How dull and dim it would be.

I gathered my stuff and threw the small duffel bag over my shoulder. A knock on the door made me chuckle. I walked over and opened the door to find my best friend standing there, grinning from ear to ear.

"D! What's up, man?"

"You headed out?" He pointed to my bag. "I didn't think you'd be going to work this late."

"Not my work," I chuckled.

His eyes widened. "Got it. I have news to share."

"Yeah, what is it?" I stepped onto the porch and pulled the door shut behind me before locking it.

"You have time for dinner or a drink?" He ran his hands over his head and shifted his feet.

"Sadly, no. But I'm walking that way if you wanna join me." I pointed towards Santa Monica Boulevard.

"Cool."

I slapped him on his shoulder gently. "So, what's up? I haven't seen you for a little bit. Have you... uh... been busy with someone?"

“Not just someone, bro.” He laughed. “Maurice and I finally had a real breakthrough. “He decided that he was being a dick.”

“Really? Well, it’s about time.” I nodded, already knowing what was happening.

“Yeah, seems like he got some texts from a friend of mine telling him all about love.” He frowned and grabbed me by the arm. “That could have gone poorly, you know?”

“Yet, it didn’t. I didn’t really do much of anything at all except tell him about me and Archie and the power of giving yourself over to love. That was all.”

“Thank you, J. We’re not moving in together, but... We’re back, baby.”

“You’re welcome, Daveed. God, this sunset is going to be stunning tonight. I’m glad that it’s finally started to cool down, though. Even the leaves are beginning to fall.” We walked in silence for a bit.

“You and ghost boy... er... Archie is... I’m glad that I hired him. I mean, your ghost is gone, and you seem so happy.”

“I am. I know it’s only been a few weeks, really, but I love him, D. I can’t imagine a life without him now.”

“You two are perfect together. Even I can see that. I’ve never known you to be so... carefree and light. How are you feeling now?”

“Are you asking if I can still see ghosts? No. It’s a little weird. I kind of miss it. I shouldn’t, but I do a little. Having that connection like Archie has to them – to be able to help them, it’s noble.”

“It still scares the fuck out of me. If the house says get out, you do what?”

“Leave,” I chuckled. “Now, I... It’s different. I’m not as scared of it as I was before. Besides, I have Archie.”

“That you do. Speaking of...” He nodded towards the corner where Archie stood with his hands in his pockets and a light sweater thrown over his shoulders.

I grinned as we approached my very handsome boyfriend. He looked both ways before crossing the street, looking like a million bucks. God, he was so beautiful to me. I opened my arms as we approached, and he ran into them, wrapping me in his own.

“Hi, boyfriend.”

“Hi, boyfriend.” He giggled.

“You two are too fucking cute. Would you two like to go to dinner with me and Maurice this week? He really wants to meet you.”

“Sounds great,” Archie replied happily. “I can’t wait to finally meet him. So does that mean...”

Daveed nodded. “Yep. Seems that since meeting you, Jack here has a way with words of love.”

“I know.” Arch grinned and kissed me on the cheek.

“What are you two up to?” Daveed looked at us. “Is it date night?”

“I have a new client and apparently a new assistant,” he said proudly, taking my hand in his.

“It’s a poltergeist,” I added.

“Isn’t that the kind of ghost that... uh... moves things and causes... Isn’t that dangerous?” Daveed’s eyes grew wide. He worried, and that meant he was the best of friends. I was lucky.

“Someone’s in need, bro. I’m not letting Archie go in there alone.”

“I am shooketh,” Daveed laughed. “Aren’t you scared?”

“No, bro. I’m with Archie. Ready?” I looked at my love and felt my heart fill with him.

“Let’s go.”

We had a family to help and a spirit to show the way home.

My life was fulfilled.

THE END