



SPRIT VLOG  
BOOK FIVE

# SPIRITS and SNOWFLAKES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
JARICA JAMES

# **SPIRITS AND SNOWFLAKES**

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**Cover by: Everly Yours Cover Design**

**Edits by: Michelle's Edits**

# BLURB

*The ghosts lurking in the Bellmore Castle are out for blood.*

After surviving one of the worst investigations of their lives, Brea and her group are ready to finally take on another big haunt.

When they are contacted to explore a modern day castle they don't hesitate to accept. It's in an idyllic town, the location is gorgeous, and the best part? There's snow.

If only things were that simple.

They quickly realize that something dark is roaming the halls of Bellmore. Between near death experiences, crazy visions, and the conflict between good and evil, the team realizes they may be in over their heads.

**Can Brea's abilities help them cleanse the castle of the dark entity, or will this be the first investigation they have to abandon for their own safety?**

This is book five in the Spirit Vlog Series, there are mentions of violence and death in this book. This is a why choose romance that contains spooks, spice, and plenty of mystery.

# TRIGGER WARNING

This book does contain elements of horror, mentions of past abuse and violent deaths, and supernatural attacks.

Please only read if you feel comfortable with those topics.

Stay safe <3

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CHAPTER  
**ONE**

*Brea*

The morning fog was still clinging to the ground as a soft drizzle rained down. For a brief moment, I saw a flash of a ghostly figure just inside the treeline that circled our property.

It was something that seemed to happen a lot more often lately. The witches had suggested that the stress of my encounter with Mack had my abilities amping up and my mental walls falling slightly.

Either way, I was avoiding it like the plague. Before they could notice me tense, I focused on something else.

“If I don’t see a snowflake soon, I’m going to buy a snow machine,” I protested as I stared through the kitchen window at the rain pouring down.

It had been several days of straight rain and gloom without a hint of snow and I was losing my mind.

It felt ridiculous to complain about the lack of winter weather, but as the supposed cold months stretched on, I was getting tired of the lack of snow.

“We could go on vacation somewhere,” Ryker suggested as he brought me a fresh cup of coffee. My sweet boyfriend brushed a kiss over my forehead before taking a seat.

I took a sip and hummed in agreement, though I had no idea where we would go. That was part of the problem with

having a business that required travel. We'd been to so many places that sometimes it felt like there was nowhere left to go.

Onyx ran through the kitchen then, a streak of black fluff that came to a halt in front of her food bowl. She took a few bites then ran off at top speed like a little psycho.

"Even she's getting stir-crazy," Ethan joked as he sat down at the kitchen table with his own mug of coffee. "What we need is a good hunt."

Investigations always slowed down around winter, partially because everyone was too busy with the holidays to deal with anything.

We always had a lull in requests this time of year, even though it wasn't exactly like ghosts took a winter hiatus. People were just too busy to notice them as much.

"Speaking of hunts," Ben said as he walked into the room, his dimples on full display and his brown eyes sparkling. He definitely had something for us. "How do we feel about castles in winter?"

"That sounds more than a little drafty and miserable," Lincoln countered. "An abandoned castle isn't exactly going to have any form of insulation or heat."

His lips twisted into a grimace, and I held back my laughter. Leave it to Lincoln to find the negative side of a real-life castle.

"I never said it was abandoned," Ben said with a laugh.

He had his laptop in his hand and sat right down next to me at the table, opening it to a web page for Bellmore, Washington.

"I've literally never heard of this town," Ethan mused as Ben scrolled through the pictures of the little town. It was idyllic in every way from the mountain backdrop to the fluffy coating of snow dusting the rooftops and grass. The view in person would be amazing.

They even took it over the top by decorating everything with sparkling lights. It looked like something out of a

Christmas card but they boasted it was like that for most of the winter, not just the holidays.

I could get on board with that. This might be exactly what I needed to get out of my own head. It was getting exhausting trying to pretend I was just fine when I definitely wasn't.

“So, this town isn't *just* a town. It was built and kept afloat by the Bellmore family. This is their castle here,” he said, scrolling up and showing a gorgeous castle.

It was everything I expected when he suggested we investigate a castle. The dark stone was perfect and well-maintained. There wasn't even a hint of moss or vines dotting the stone façade.

The landscaping was precise, not a shrub or limb out of place, and even in the winter, they had greenery giving the grounds life.

If this was how well they took care of the outside, I had a feeling the inside would look just as beautiful.

“So, where's the ghostly catch?” I demanded with a raised eyebrow and a bit of sass. There was always a catch. I wasn't exactly antsy to throw our group in danger again. “Is this family as crazy as they are rich or something?”

“There's only one Bellmore heir alive, the daughter Elizabeth. Her father died at the beginning of the year,” Ben explained as he pulled a tin of cookies his way and started nibbling on one and passing a second my way without question.

I bit into the chocolatey goodness and waited for him to give us more details.

“And the haunting?” Ethan prompted, done waiting for him to sort his thoughts.

“That's the thing,” Ben said. “This house was apparently always haunted, but now it's gotten worse. Elizabeth said in her email that they don't go a single day without some sort of weirdness happening. She said if we accept, she's got more stories for us, from childhood imaginary friends to things

happening as an adult. This town and this castle are full of history. With this family at the center of it all.”

“Where would we stay?” I asked around a bite. His smile widened and he looked at each of us for dramatic effect. Give Ben some history and a good location and he apparently got dramatic.

“That’s the thing,” Ben said. “She’s offering us an entire wing at this castle, and it’s fully staffed, so we won’t have to worry about food or cooking for ourselves. All we have to do is stay, and then we get to set up our equipment as we want. There won’t be any guests outside of the staff, and they’ll make sure to be out by dinnertime, so from evening to breakfast time, it’ll be empty except for us.”

“What about her? We’re not going to kick her out of her home.”

“Oh, she’s willingly going,” Ben laughed “She’s going to take a Caribbean vacation from the sound of it. ‘Anywhere warm, with sun, a beach, no snow, and no ghosts,’ were her exact words.”

“The opposite of what we’re looking for,” I snorted.

“And it gets better,” Ben continued. “You remember our first competition where they offered us 10K? She’s offering us a month at this castle for 10K a week.”

“Holy shit,” I breathed out. “That’s insane.”

Even Lincoln couldn’t come up with something to complain about with that kind of money involved.

“I’ll call Mom and make sure she can help keep an eye on the house and Onyx,” Lincoln said.

“You know she’s just going to come pick her up and take her home with her,” Ryker pointed out.

“I’ll pack her stuff up then,” Ben said. He was so excited he was willing to do anything to push this along faster. “Everyone needs to pack. The sooner we get out of here, the sooner we can do this. If everyone is in, I’ll contact her now. It looks like it’ll be one hell of a drive to get there.”

“We’re in,” I said for everyone since not one person had protested. With that kind of money and this location, we’d be crazy to turn this down.

“I’m going to dig out my winter clothes. I haven’t needed them this year, so they’re shoved in the back of my closet,” I said with a grin.

I couldn’t even keep the smile off my face. This entire town screamed snow and winter, all the stuff I hadn’t gotten at home.

I loved our place, but apparently, snow was not in the cards this winter for Shadow Ridge. The most snow we’d gotten were a few flakes that melted within half a day. I wanted a fluffy, big snow we could actually enjoy.

Ben hurried off to make arrangements while the rest of us went upstairs to our rooms. If we were staying at the castle, we wouldn’t need the RV, meaning I’d have to pack light.

That wouldn’t be easy for an entire month-long investigation.

I pulled my biggest suitcase out from the closet and started throwing in an array of sweaters, hoodies, boots, gloves, hats, and the works because there was no way in hell I was just staying inside this castle the entire time.

The entire town of Bellmore looked adorable, and I couldn’t wait. It wasn’t only a vacation, but I was definitely going to treat it like one as well—the best of both worlds.

I quickly moved on to my laptop, a few books, my tablet, and my favorite pair of streaming glasses. Ryker would handle the rest.

Two hours later, I had everything I needed for the trip packed up and moved on to helping Ry with equipment.

With that kind of money involved, we couldn’t play around. It had to be a great investigation.

My stomach was already knotted despite my excitement. We’d done plenty of investigations, but lately, we’d been sticking to quick, local ones. After a crazy investigation at a

lighthouse and the insanity of the mines, I was ready for something new, but also understandably hesitant.

I just hoped it wouldn't be full of danger this time.

This was exactly why we'd settled on never having kids. I couldn't imagine a life where I couldn't just pack up at the drop of a hat, put everything I owned into a few suitcases, and head out for a month.

Sure, we had a home base that I adored. This manor that we claimed as our own meant the world to me. But so did my job. The Darklings hadn't gotten a solid investigation in far too long.

Wanting to tease my viewers a little bit, I pulled out my phone and downloaded a few pictures of castles and ghosts from my go-to stock site, making a post that only said, 'Last-minute destination, who has a guess?'

Chuckling to myself, I pressed enter and then tossed my phone aside, laughing as the notifications started blowing up immediately, one after the other. The constant dinging only made me laugh harder.

That was how Lincoln found me a few minutes later as I was helping wind up extension cords. Ryker was too busy using his checklists in the storage room to even ask about my evil laughter.

"What did you do?" Lincoln questioned, coming over and wrapping his arms around me, placing a kiss on the top of my head.

"Just teasing our viewers," I said as innocently as I could manage before we both lost it. We both knew there was nothing innocent about the post.

"I should have known," he said. "I just ran into Ben as I was heading up. It's confirmed. We told her we'd arrive tomorrow because she asked how soon we could get there. The poor lady sounds desperate."

The reminder had my smile dropping.

“I’m a bit nervous,” I admitted. “It’s been a while since we’ve had an investigation like this, where we immerse ourselves into the place.”

“Are you worried something’s going to happen like last time?” he asked as his hands smoothed through my curls before kneading my shoulders. “We have better protection now. The witches have made sure of that.”

I let out a sigh as I tried to put into words what I was feeling.

“It’s more about not trusting myself anymore. It seems like with each investigation I do, my connection to the dead just increases. It started with me getting feelings and turned into me being able to see the history of things. I feel like I can talk to them and see them way more than ever.”

“I knew something was up,” he said as he pulled me into a hug. I snuggled into his chest and tried to calm my nerves. “Is it happening a lot?”

“No, we have protection here. But anytime we leave, I spot them from time to time. Then sometimes I see them outside of the wards in the trees. I try to ignore it and play it off like it’s no big deal.”

“Why? You know we wouldn’t ever judge you,” he protested, pulling away just long enough to stare down at me. His blue eyes were full of concern. At least he wasn’t hurt by me keeping it to myself.

“I didn’t want to worry you guys,” I admitted. “We’ve all been trying to get back to normal and I didn’t want to ruin that.”

“We don’t keep things from each other,” he frowned down at me. “Promise me that you’ll tell us when things like this happen?”

“I will. Grandma Rose said that my walls might be falling a bit and it’ll happen more frequently. Eventually, if I practice, I might be able to turn it off and on.”

“We’ll make sure to protect our wing so they can’t get to us, so you’ll have a safe place. But otherwise, I think this

could be a good way for you to practice those skills and build up the barriers they're talking about. Have them send us some techniques if you can."

"That's true," I hedged, on the brink of letting go of my worries but I had held onto them for so long I was a bit hesitant. "I don't love that I have to lie to the Darklings or pretend it's just a feeling or a flash of something."

"If you jump or react, it won't be the end of the world. We've been spooked on stream before," he reassured me. The way he answered with a blunt calmness had some of my insecurities draining away. I shouldn't have shut them out for so long. I knew my guys better than that.

"You're right," I conceded. "I just want this one to go well. I want to have time to enjoy the town and the snow, but also to escape a little bit, to throw ourselves into an investigation."

"This is what brought us together, after all. It was winter then, too," he noted. "The Finley Lodge was quite the experience, but I wouldn't change it for the world."

"Can you believe we started as rivals?" I teased. "You hated me."

"Not my finest moment," he said with a shake of his head. He walked around me and sat on a crate, staring up at me. "I was just certain that you were falsifying information, and I—"

"Hate that," I finished for him. "I get it. So do I. I just understood quicker than you did that not everyone has the same gifts."

"I've learned since then," he chuckled. His focus shifted to the growing pile of equipment. "This is a lot."

"We might need to order more equipment, actually. That castle looks huge," I admitted, sitting down next to him and pulling up the information Ben sent us.

The pictures were gorgeous. Inside the castle was full of polished marble, plush rugs, tapestries on the walls, and beautiful art. In fact, there was something fancy and decorative everywhere you looked.



Outside of that, I was shocked to see it also looked inviting. Between all the warm lighting and roaring fires, I could picture myself snuggling under a cozy blanket with a book.

The family had put work into keeping this place modern, yet rustic. It was a shame the only living heir was terrified to step foot on the grounds. Bellmore Castle was one hell of a legacy.

“I wonder if the staff is afraid of being there. She mentioned that there is a cook and maids, right? Probably a groundskeeper and maybe some security,” I pointed out. “At least they’ll be around for questions during the day.”

“That and the locals will have the best information for us,” Lincoln agreed. “Ben’s going to be salivating over this one.”

“So is Ryker, he’s already ordered a ton of equipment that’ll be delivered there over the next few days.”

“Make sure he tells Ben so he can give them a heads up,” Lincoln called out to Ryker.

“Already did!” he shouted back before something crashed in the storage room. “I’m okay!”

We both bit back laughter and shook our heads. I was just happy everyone was throwing themselves into this hunt already.

“When are we leaving?” I asked since he seemed to have more details than I did.

“Ben is just now starting to pack and we need to load up. We’ll leave at dawn. We probably won’t even arrive until pretty late into the night,” Lincoln explained.

He gave me one last kiss before going to get his own things together.

Even as the excitement built, I couldn’t shake the feeling that this was going to be another life-changing investigation.

The more I stared at the photos, the more uneasy I became. On the surface, the castle was gorgeous, but there was something under it all that I couldn’t seem to shake.

There was something dark roaming the halls of Bellmore Castle.

CHAPTER  
**TWO**

*Brea*

“Shotgun!” I yelled as I ran toward the front seat, hurtling over the final boxes of equipment, and sliding in before any of them could reach it. I knew that not one of my men would protest but the excitement of a road trip and investigation won out.

Lincoln caught the door before I could close it, reaching over me so he could buckle me in before going to his own seat next to me.

“You only get to ride shotgun if you pick a solid playlist,” Ethan joked as he slid into the back.

Ryker added the final few boxes to the small trailer attached to the van before getting in as well.

Ben had already set up camp in the very back, answering our emails and finalizing plans for Bellmore.

We purchased an eighteen-passenger van a while back. It had enough room for all of us and a few boxes of equipment. The rest was strapped to the luggage rack on top or piled in the trailer. It made it a lot easier for these huge road trips to just ride in one car instead of taking several.

I missed having my blue, vintage RV on these road trips but I loved having them along far more.

Lincoln had gone out this morning and dropped off Onyx, before putting gas in the van and making sure it was prepped and ready to go for winter, including fresh tires. Traveling

through mountain states during winter was not exactly an easy trek.

“You’ll deal with whatever I choose,” I shot back to Ethan before pulling up my favorite morning mix. It was chaotic and made zero sense, but it was a compilation of my favorites.

They were used to my mixed-genre playlists by now.

The hours on the road passed slowly. We were leaving just after the sun came up, and twelve hours later, we still hadn’t arrived.

“I’m starving,” Ryker finally spoke up, “and I need to stretch.” He groaned as he shifted in his seat.

It had been quiet for the past few hours while everyone but Ben and I took power naps. I’d had one earlier so I could make sure the driver was awake.

“I’ve got you,” Ben promised. He’d taken over driving for Lincoln a few hours ago. “Anything coming up, Brea?”

I pulled up my maps app and started scrolling ahead, looking to see if there were any food stops coming up. It didn’t take long to find a big enough city that we’d have options.

“Yep, four exits ahead,” I promised. “What does everyone feel like?”

“Tacos,” Ethan said.

“Burgers,” Ryker protested.

“Anything,” Lincoln mumbled, his voice rough with sleep. Apparently, we woke him at this point.

“Brea’s pick it is,” Ben said before we could dissolve into pointless, crabby arguing.

No one got along well after twelve hours on the road.

I pulled up the town and searched the choices before landing on one that worked.

“Here, this diner looks like it has a bit of everything, though I doubt they have amazing tacos,” I said, putting it into the GPS so it directed us there.

“Diners have coffee,” Lincoln said around a yawn that only had a chorus of yawns joining his.

“Hey, none of that. We’ve still got a few hours to go,” Ben protested with a groan. You could tell we were tired now. All the joking had been left behind a few hundred miles ago. Now we were all bordering on grumpy.

Road trips always sounded like a good idea until it was a full day of driving.

At least there were enough of us that we could switch off and didn’t have to take as many pit stops.

We pulled up outside of Sunrise Diner a short drive later. We climbed out and stretched our sore bodies for a few minutes before managing to walk to the front door.

“Sit anywhere you like,” a woman in an apron said as she rushed past with a tray full of food.

There were only two other tables at this time of night, so we took the large corner booth at the back. It was big enough to fit us all, so we slid into place and grabbed a stack of menus that were tucked into the holder on the table.

“Well, you look like a bunch of zombies,” our waitress teased as she came over with her pad and pen. “Long day of driving? I haven’t seen you around here before.”

*‘If I had a nickel for every time someone said that to us,’* I thought to myself but put a smile on my face for her. It wasn’t her fault we were exhausted.

“I think we’re going to need coffee all around,” I said instead. “Definitely a long day of driving.”

“I’ll get that while you take a minute to look over the menus,” she said, rushing off before coming over with a tray of coffee mugs, cream, and sugar packets. She even had a little thing of coffee syrups. It was a lot more than I expected to get at a diner, but I wasn’t going to protest.

We all grabbed a mug and flipped it over as she ran off for the coffee. She filled the mugs one by one before putting it back behind the counter. I’d already downed a chunk of mine

without adding anything before she was back with her book, ready to take our order.

“One check or separate?”

“One,” Lincoln said.

“An easy table, that’s what I like,” she said, giving him a wink. He didn’t even look twice, and even I could admit that a satisfied smile graced my face before I could stop myself. Ben gave my thigh a squeeze, biting back his own laughter at the sight.

“Little bit jealous, are we, red?”

“Always,” I shot back, giving him a glare this time before it was our turn to add our order to the mix before she was off, handing the ticket to the cook.

“Alright, so I did some digging on the way, and she sent over some more information. Who wants a little history lesson?” Ben asked.

It took everything in me not to protest but Lincoln just waved him on and brought his coffee to his lips for another long drink. Maybe by the time he finished, we’d be human again.

“She said she’d leave the haunting stuff for our initial tour, but she sent some history over so we would have the background,” he explained.

“Is there really that much to this family to count for a history lesson?” Lincoln asked with a raised eyebrow. His vibrant-blue eyes were full of skepticism.

It wasn’t often that we were called in and realized it was all just stories and no ghosts. But when someone made a huge deal out of their haunting like this, it was a bit harder to believe. One person is a lot less trustworthy than a whole slew of personal experiences.

“Apparently,” Ben said. “The moment I typed Bellmore into my search, a ton of stuff popped up. The family itself is old money. I don’t think I ever found the start of their wealth, they were just *known* to be wealthy. They built this castle

sometime in the 1800s. There's some debate on what date is actually correct but that's not really important."

"Is it all background on the family, or anything supernatural?" Ryker interrupted.

"There isn't a lot about the activity online, except for a few people talking about the town itself. They actually run ghost tours in Bellmore, not the castle."

"So, the town is also haunted?" I asked, a bit shocked. It seemed so cute. Plus, it wasn't often that you found a place packed with supernatural activity. We generally found it contained to one location, not multiple.

Unless demons were involved.

"Yeah, it was established around the same time as the castle itself. Obviously, the buildings and renovations are way newer than they were back then, but there are a few locations listed. The ghost tour goes to a library, an old bank, and a few other buildings in town. You can walk one side of the town and the other in like fifteen minutes. I'm talking *tiny*," he mused.

"Are there any towns around it in case we need supplies?" Lincoln asked. I hadn't even considered that. Thankfully, Lincoln was the one who was always making sure everyone was well taken care of and protected.

At least with them, I always felt safe, and that was something I'd never take for granted. Especially now that they'd helped save me from my stalker.

"Alright, what else do you have for us?" Ryker asked as he took a sip of his coffee. My poor man looked exhausted. His blond hair was messy, like he'd run his hands through it far too many times. There were dark circles under his eyes that looked almost bruised. He never slept well on road trips, and none of us started with a good night's sleep. We were too hyped up from the new investigation and I had a feeling Ry was too busy ordering new equipment to sleep right away.

Ben had to pause before answering as she dropped off all of our food. We stopped talking altogether as we stuffed our

faces. I'd gone for a grilled cheese and fries, downing half of it before Ben jumped back in.

"I did some digging into some gossip sites as well, and it looks like Patrick Bellmore, the late father of Elizabeth, our contact, had some contention. He was not happy about not having a male heir and even more unhappy about the fact that Elizabeth did not want to stay in the house. She'd apparently moved out when she was young and only recently moved back after his death to handle his affairs. According to her, it's temporary."

"Wait, wait," Ethan asked with a snort. "They have rich people gossip sites?"

"Oh, they have gossip sites for everything," Ryker said without skipping a beat. "Humans love to spill the tea."

Ethan shook his head but didn't interrupt again, waving for Ben to continue.

"She's also unmarried and twenty-nine. The horror," Ben joked.

"I'm sure in their circle of debutantes and money, that's unheard of," I said. "Especially for the only heir of a man as proud of his line as Patrick Bellmore."

"Wait, have you heard of him?" Lincoln asked.

I shook my head. "No, but from everything I'm hearing, he cares more about his family line and name in business than he does about his daughter. Happy children don't just move away from their parents at the first possible moment."

"True," Ryker agreed.

"She seemed really nice on the phone," Ben said, "a lot more down-to-earth than I anticipated from the emails. They were pretty formal. She might have had an assistant or somebody drafting them, though."

"Or voice to text, it always makes things seem choppy and formal," Ethan added.

"Is she going to be there when we arrive?" Lincoln asked.



“Yes,” Ben said. “She said she was packed and ready to go. She has a private jet on standby. Once she gives us a look around, she’ll be gone.”

“It must be bad if she’s ready to run,” I said. Again, my nerves started to turn, and I suddenly wasn’t very hungry. Lincoln gave me a side eye as I pushed my plate slightly away.

“Sunshine, it’s going to be fine,” he said, reaching across the table and giving my hand a squeeze.

“What did I miss?” Ethan asked, looking between us and raising a bushy eyebrow.

“Baby, is everything okay?” Ryker demanded, a bit more direct than Ethan was as he eyed me.

“Just nerves,” I reassured them, trying to give a smile but failing. Now I had all of their attention, four sets of eyes stared me down, waiting for me to give them a bit more.

“It’s just after everything with Mack and my—” I trailed off and looked around to make sure nobody was listening in. The waitress was on the other side helping a couple, so we had no ears on us. “Abilities amping up. I’m just a bit nervous. It’ll be fine.”

“It will,” Lincoln said. “No one like Mack is ever going to get close enough to you for anything to happen.” There was conviction in his tone.

“What abilities amping up?” Ethan asked quietly. His eyes were full of hurt and I swallowed down the guilt rising.

“It’s just seeing and hearing more. I’ve been trying to ignore it,” I admitted.

“You don’t have to hide from us,” Ryker said. I heard a grunt as someone kicked Ethan under the table.

“I’m sorry, this is on me. I should have shared but I thought it would just go away if I ignored it. Or maybe hoped it would.”

It wasn’t often that I let my insecurities win, but getting back into a big investigation like this was hard. It brought up some bad memories that I wasn’t willing to repeat.

We couldn't just fly under the radar and pretend we were there on vacation. The Spirit Vlog had gained enough traction that every place that we went to, someone usually recognized us. It was generally the younger crowd, the ones more computer-savvy, but there was always someone coming up to say hi or covertly taking pictures.

We've been careful not to tell anyone where we were about to hunt until it was happening so they had no time to stalk us like Mack did. Unfortunately, some locations we couldn't hide.

I'd teased the Darklings but with something this big, we'd have to say where we were or someone would for us.

What was to stop one of our streams from hitting the wrong viewer?

"I'm sorry, red. I should have looked into security at the castle. I didn't even think about it," Ben said. His voice was off now and I kicked myself for ruining the mood.

"No, don't let my anxiety bring you guys down. This is exciting, and I can't tell you how happy I am to have another long investigation. This is what we love to do, and I can't let my past stop me from enjoying it."

"This is a castle," Ryker said. "There's no way they don't have some sort of security system in place. I doubt it's just some gates that close or anything as simple as that. The amount of money that is shown in these pictures is enough for them to have *something*."

"You're right," I agreed. "It's fine. Bellmore is a small town as well. I'm sure the police would be there within minutes if we needed them. The castle is part of the town, right?"

"It is," Ben agreed. "You've got us, red. Nothing's going to happen to you."

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

*Brea*

**B**ellmore was just as beautiful in person as it was in pictures. The snow started about an hour out, and by the time we arrived, the salt on the roads was the only thing keeping us on track.

At least in towns like this, they knew how to handle snow. This much snow this quickly would have shut our entire town down.

Even as we drove past the welcome sign on the outskirts of town, we could see the castle looming over the smaller buildings of Bellmore. The mountains painted the landscape behind them and the night sky seemed to scroll out forever.

The twinkling lights lining all the houses and businesses in town seemed to rival the stars blinking up above. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen. This town truly seemed like something out of a fairy tale. This was exactly what I wanted.

Lincoln managed to make it to the castle gates without trouble. In less than five minutes of being in town he'd found the gates to the castle.

He paused in front of them and was about to unbuckle and get out before the gate started to slide open.

"I guess she's waiting for us," he muttered as he navigated up the plowed road. There was a new dusting on it, but you could tell that somebody had kept up with it for us. After the hell we went through to get to Bellmore, it was appreciated.

Lincoln parked on the circle drive right in front of the main doors so we could unload a bit easier.

The moment I was out of the car I stretched and took a deep breath of mountain air. It was fresh and crisp and snow was still falling.

“Snow,” I squealed as I blinked up at the falling flakes.

“There’s that smile,” Ethan said, pulling me and kissing me hard. “I was worried for a bit there.”

The front door opened and a woman walked out. I recognized her from the pictures, though she was even more gorgeous in person. Her makeup was practically airbrushed and her dark brown hair was slicked back in a high ponytail.

“You guys made it! I’m so glad,” Elizabeth called out as her high-heeled boots clicked on the steps. How she didn’t slip and fall to her death, I’d never know. I could never walk in shoes like that. I was way too uncoordinated.

“This place is gorgeous,” I told her, looking up at the castle. I couldn’t believe I was standing in front of an honest-to-God castle in America. Sure, we had some ruins here, but this was the first functioning one that I’d ever been to.

“Home sweet home,” Elizabeth muttered, trying to sound enthusiastic and failing. “Sorry. Not to be pessimistic, but this place has been driving me crazy. I’ve never been more ready to leave. My car is already packed.”

“So, tell us what we’re about to face,” Ben said as he walked up, holding out his hand for her to shake. “I’m Ben, by the way.”

“Oh yes, you’re the one I spoke to,” she said, returning the handshake. I was glad that she didn’t give him more than a passing glance before turning and heading up the stairs. “Follow me. I’ll give you a quick tour, and I’ve got the staff ready to meet you.”

There was a line of people standing just inside the door, waiting for our arrival. It was so strange and formal, like she was royalty or something.

“Welcome to Bellmore Castle,” an older woman said. She had sharp, severe features and her white hair was pulled into a tight bun. Everything about her screamed serious, but her eyes were kind. “I’m Margaret, the caretaker here at Bellmore.”

“You’ll be the one who knows all the secrets of this place,” Ethan said, giving her a grin. She offered a smile in return, and it lit up her face, changing her features from severe to beautiful.

“Margaret keeps me sane,” Elizabeth said, giving her a fond smile. The old woman returned it. There was a friendship there, and I was glad to see it.

It would be nice to have someone around that cared about this place. Hopefully, she’d give us good information and not elaborate stories just to up the spook factor.

“This is our cleaning crew. They’ll only be here every other day to do some cleaning. You really shouldn’t get in each other’s ways.” There was a line of at least ten women standing off to the side that Elizabeth pointed out. The only ones you’ll likely talk to are the supervisors. We’ve got Lindsey, Brooke, and Tammy.”

Tammy gave us a nod. “Let us know if you need anything. Or tell Margaret, she runs things here.”

“That she does,” Elizabeth said before turning to the man standing at the end of the line. “Then this is our chef, Logan. He’s a wizard in the kitchen. I think I’m going to miss him the most,” she said with a wink, both of them laughing at Margaret’s half-protest.

“Do you have any sort of security team?” Lincoln asked.

“We do. They don’t stay on the premises, so I didn’t think to mention them before. We have a security system here, and Margaret has the code. She can give you all the information you need for that. But Graham has a little security building just inside the gates. I don’t know if you noticed it. He has someone there around the clock, so you don’t have to worry about anyone just walking up to the front door.”

Him or someone on staff will be there the whole time, so you don't have to worry about anybody coming into the grounds. And if they have any alerts, the police are connected. We've had to put quite a few extensive procedures in place over the years. I'm sure you can imagine."

"We've had some run-ins with some unsavory people, so it's nice to know we'll have somebody to keep us protected," I said.

From the look that she gave me, a sympathetic smile, I knew that she was aware of our history as well.

"You'll be safe here," she promised, then paused as if she thought better of it. "Well, from the living."

"We'd love to hear more about that as well," Ben said. "We're all caught up on the history of your family that was online and the building itself, the town, you get the idea."

"Oh, I know there's plenty of stuff out there," she said. "Some of it is true, a lot not. I try not to pay attention to it. Now on to the fun part."

"I can imagine," I said quickly. The last thing I wanted was her to worry we were believing shitty tabloids and gossip sites.

She turned back to the staff, seemingly unbothered. "Everyone is dismissed; I'll take it from here."

"Come find me after," Margaret said, gesturing to a door off of the main foyer. "My room is just there."

We turned our attention back to Elizabeth as everyone else dispersed. Without them next to her, she seemed tense, looking nervous as she glanced around her. I couldn't help but feel sorry for the woman.

Not only had she lost her father, but she also was being tormented in her own home.

"It would take me a very long time to give you guys a full rundown of this place. Instead, I had Graham print off a map of the grounds and the building for you. It's something we created when we first brought on his security team so they always knew how to get around."

She walked over to a side table and grabbed a stack of papers, handing them over to me. It was a small map, and I did a quick count, nearly gasping out loud at the sheer amount of rooms this place held.

There were two stories plus a set of cellars and the attic. The second floor had four wings, each holding numerous rooms, bathrooms, and sitting rooms.

It would take us an entire month just to make sure that we stepped foot in every room here. No wonder she had a large cleaning staff, it would take forever to keep this place habitable and dust free.

“Let’s start with the main floor, and then I’ll take you to your wing,” she said. “As you can see, this is the foyer.” She gestured around at the large entryway.

It was just as gorgeous as the pictures. The polished marble floors were complemented by navy-blue walls and gold accents. Fine art filled nearly every empty space that wasn’t already covered by vases and statuettes.

Detailed murals lined the ceiling. The one above us depicted the mountains and night sky. The deep blues and swirls of the star-speckled evening mixed perfectly with the room decorations below.

“This isn’t even my favorite mural,” she said when she saw us all stop and stare up at it. “Just wait, this place is a work of art.”

It was crazy that she could be so proud of this place, yet hate it at the same time. I wondered just how bad the haunting was. There was no doubt in my mind that whatever was here was real, but her demeanor was making my nerves amp up all over again.

Elizabeth was already walking away and we had to hurry to catch up, heading down a long hallway before it opened up into a large sitting room.

“This is the closest thing we have to a main hub. This doorway leads to the formal dining room, and then this is

another hallway, which will lead you to the library, some offices—again, the list goes on.”

“How did you not get lost as a child,” Ethan asked with a shocked laugh as she moved further into the main floor.

“Oh, I did. The staff was just trained to find me,” she said with a small smile. “Back then, I didn’t know enough to be terrified of this place.”

“I bet you gave them a run for their money in these halls,” I snorted. “Hide and seek takes on a new meaning.”

She gave me a wicked grin. “I had to find my fun somewhere.”

Elizabeth continued toward the kitchens.

“This one leads to storage and the basement. You couldn’t pay me enough to go down there, never could,” she said, giving the door the side-eye. “I’ve never even been down there.”

“Basements were never my favorite,” I agreed. I definitely wasn’t going to blame her. With a place this big, the basement had to go on for fucking miles.

She continued the tour, showing us elaborate room after room, until we worked our way back to the entryway and to the grand staircase.

“There are plenty of guest rooms, but I had them specifically clean up and prepare the South wing for you. It’s my favorite and has the best view of the mountains,” she promised.

“Oh wow, thank you,” I gasped. An entire wing was a lot and far more than I expected.

Elizabeth waved me off with a smile. “I wasn’t exactly sure of your dynamic or how many rooms you need, but there are plenty to choose from. I also had them clear out one of the rooms completely because I know that you guys like to keep your equipment in one place. There’s also plenty of space downstairs if you prefer that as well. Just tell Margaret what



you need and she'll help you set up whatever data center you need for all of your equipment," she promised.

Ryker's eyes lit up at that. I could already see the wheels turning, planning how to set up a home base like we always did.

"Speaking of which, I believe a few of your deliveries have arrived. Margaret can help you with that. Honestly, Margaret can help you with anything you could possibly need, and she'll be here from morning until evening."

"Does she live in town?" I questioned.

"No, the grounds aren't just pretty landscaping and the security office. We actually have a home that used to be for all of the staff, but we converted it into Margaret's place. Everyone else lives in town or nearby. They just drive in to work. The security team has an office in town as well because they help protect not just this place, but our businesses."

"That makes it seem a little bit less lonely in this castle, huh?" Ethan said.

Elizabeth let out a long sigh that I think she felt in her soul.

"You would think," was all she offered before putting a smile back on her face.

"That's about all I have. Here is a card, I just loaded all of the funds for the month on it. I'll give you the information you need to either transfer it to your own accounts or to just use this card. I went ahead and put Ben's name since he was my contact, but I trust that you can share with everyone," she questioned, raising a perfectly drawn eyebrow.

"Of course," Ben said, taking the next stack of information from her and putting it in his bag for safekeeping.

"I went ahead and added a bonus in case you needed equipment or anything like that. The cook will be here every day unless the weather gets crazy. You can talk to him about allergies and menus. He can literally make anything, and I mean anything. There's been more than one drunken order that he's made for me. And if you happen to need a hangover cure, he's your man."

She said it all in a huge rush. It was nice but quick, giving us a rundown so she could leave as quickly as possible.

“Sounds good,” I said. “Is there anything else we should know about this place?” It didn’t go unnoticed that we didn’t talk about the ghosts at all yet. She brought us here to investigate so she needed to let us know what we would face. This was a big place and far too much to face without at least a few leads.

She glanced from one of us to the other before her shoulders slumped, and she let out a deep sigh.

“This place has always felt a little bit strange. You’re never truly alone at Bellmore Castle,” she said, the words hanging in the air. They were ominous at best and unsettling at worst.

“Most of the activity you’ll hear from staff is things going missing or moving on their own. The occasional door opening and closing. The security team has talked about a few strange things with the cameras. I’m sure you can talk to them about that. Graham is an open book.”

“And you, personally?” I questioned.

“Let’s just say the months since my father died have been terrible. Something here is unhappy either with his passing or with me being the only one left. I’m not sure,” she said, looking down the hall as if something was going to burst out of nowhere and attack her.

This woman wasn’t just lonely, she was terrified, and that left me more than a little bit worried about what we were going to uncover here.

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

*Brea*

**W**e slept through the night and made it through breakfast with no crazy activity. The lack of ghostly interference had settled my nerves a bit. With how scared Elizabeth was, I was fully prepared for our defenses to not hold out.

Though the coven hadn't let us down yet.

My faith was just shaken after the mines.

As soon as we left the room, we were greeted by the cleaning crew. They moved past us to tidy the rooms and fill supplies while we headed to the dining room.

Logan popped out a second later with a bright smile.

“What can I make you guys today?”

“Do you have a specialty?” I asked, curious to see what he'd choose.

“I have an amazing cheesecake-stuffed french toast,” he offered.

“Sign me up,” Ethan said, everyone else easily agreeing.

“Bacon on the side?” he asked.

“Hell, yes,” Ben said. Logan shot us a smile before hurrying out to get started. I felt like a princess having staff to cook and clean for us.

It was kind of nice to not have to take care of the small details and just focus on our work.

Logan was a wizard in the kitchen. He had made some of the best French toast and bacon that I had ever had in my life.

“I’ve got one more delivery coming this afternoon then I think we’ll have everything we need,” Ryker said as he pushed his empty plate away. “We can set up after it gets here. That might take a few hours.”

“We have to learn this maze first,” Lincoln mused. “I got lost finding a bathroom earlier.”

“It’s huge,” I agreed. “We’ll have to do our usual approach of choosing one location each night, or two if we split up.”

“I’m not splitting us up the first night,” Lincoln protested. “Maybe when we’re more comfortable. We have a month, there’s no reason to rush things.”

“Let’s go for a walk in town while we wait,” Ben suggested. “That’ll give the staff a bit more time to work in peace, and then we can set up this afternoon after the rest of Ry’s stuff gets here.”

“That works... I need to plan how to do this. I’m a bit overwhelmed,” Ryker admitted. “This place is huge, and I don’t have enough equipment to do the entire place even with what I ordered. They have enough security feed going that it’ll help a ton but we might need to set up individual areas as we investigate them. I’m going to go meet with Graham before we head back. He’s supposed to be in his office today.”

“I’m in. I want to grab a coffee in town and get a lay of the land,” I said. The prospect of spending the afternoon in the snow and exploring the town had any lingering anxiety drifting away.

It felt wrong to leave the mess on the table but the staff insisted last night that we leave it for them.

We all hurried upstairs to put on something warmer. The flannel shirt and jeans I had on definitely weren’t warm enough.

I put on several layers of clothes before pulling on my coat, hat, gloves, and scarf in hopes it would ward off the wintery cold.

The longest we'd have would probably be from the front doors to the end of the driveway. Even then, I knew we wouldn't need to drive our way through town. It would be a waste of gas and time, plus I wanted to experience it firsthand. I'd never lived anywhere like this and wanted a local experience.

Now that it was daylight, we could see the small security building waiting just inside the gates. There was a small pathway that led up to it, and an ATV parked outside in case they needed to hurry up to the castle.

Before we could pass by, a man stepped out. He had silver hair and a thick mustache. He was wearing an all-black security uniform and had a gun holstered at his side.

"You must be the ghost hunters," he said. "I'm Graham, head a security here."

"I'm Brea," I offered with a friendly smile. He studied me before looking at Ben and then, one by one, the men told him their names.

The man studied each of us, committing our faces to memory, before finally looking back at Ryker.

"I hear you needed to see me. I'm available now if you are?"

"Yes, sir," Ryker said, giving a nod of respect. "I'd love to go over what your security feeds cover so that my cameras can cover the rest."

He frowned at Ryker's words. "We don't usually allow cameras in the castle," he said. "You are the exception."

"Noted. We won't do anything to compromise security here," Ryker promised before turning to us. "I'll catch up to you guys in a little bit."

"You sure?" Lincoln asked, studying him for any sign of nerves.

“Positive,” Ryker said. “I’ll catch you guys up when we get back.”

Normally, I wasn’t a fan of splitting up, but I also didn’t want to sit through an hour-long conversation about security system software and the layout of this huge place.

“Call us if you need us,” Ben said, looking just as reluctant as I did to part ways. He eventually wrapped his arm around my shoulder and forced us both to walk away.

“He’s fine,” I reassured us both. “When did we get so needy?”

“When you were kidnapped,” he deadpanned. “I’m going to need you to never do that again.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said with a snort. “It definitely wasn’t my favorite experience.”

“No more talk about that,” Lincoln said, giving us both a glare. I reached for his hand and wrapped my fingers around his. “Focus on this town. We’re here for a fresh start, right?”

“Right,” I agreed.

We’d just stepped into the street heading toward the main square. The town itself reminded me of one of those German villages, where one building merged into the next with the same architectural style outside.

The signs helped differentiate the shops from each other. I was genuinely surprised to see the variety they had here. There was a bit of everything from hair stylists, to a grocery store, a row of boutiques, cafes, a less casual restaurant, and a pet store.

Flyers were hung up on bulletin boards throughout the walk talking about the vendor fairs every Saturday and Sunday through the winter, barring inclement weather.

“We have to check that out at least once while we’re here,” I said, pointing it out.

“Hell yeah,” Ben agreed. “They usually have flea-market-style finds. I bet I could find a few cameras for my collection.”

“There’s the coffee shop,” Ethan said. “With a bakery next door.”

“You didn’t get your sweet tooth satisfied with breakfast?” Lincoln asked, horrified at the thought of more sugar.

“Nope,” Ethan grinned.

“I’m with Ethan,” I laughed. “Don’t worry, you can go for a run later if you want.”

“I’ll have to if I keep eating Logan’s food,” Lincoln said. “That breakfast was more than I can usually handle. It was amazing, but I’m used to a quick breakfast and run.”

“You can get back to it next week,” Ethan said. “I probably should join you. Though, I’m not giving up Logan’s food.”

“I swear all you two think about is snacks.”

“And coffee,” I corrected Lincoln.

He shook his head but didn’t argue any further. He knew damn well what we were like, and he loved it.

His focus shifted from us to the town, slowly scanning our surroundings and eyeballing anyone walking around. He was always vigilant, planning ahead, making sure that we were safe.

I’m sure my questioning whether this would go smoothly wasn’t helping the situation. I felt bad for projecting my anxiety on him, but it was nice to know that he was taking it seriously.

That, and we had an entire security staff at the castle. It was nice to know if we ran into anyone with a bit too much interest in what we were doing that we had an escape.

It took us about fifteen minutes to take in all of the businesses. Behind the circle of businesses was a circle of homes, some small, some bigger, and all well-maintained. Everything in this town seemed a little too perfect, but then again, for them, it was still tourist season.

As we passed another bulletin board I noticed flyers for ghost tours and shuttles to a ski lodge nestled in the mountains

nearby. The entire town catered to winter, and even during the day, the twinkle lights were glowing and everything seemed just a bit removed from the fast pace of society.

It was refreshing.

The fact that we also had a good signal out here was a bonus. It was the best of both worlds because half of our work relied on technology. We could never truly escape it, nor did I want to. I just needed a change of pace.

Bellmore was exactly that.

“The coffee gods have spoken,” Ethan said, shifting direction and leading us straight to the coffee shop, Mountain Roast. It wasn’t as small as I imagined. There were plenty of tables and nearly every single one was full. I guess in a small town filled with snow and icy temperatures, they took their warm drinks pretty seriously.

“Oh my God, you’re from the Spirit Vlog!” a girl yelled out, the entire place descending into pure silence as everyone in the room turned to look at us.

The girl in question was wearing all black, from her lipstick to her ripped jeans to the oversized band t-shirt she was wearing.

“Hi,” I said awkwardly, giving them a little wave. I used to be a lot more weird about being approached, but now I’d almost gotten used to it. Though... no less awkward.

“Are you guys here for the castle?” she asked. She hadn’t sat back down, nor had anyone else started to speak. Literally, they were all hanging onto our words.

“We are,” I admitted. “We’ll probably also do the ghost tour at some point. We want the full Bellmore experience.”

“My dad runs that,” she said excitedly. She was practically vibrating, she was so hyper. She waved at the man sitting at her table. He turned around to face us when she first walked in but had turned away soon after. He seemed a bit more reserved than his daughter.



His eyes were full of amusement as he nodded his head in greeting.

“It’ll be nice to have some like-minded individuals around,” he said, giving us a wink. “Now, sit down, Sadie. Let them have their coffee. Not everyone is used to this cold.”

“That’s for sure,” Lincoln grumbled as he blew hot air onto his fingers.

That seemed to break the silence in the room. A few people chuckled as they turned back to their conversations. The noise level picked up to a normal volume again and I let out a breath of relief.

Now that the attention was off of us we walked further into the shop and took our place in line.

The barista worked through the two ahead of us before giving us a bright smile.

“Welcome to Mountain Roast, What can I make for you?”

“I’m going to need a caramel latte with an extra shot of espresso,” I said before Ethan piped in.

“I’ll take the same.”

“Americano for me,” Lincoln added.

“Hot chocolate,” Ben added. “Actually, make that two,” he said, turning to us. “I’ll take another one to Ryker.”

“On it,” she promised, tapping into the register and letting Lincoln pay before she waved to the few tables that were now unoccupied. “You can take a seat, and I’ll bring it out to you when it’s done.”

We’d barely sat when Sadie was turning back to us. Her father tried to protest, but this is exactly what we needed. The locals would be the ones with the stories.

Elizabeth probably had plenty of horror stories of her own, but she was a bit hesitant to share them all. I wasn’t sure if it was fear or worry that held her back, but we wouldn’t judge her. This was our job and passion, we were the least likely to not believe her.

The local stories might help us figure out what went wrong at Bellmore Castle. Especially if the haunting stemmed from the town itself. There was a ghost tour here after all.

“Have you seen anything at the castle yet?” she asked.

“We just got in and slept there last night,” I said, “but nothing so far.”

“It always acts up when the snowstorms blow in. I’m sure we’ll have one before too long,” she said with a knowing grin. “It’s only an every-other-week occurrence this time of year.”

She rolled her eyes, earning a chuckle out of a few people who had turned to listen in again.

“She’s right on that one. It’s always been like that here. On the dark, snowy nights you’re more likely to hear voices on the wind or have eerie things happen,” an old man added as he sipped his mug of black coffee.

“Can you tell us any stories about the town or the castle?” Ben asked in an offhand voice. He might be acting as if it was a casual question, but we knew damn well he was salivating for more of the local history.

“Oh, I’ve got a few,” Sadie’s dad said, nodding slowly and rubbing the stubble on his chin. “Every Christmas they have a community dinner up at that castle. A few years ago, while Patrick Bellmore was still alive and running them, I went. It had gone on a little later than usual. The dinner was done, and drinks were being served, and I stepped away to go to the bathroom. It was a bit of a trek from the dining hall, that place is huge.”

“I got lost finding that same bathroom this morning,” Lincoln said with a shake of his head. “And we have maps.”

“The sound of the party was muffled the further I moved into the castle. My footsteps echoed in the hall as I walked.”

The man stopped talking and glanced around, a small smile on his face. He was clearly a storyteller and was loving the engagement he was getting from the room.

Hell, even I was hanging onto his words, wondering what was going to happen next. It had been far too long since we had been somewhere with this much history.

This might be the first time this many locals were willing to share, too.

“I had just found it and started opening the door when something pushed it closed. Of course, I thought I was about to walk in on someone and was horrified. I apologized profusely through the wooden door.”

“Was anyone there?” someone asked in a hushed voice.

He chuckled. “Well, I could even hear someone moving around on the other side, but I also heard sobbing. So, I leaned forward, pressing my ear to the wood, just listening to see if I truly had heard someone crying.”

He paused again and I bit back a laugh. This man was living for the crowd’s reactions.

“What did you hear?” an older man asked, his eyes wide and face a bit pale now. Clearly, everyone wasn’t loving the thought of ghosts so close to home. Ironic since the town seemed to embrace them.

“Silence. I called out to the woman. I asked if everything was all right, and apologized again, but there was nothing. I put my hand up to knock on the door one final time but barely got one knock out when it sent the door swinging open like it was never closed in the first place.”

“No!” a woman whispered as she fought back a shudder.

“There was a slow creak before it revealed a dark room. I ran my hand along the wall, reaching for the light, and when I flicked it on... empty.”

There was a collective gasp at the conclusion of his story, and I almost had to bite back my laughter. I believed every word of it, but damn, the man could tell a story. He was going to make the ghost tour amazing, and I couldn’t wait to go on it.

“That’s not the only haunted place in town,” Sadie said quickly.

“My wife is a librarian,” a man in the crowd yelled out.

Sadie took a sip of her coffee and raised it to the room as if giving a toast.

“When she first started, they told her about the historical section. Apparently, it was widely known to be a bit of a mischievous ghost.” He chuckled. “They would put things away, and then all of a sudden the books were stacked along the floor. Then when they’d go to get a cart to help them sort it and come back to the books right back on the shelf. Nothing out of place.”

“Oh, that’s nothing, Harry, I swear” a woman said, waving him off. “One time at the grocery store I was getting ready to close up shop. I checked out the last customer and did my usual sweep to make sure we didn’t miss anybody. We have those old mirrors up in the corners. You know what I’m talking about, those circle mirrors to make sure you can see around?”

We nodded to let her know we were following and she continued, barely taking a breath in between.

“I could see somebody in the back aisle. They weren’t pushing a cart, but they were walking along in a long, black coat. At least I thought it was a coat. It was long... could have been a cloak. Maybe it was a grim reaper,” she said, freaking herself out now.

“Oh, you’re full of shit,” somebody in the crowd said. She just scoffed, flipping them off, not even the least bit deterred by their skepticism.

“I would agree with you if it wasn’t for the fact that I never found a single soul. I walked those aisles twice, and when it was still empty, I locked up for the night. There would have been no way for them to get out without the doors being unlocked in the morning. There was no one ever there.”

“This town is full of stories like this,” Sadie said to us as the others started bickering like siblings. “I’ve heard them my whole life, so if you want to know anything, feel free to ask.”

“Oh, I’ve got one,” somebody else said.

“My brother used to be the caretaker at the old cemetery. He would talk about how at night you would hear whispers on the wind. Then on foggy nights he could hear the clattering of bones like the dead were walking again.”

I shivered at the picture he was painting. Cemeteries usually didn't hold a lot of activity. Ghosts haunted the places they frequented, not the places they were resting. Yet the way he spoke with a slight waver in his voice told me it was no joke.

“What about the lake?” I said. “I saw there was a lake next to the castle. Anything spooky about that?”

“Oh, there're tons of stories of faces under the ice,” Sadie's dad said. “That's actually one stop on the tour. You should definitely take it.”

“Oh, we will be, I promise.”

The afternoon continued on with story after story. Eventually, Ryker joined us again. Ethan handed over his lukewarm hot chocolate and settled in.

They paused the story long enough for him to get comfortable before continuing on. Ben took notes the entire time. If this continued the way it was, he'd have an entire notebook by the time we walked away.

This was the most welcoming a town had ever been to us. We've been everywhere from big cities to small towns, but this one had a sense of community that I didn't think I'd seen anywhere else.

There was a camaraderie between them, a joking teasing that you only find among families and siblings. Bellmore itself had welcomed us with open arms and it only made me like this cute, little town more.

The citizens were definitely talkers. As soon as one person finished a story, another was taking its place. They went on like that, one after the other, until they'd given us a full local history.

“Don't even get me started on the hardware store.” We shared a look as they kept going, trying to one up each other. I

had a feeling half of these were made up but I was loving every second of it.

CHAPTER  
FIVE

*Ryker*

“God, I’m freezing,” Brea said as she pulled off her coat. We had already kicked off our boots, but wet snow was melting along our coats and hats.

Her face was rosy, but there was a big smile on it. It was a far cry from the woman who sat at the diner telling us how afraid she was.

The talk with the locals seemed to fill us all with excitement again. We were ready to dive into our investigation and see what connections we could make.

I wanted this to be what it used to be for us. Not just an investigation, but our passion.

“I’ve got a few ways I could warm you up,” I teased. The sight of her smiling and happy had me wanting to touch her, to kiss her. “Have you seen the shower here?”

Her eyes darkened at the offer and she slowly started slipping out of her clothes, dropping her sweater and then a long-sleeve shirt before finally revealing her lacy bralette.

The red was stark against her creamy skin and my cock was already straining against my jeans. Minutes ago, my skin had felt numb but now it was warming swiftly as I took her in.

She continued pulling off her jeans and a layer of leggings underneath to reveal the matching set of high-waisted panties.

They curved around her ass perfectly. She turned around and bent down, pulling them off of her ankles.

It was just an excuse to show off her ass because she knew it was my weakness.

“Now you have no choice, baby,” I growled, running my hands over her skin to warm it up. She yelped at my cold fingers.

“Oh hell no, you have to warm those up first,” she said with a laugh. The sound was free and my cock twitched in response.

I stripped out of my clothes as quickly as possible so I could join her as she hurried into the adjoining bathroom.

She had the water on by the time I got there. It was a waterfall showerhead and the steam was already rising in the room.

“Now this is what I needed,” she hummed in appreciation. “Get your ass in here.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I teased, stroking my cock slowly as I walked into the open shower, watching as the water rolled down her full breasts to the soft curve of her hips then cascaded down her toned legs.

“You’re gorgeous, Brea,” I said in a husky voice. I ignored the water and moved behind her, circling my arms around her and pressing my chest into her back, cupping her breasts in my hands.

She smelled like coffee and her sweet perfume and I ran my nose along her neck, breathing her in. Just that scent alone had me aching for her. It was uniquely her and got me every time.

My chest warmed as I held my girl. I’d almost lost her once and even if she was the only one to admit it, my own anxiety was bubbling under the surface.

There was no place for that here. Not now. All I needed was her.

I ran my tongue over her wet skin before nibbling along her shoulder.

Her soft sighs were one of my favorite fucking sounds.



“Tell me what you want, Baby,” I whispered in her ear, grinning as a shiver ran through her. She was so responsive, always reacting to every touch

“I think that’s obvious,” she teased, putting her hands on the wall of the shower. There was enough room in here that the spray covered her even in her new position.

I kicked her legs apart and let my hands trail slowly over her skin. It was warm to the touch now and I followed her over, leaving a trail of nibbles down her spine.

She might be needy now but I wanted her dripping and desperate for me. I was going to take my time until she was there.

I had plans to worship every fucking inch of her body.

“Fuck, Ryker,” she gasped as I dipped my hand between her legs, skimming over her slick folds. She tried to widen further but I was already moving on, running my fingers over her hips and giving her a squeeze.

When I reached her ass, I kneaded the soft flesh and bit back a smile as she sent a glare over her shoulder.

“Ryker, fuck me,” she demanded. “I need you.”

“You’ll have me in a minute,” I promised her as I dropped to my knees. “Turn around for me, baby.”

When she turned around I placed a kiss on her stomach as my hands trailed down her legs, massaging her calves until she was moaning in bliss. Her hands steadied on my shoulder, nails digging into my skin as her head fell back. Even in this aspect, she was responsive. I loved that she let me know what she was enjoying even if it wasn’t with words.

I shifted one of her legs over my shoulder. It put her pretty pink pussy in front of my face and I breathed in her scent. My cock throbbed painfully and I gave it a squeeze and a few slow strokes as I leaned forward, running my tongue over her from ass to clit.

Letting go of myself, I held her in place. She was already grinding her pussy into my face, demanding more and I wasn’t

letting her take over control.

I swirled my tongue around her core and she moaned, low and long, my name falling from her lips. Her voice held a hint of desperation and a rasp of lust that sent a shock of need through me.

“You’re doing so good for me, baby,” I praised before sucking hard on her clit. She cried out and I held her firm, spearing my tongue into her core and fucking her ruthlessly as she fought against me.

Her nails bit into my shoulders as she whimpered against the onslaught of pleasure. I was unrelenting, tasting and taking what I wanted from her. I knew exactly what she needed but I wasn’t ready to give in yet.

“Alright baby, take what you need,” I said as I loosened my hold. She didn’t hesitate to suffocate me with that perfect cunt. She pushed against me as I licked and sucked at her with a desperation I felt in every inch of my body.

When she started to shake I pushed my fingers into her core, sucking on her clit as she writhed against me.

It wasn’t long before her walls were clamping around my fingers and she was pulling at my hair.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” she cried out as she gave in, riding out the waves of pleasure until she was gasping for breath.

As her aftershocks slowed, I moved away and sucked in a breath, standing and turning her back around. She braced herself against the wall and I barely let her get into position before I was burying my cock in that swollen pussy.

We both let out a sigh of pure fucking bliss as her body enveloped me with her warmth. She squeezed around my cock as she pushed back against me.

“Fuck baby, I’m not going to last,” I groaned. “Not when I’m buried inside you like this.”

Her breathing was ragged and I could smell sex in the air. She’d already come once and was so hot around me now as she fought off a second orgasm.

“Ryker, please,” she begged me as she fought to take in a full breath.

I gripped her hips and slammed into her hard and fast until the sound of our skin slapping together was the only sound in the air.

We both probably looked half drowned as the water cascaded around us but I barely noticed.

I was living in this moment with her and nothing else mattered.

Pleasure coiled in my stomach and tightened my balls. I knew it was only moments away and I reached around, pushing my fingers against her clit.

Brea rode my fingers, seeking out her own release and I bit down on her shoulder, barely keeping it together.

When her pussy pulsed around me, I finally let go, crying out as I filled her with my cum. She was killing me tonight, the feel of her too much. My body tensed as I rode out the waves of pleasure coursing through me.

“Fuck,” she breathed out, “I needed that.”

“Me, too,” I admitted as I caught my breath. When I released her she started to move toward the water but I stepped in, slowly cleaning every inch of my girl. She groaned as I massaged her shoulders and back, then moved onto her hair. The scalp massage nearly turned her into a puddle.

“That feels so fucking good,” she groaned.

When she was finished I finally took my own shower, washing my body and hair quickly.

She shut the water off and grabbed two towels, handing me one before wrapping the other around herself and then grabbing a third to dry her hair.

We didn't speak again until after we were dressed, just living in the afterglow. We'd barely pulled on our clothes and started putting on our shoes when a knock sounded on the door.

“If you guys are done fucking, we have an investigation to set up!” Ethan called out. There was laughter in his voice as Brea and I cracked up. She went and unlocked the door, letting him in.

“Don’t worry, we’re done,” she said before turning back to me. “Did you pick a room for the data center?”

“Elizabeth suggested there was one up here, but I think it’d be better to do the main floor. Especially if we’re going to start there. I don’t think we’ll have time to do an investigation until maybe tomorrow night, but I’d really like to get things set up and get some footage rolling.”

“We’re all at your command,” she promised, leading the way out the door with me and Ethan trailing behind. Lincoln and Ben were waiting at the other end of the hall.

“I already moved most of the equipment downstairs. I figured that’s where you were going to set up,” Lincoln said.

“Perfect,” I agreed. “Show me where.”

Lincoln took the lead, not stopping until we were down in the foyer. There were stacks of boxes off to the side. Margaret must have heard us; her door opened, and she stepped out, giving us a warm smile.

“I take it everybody settled in alright?” she questioned. “I saw you visited the town. Actually, I hear you caused quite the uproar.”

She let out a laugh and shook her head.

“They’ll jump at any opportunity to tell their stories, won’t they?”

“It was actually kind of nice. We don’t usually have as many locals opening up. Usually, we have to drag stories out of people.”

“Oh, not around here,” she promised.

“We were actually just talking about where to set up our screen so we can watch all the monitors. Do you have a suggestion?”

“I actually had the maids and our groundskeeper help move some things out, so there’s an empty room just down the hall,” she said, opening the door that led to the hallway Elizabeth had shown us on the tour. The offices and library were down here and I made a mental note to peek around before we got too deep in setting up.

Margaret stopped and pushed open a door, revealing a mostly empty room. They had a few tables pushed along the walls and several chairs. It would be perfect.

“There are plenty of outlets in here,” she promised. “Do you need help carrying stuff in?”

“No, I think we can take it from here, I promise.”

“Good luck,” she said. “I’m about to head out for the night, but on that bulletin board is all the contact information you need. I’ll be around.”

“Thank you, Margaret,” we said, waving at her as she headed out. She seemed much more relaxed than she did when we first met her. It was nice having her around and she was as helpful as Elizabeth had promised.

Lincoln glanced at his watch. “We’ve got about an hour before Logan serves dinner. We should get started.”

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### *Brea*

THANKS TO MARGARET and the staff doing most of the prep work, we were able to dive right into setting up the data center. Ryker had more monitors than I’d ever seen him set up along the tables, but the long room and all the space meant that he had no trouble fitting everything in.

He had his usual cases with our wireless equipment, cameras, and any other ghost hunting equipment we needed occupying another table already. He was a machine when it came to set up, but I was impressed at how quickly he’d managed this one.

The equipment we needed to cover the main floor was stacked near the door. We all started grabbing cameras and extension cords, then heading different directions to get footage everywhere we could.

The first door I opened was a cozy lounge. There was a large fireplace and plenty of comfortable seating. A polished wood bar was off to the side and fully stocked. I made a mental note to tell the guys about it. This might make for a nice room to relax in at some point.

I set up two cameras in the room: one on the bar facing the main portion of the room, and then one near the doorway facing the bar so there was no inch of the room left unmonitored.

Ryker had gone all out when ordering. Our cameras had plenty of audio equipment attached, meaning that we'd hear and see pretty much anything that happened to this portion of the house.

I was just plugging the camera and extension cords into an outlet when I stood up and froze. A cold crept along my skin and my breath caught in my lungs.

There was a woman in a long, elegant dress sitting at the bar. It was dark, and I couldn't make out the exact color since I could see right through her.

My fears about my powers getting stronger were definitely on point. It wasn't often that I saw a full entity just sitting here like this.

I didn't know what to do or say, I was frozen as I stared at her.

She started singing. It was a haunting melody but beautiful in its own right. Her voice was melodic as she sang along to music I couldn't hear. She was tapping her fingernails against the bar as she smiled at someone behind it.

I couldn't see them and I had a suspicion she was living in a moment in the past, unaware of my presence.

Using her as a focus, I shifted the camera, making sure that I could see exactly where she was. I doubted that we'd find

anything on camera like what I was seeing in person, but I tried not to react or panic.

It wasn't fucking easy. This was insane.

My heart pounded as I worked and my head was swimming by the time I finished.

She still hadn't responded by the time I'd set it up, so I slipped out of the room as quietly as I could. A soft hand touched my shoulder, and the scream I let out echoed on the walls.

"Holy shit, angel, what's wrong?" Ethan said, turning me around to face him. My eyes were wide as I studied him and he glanced behind me to see what I was panicking about.

"This place is definitely haunted."

CHAPTER  
**SIX**

*Brea*

“Shut up, it’s actually a castle!” Astrid gasped as she leaned closer to the screen like she could see more of the room by getting closer to her phone. Her eyes were full of excitement as she looked around me.

I switched the view away from my face and panned the room slowly. I was standing in the dining room, but her reactions had me wanting to show her even more.

“Just wait,” I teased as I slowly walked through the main floor, showing her everything from the foyer to the library.

“Oh my God, that’s like out of *Beauty and the Beast*. Swoon.”

“I had the same thought,” I said as I looked around the giant library. There were rows of bookshelves filled to the brim. They had everything from classics, to sci-fi, horror, biographies, and even some smutty romance.

I had a feeling that Elizabeth was behind those last additions, and I chuckled, thinking of what her father would have said about that.

Everything I heard about Patrick made him seem like he lived and breathed status and power. I doubt he even stepped foot in here to read unless he was adding some rare first editions.

“How does the place feel, though?” she asked, more serious now. I turned the camera back around as I flopped



down on the couch.

Astrid was studying me, her hot-pink hair swinging in front of her face. She had on her usual dark makeup and grinned when she saw me staring.

“You like the new pink?” She posed a few different ways before we were both laughing.

“It suits you,” I said. Then again, every color I’d seen her wear suited her. Astrid was just gorgeous.

It was nice to talk to a friend. It had been a while since we had one of our chats. She’d started her own kitchen vlog, which was going amazing, but between both of us, it was hard to find time like this.

“Something is definitely off here,” I finally answered her original question. “But I don’t feel like all of it’s bad, if that makes sense. There’s so much history here in these walls. I don’t think that every ghost we’re going to encounter is going to be the scary kind.”

“Well, that’s a nice change,” she said with a dark laugh. “A lot better than that terrible amusement park. It’s ruined me for theme parks for life.”

“No children yet either,” I tacked on. We both shuddered at that before laughing.

I fell silent as I thought about the ghost I’d seen earlier. She studied me for a second before narrowing her eyes. “So, what’s wrong? There’s something off about you.”

We’d talked a few times about my abilities and what I could do, and they always speculated that I could manage even more if I tapped into the right energies. I’d always marked it off as me being a little sensitive to the supernatural.

They weren’t convinced.

I guess they were right in the end. Here I was seeing and hearing the dead without any real effort.

And that terrified me.

“Yesterday when I was setting up in the den, I saw a ghost, Astrid. She didn’t notice me or react at all. She was fairly solid, transparent but opaque enough that I could make out her features, her dark dress, and her painted nails.”

Astrid’s eyes and smile both widened.

“Brea, that’s amazing! That means that you’re really opening up your third eye. I think you would see even more if you gave yourself a chance. You like to hold yourself back, and I don’t blame you. You’ve seen some scary shit. But if you opened it even further and learned how to keep some boundaries in place, the possibilities are endless.”

“I don’t know if I *like* the possibilities,” I muttered. “I feel like I’ve just been scared ever since the mines.”

“You’re strong, Brea. You made it out of that place alive. You did what you had to do to protect you and your men. That’s how you kept your life. You’re safe now. It’s okay to embrace what you can do. We’ve taught you how to keep your walls up, how to not let anything negative get past. You’re ready for this.”

“How do I open up?” I questioned. The pride on her face had my cheeks flushing, the warmth creeping up from my neck. Being a redhead meant that my emotions were always on display like that.

“Don’t be embarrassed, girl, this is amazing. I’m so fucking proud of you for giving it a shot.”

“Ugh, stop,” I groaned, hiding my face.

“Okay, okay,” she conceded. “Honestly, I would start with meditating. There’s a difference between psychic walls and mental blocks and once you figure that out, it’ll become second nature. I think you’ll be surprised how quickly the ghosts come to you once you’ve got the walls down. Be open to the spirits, really listen.”

“Sounds complicated,” I groaned.

“No, don’t worry. Think of it like a filter. You let in some things but keep yourself protected. Right now, you’re blocking them out completely. They can’t talk to you if you don’t let

them. I bet you the ghosts here have way more stories than those locals.”

“I’ll try that,” I promised. She paused when someone came in the room and nodded before turning back to me. “I’ve got to go, but I can’t wait to talk to you later. Give it a try.”

She blew me a kiss and ended the call before I could even utter a goodbye.

“Okay, Brea, you can do this,” I muttered to myself.

She was right, though. I was blocking myself. It was the only way I knew how to keep myself safe. As a kid I kept myself guarded from getting hurt, then as an instigator I kept my walls up to not let fear win.

Now I was just overly cautious.

Yet I couldn’t argue the fact that if I could see and hear the dead, then we would protect ourselves better. The ghosts could warn us about the darker spirits and give us insight we wouldn’t have before.

With a deep breath, I let my eyes fall closed. I used the tricks that Astrid had taught me to fall into a deeper meditation.

First, I concentrated on the sounds around me. There was a soft patter of snow against the window, a crackling of the fire that the staff had lit earlier in the day, the sound of the vent blowing air into the room.

Then I concentrated on my other senses. Warmth against my skin from the heat, the scent of books hanging in the air, filling it with musty paper and ink.

Then I pushed past that, mentally picturing some of my mental walls dropping. The air around me shifted, the heat giving way to cold, and I felt a set of eyes on me.

I clenched my teeth together, refusing to scream when I opened my eyes.

As my eyes cracked open I saw a man standing in front of me. His head was cocked to the side as he studied me.

He was wearing an old-style suit minus the jacket and the vest was buttoned around his rounded stomach. He had a beard so white it was hard to make out against his pale features.

He didn't speak, so I decided to break the silence.

"Who are you?" I asked, keeping my voice as calm as possible. I didn't speak loudly, but he heard me nonetheless. His head tipped back to the proper position, and his eyes widened.

"You can see me?" His voice had a wispy quality to it despite being strong. The reverberation of it sent a shiver down my spine and goosebumps over my skin.

"I can," I confirmed. "Who are you?"

"My apologies, miss. My name is Remington, Remington Bellmore." The way he said his name with pride, puffing out his chest a little, meant that he thought I should know who he was.

I racked my brain for all of the history that Ben had imparted on us in the last few days, but I was coming up blank.

"What year was it when you died?"

"I died?" He gasped dramatically. My jaw dropped as I realized he might not know he was dead.

Before I could utter a hasty apology he started to cackle. It quickly dissolved into a full belly laugh that had his form flickering in and out of view.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't resist," he said, chuckling softly to himself now. "It's hard to remember the details of my former life."

"Is there anything you do remember?"

He didn't answer right away. His smile had fallen and he looked melancholy now. My heart ached at how lonely he likely was.

"I remember my wife's name was Maisy. We had a son. The rest is..." he trailed off.

“We’ll help you remember,” I promised. He needed a subject change, I was losing him. “You’re going to see some new faces around here. My team and I are investigating the castle. We’re ghost hunters. Elizabeth, the current Bellmore heir, is having some trouble staying here. She’s scared.”

“Most of us are harmless,” he said. His eyes darted to the side nervously and his form wavered again.

There was a beat of silence before he put a smile back on his face. He wasn’t fooling me. That smile was strained and he was nervous.

“You said *most* of you were harmless,” I hedged. “So, what’s not harmless?”

“I don’t know,” he said before flickering out of view again. I waited a few moments to see if he’d come back, but it seemed I’d scared Remington away.

Shit.

I sat in silence and processed what just happened. Then it hit me.

Holy shit, I just talked to a spirit.

One that was probably hanging around me this entire time.

That thought was a little more unsettling, but I ignored it and focused on the fact that I’d managed to do it at all.

He didn’t move too close to me. He didn’t try to invade my mind. He just wanted to talk.

Grandma Rose always talked about how spirits were chatty, that they were lonely and wanted to talk to the living, but the living never heard them or talked back.

She was right.

I glanced down at the gloves that were on my hands. When I wasn’t home, I generally had them on, and I’d worn them most of the time here, not out of cold but necessity.

No one wanted to be plunged into visions of the past and I wasn’t ready for that. Not before we knew what we were dealing with.

Maybe in a week or two I'd attempt to see what happened here. Until then I was happy to stick to what we found on our investigations and talking to Remington if he ever came back.

My phone rang with the shrill tone that had me nearly jumping out of my skin. Lincoln's name flashed on the screen and I answered. My voice was breathless and I bit back a groan, knowing he would pick up on it.

"Hey, where are you?" he demanded. "Wait, what's wrong? Why do you sound like that?"

He always sounded so harsh, but I probably had him on edge.

"Sorry, I'm in the library," I said. "I just got off the phone with Astrid."

"And what happened? Why are you scared?"

"It was quiet in here and the phone startled me. I'm just a little bit jumpy."

It wasn't really a lie.

"Lunch is ready, head for the dining room," he said before hanging up. I had a feeling that he would be at the doorway before I even reached it.

Sure enough, by the time I put my book back on the shelf and headed toward the door, he was pushing it open.

He glanced around the room before settling his electric blue eyes on me. There was accusation there, and I couldn't ignore it.

"It was just me, I promise. Everything's fine. I do have something to tell you guys but I'd rather do it over lunch," I said quickly.

His jaw was tight, but he just nodded once and held his hand out to me. I placed my palm in his and he circled his warm fingers around mine before leading me to the dining room.

The others were already there waiting. They'd spent the afternoon setting up while I snuck away. I was short enough I

got to slip away when they started the ceiling-level installations.

At least now we had cameras in almost every room on the main level. Especially between Graham's cameras and ours.

Before Lincoln could question me further, Logan swept out of the kitchen with platters full of food, setting them on the table. He was always full of smiles and started to explain each dish.

Today, he'd gone for a Mexican spread. There were two types of queso, several homemade salsas, and then the ingredients to compile our own tacos.

It all smelled amazing, the aroma of savory spices and grilled meat filling the air until my stomach was rumbling in appreciation.

A girl could get used to having a private chef.

"All right, enjoy," Logan said with a quick bow and started for the door.

Ben stopped him before he could back out of the room completely.

"Hey, man, we've asked the rest of the staff, but are there any places here that you try to avoid or don't go to? Things that freak you out?"

We didn't need to explain why we were here, they all knew.

Logan took a deep breath before glancing out the window. You could see the mountain and the lake in front of it that ran alongside Bellmore Castle.

"That lake. I went out for a smoke one night." He put his hands up in defense like we were going to say something about it. "I know, I know, not the best habit to have, but I needed to take a break before I drove back home. I wandered over by the old dock. I swear to you, I saw something looking at me from under the water. I don't know if it was a lake monster, one of these ghosts you guys look for, or something else altogether. But I'll tell you one thing, I ain't never been

back since.” Chef Logan had a bit of a Louisiana accent, and it seemed to come out more while he was telling his story.

The pure conviction in his tone had me looking at the lake with a new light. I thought it was beautiful yesterday, the way the sun reflected the landscape on its surface.

Now, as the sun was dipping low and a fog was rolling into its place, I wasn’t so sure.

Everywhere we turned here, there was a new location to investigate or a new story that sent a cold shiver down our spines.

Yet we hadn’t even done our first night of investigation.



CHAPTER  
**SEVEN**

*Ethan*

The water was still as I stepped onto the dock. The small waves lapped at the shore in the quiet of the night.

It was strange being outside here where there wasn't the sound of cars driving past or the constant thrum of the city around us.

The entire place was peaceful. I was already in love, despite all the spooky shit we'd heard so far.

I couldn't seem to let the lake go after Logan told us about what he'd seen. I'd been on edge since we arrived at Bellmore Castle. Elizabeth and her fear filled me the first night. After she left, it settled a bit, but the house still felt restless.

You could feel the lingering emotion in the halls. Everywhere we went there was an oppressive quality to the air.

Out here, at least, I could breathe. I settled on the end of the dock, tucking my legs under me. It was too cold to put my feet in.

I glanced out over the water as the sun finished setting. It was painting the sky in gorgeous oranges and pinks that reflected on the water.

It slowly faded away into that strange time of day where the warmth faded but there was still just enough light to see. A time between light and dark.

Rippling water had me tensing before movement caught my eye. I glanced down in time to see something moving

through the surface of the water.

It was coming right for me.

My gasp cut off as I scrambled away from the edge of the water and stood. It would have been smarter to run but I couldn't seem to move. My body was frozen in place and all I could do was stare at the disturbed surface of the lake.

A pale face glared at me through the water. It was sickly pale as if it had been underwater for years. Big, black eyes focused on me as if peering through my very soul. As it continued to rise it revealed a swollen, bloated body.

It wasn't until the form moved closer that I realized they weren't eyes, but the opposite. The sockets were empty caverns.

"Holy fuck!" I gasped out, getting ready to turn, nearly knocking into Brea.

"What's wrong?" she asked, steadying me with her hands and looking up at me. One of her gloved hands went to my cheek, and I leaned into the touch, closing my eyes and trying to recenter myself.

"Do you see anything in the water?" I questioned. She looked past me but shook her head, her curls shifting in the breeze that rolled off the mountains.

I turned as well, relieved to see the figure was gone now.

"No, it's empty. It's just a lake," she said quietly. "There's not even a ripple in the water. What did you see?"

"A body," I said. "A monster? I'm not sure."

The lake should be frozen this time of year but it was just warm enough today that it was more water than ice.

"Hold this," Brea said gently, taking off her glove before sitting down. She took a breath before placing her palm flat against the weathered wood of the dock.

She didn't say anything or react outside of her breath catching. Her body was rigid.

I didn't have to see her reaction to know what she was feeling.

Brea and I were close enough now that her emotions were always stronger than everyone else's.

Pain was the first thing I felt, but it was muted. It definitely wasn't her own.

That was quickly followed by fear, then defeat.

The sorrow that followed was intense. It was bone-deep, soul-aching regret that gave away something I was far too familiar with—grief.

Whoever this was had lost someone they cared deeply about. I didn't know what she was seeing, but I knew it wasn't pleasant.

I was forced to live those emotions along with her until she finally cracked open her blue eyes and looked up at me. They were glassy before a single tear rolled down her cheek.

My chest ached with the lingering emotion and the sight of tears in her eyes. I settled in next to her, wiping it off before pulling her hand into my lap and shifting the glove over her fingers, blocking her from seeing anything more.

I didn't speak right away, giving her a minute to gather her thoughts. I knew she would say more when she was ready.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that with you here," she said, her voice cracking slightly. "Sometimes I forget that you can feel everything with me."

I hadn't even realized I was absentmindedly rubbing my chest, that lingering feeling of grief bringing up some of my own emotions. It wasn't often that I let myself dredge up those feelings so it was more than a little unwelcome.

Though, I didn't blame her for that.

"No, it's fine. This is what we do, right?" I said, giving her a gentle smile as I massaged her hand.

"Someone definitely died here. Usually, my visions are clearer than that. It was hard to decipher, like a forgotten

memory. There was a thick fog, screams, cries, some kind of fight, and then someone went in,” she explained.

There was a sharp tang of regret in the air as if something was listening to her tell the story.

“Someone regrets what happened,” I added.

She looked up at me, surprised.

“Are they communicating with you?”

Now that she said it, it made sense. I just chalked it up to lingering emotions, but she was right. The emotions were a direct response to what she was saying.

“In their own way, I guess,” I relented.

“This place is strong.”

She told us about her encounter over dinner. Maybe there was something about this opening up your senses. I wasn’t sure if I could. The emotions were already so strong that I wasn’t sure I could take on more.

I’d only ever seen snippets of the dead that she was forced to see now. We all had our own strengths in this group, and we’d embraced it. This was enough for me.

“The investigations are going to be lively,” I said. “Thank God for Ryker’s program or we’d be sorting through this footage for months.”

“Amen to that,” she said.

Brea was the one who introduced him to it. It didn’t take long for Ryker to tweak it and make it his own, though.

“You know, despite all of the spooky stuff happening here, I really like this place. I can’t believe Elizabeth wants to leave it,” I said as I glanced up at the castle.

“Who can blame her if she has to live with the memory of her dead family?” Brea said. “Not to mention she’s being tormented by these ghosts. We might be used to it but she certainly isn’t.”

“I wonder what her plans are then. If she just abandons this place, what happens to the town? Everything seems to center around the Bellmore family.”

“She has businesses here, too,” Bria said. “A few of the local shops are run by other people, but they’re owned by the Bellmore family.”

“I think it would take us months to uncover all the history here. I feel like the Bellmores are intertwined everywhere in some way.”

“I think you’re right about that,” she agreed.

“What do you say we run to town for a coffee before the shop closes? We still have about an hour or two before we really start investigating.”

That and I was eager to put distance between us and the lake.

“I’m in. We should probably get some snacks, too. There’s a long time between dinner and breakfast if we’re going to stay up all night.”

We went back inside to bundle up a bit better before trekking across town.

Fifteen minutes later, we were slipping into the coffee shop. They still had about thirty minutes before closing.

The same barista was behind the counter and grinned when she saw us.

“I had a feeling you’d be back. Though I hear Logan can make a mean espresso up there at that castle,” she said as we approached the register.

There was only one other person there, somebody tapping away at a laptop, not even bothering to turn when she called us over.

“Tonight’s our first night of investigation. We need all the caffeine we can get,” Brea admitted around a yawn.

She put in an order, adding extra shots of espresso to everyone’s coffees. It would be needed. It had been a while

since we'd pulled a late night.

"Do you guys want any pastries before I toss them for the night?"

"Oh, don't toss them. Whatever you've got left, just ring it up for us," I said.

She gave me a funny look. "Are you sure? That's a whole lot of pastries."

"Oh, you'd be surprised how much they can eat," Brea said. "Plus, I've got my eye on a few of those scones."

"All right," the barista said, ringing everything up before she got to work boxing up the pastries. When she finished, we had three full pastry boxes and a carrier for all of our coffees. I paid, tipping her well.

"Well, I'd say that takes care of snacks," she said. "We can't exactly tuck a pumpkin muffin into our bag as we walk through this place."

"Watch me."

She rolled her eyes before taking a long sip of her coffee. I wrapped my arm around her and she tucked herself into my side.

"Come on, angel, we've got some ghosts to talk to tonight."

"No, tonight's about investigating," she countered. "I won't be talking to any ghosts unless I have to."

"I'm still glad we warded our wing. It'll be nice to be able to go collapse onto our beds and not have ghosts yanking us out of bed at night."

"Or us waking up at random places," she said.

That had only happened to us one time during a lighthouse investigation. There was an old naval ship and we'd all woken up in different places.

It was probably the scariest thing that ever happened to us as ghost hunters. It delved a little further into the supernatural than most.

Once was more than enough.

We were walking past the police station and I glanced over. For a quick flash, I thought I saw something looking out the window at us.

It wasn't the pale ghosts like I saw at the lake, but a flash of something dark. A shadow dancing out of the corner of my eye. It was gone as quickly as it appeared.

Brea was looking ahead and hadn't even noticed the figure. I didn't bother to bring it up either.

As we continued through town my eyes swiveled from building to building and I swear the shadows taunted me the entire walk.

There was far too much activity in this town for it to just be a simple coincidence. We could say that Bellmore had plenty of history, but all towns had history.

The land in this country was painted in history and pain.

Bellmore was different. The ghosts seemed to linger here as if they were trapped in this town, or maybe they just didn't want to cross over.

We talked before about certain places holding ley lines, making it easier for ghosts to manifest.

Water was also a conduit. Here, they had the natural water running off of the mountains and into the lake and streams around the town.

Maybe it was a mix of all of those.

There was so much about the supernatural world that we could never understand. Brea was just now embracing the gifts that she had, and she was one of the strongest mediums I'd ever seen.

I had my empath abilities, and that was about as far as our abilities went as a group. I wondered if there was truly anything we could do to help this place. We couldn't just take the ghosts out of Bellmore or the castle.

There were far too many entities to contend with and we couldn't line the whole town in the herbs and crystals the witches sent us.

This job was going to be much more complicated than we anticipated. We had barely scratched the surface.

Even before the first night of investigation, Brea talked to a ghost, I'd seen one in the lake, and we'd seen shadows in town. I'd felt the spirits lingering in the air at Bellmore Castle.

I couldn't help but worry what we'd uncover tonight when we were actually searching for the ghosts that walked in these halls.



CHAPTER  
EIGHT

*Brea*

As Lincoln and I made our way down the hall toward the library and offices, every footstep echoed loudly around us. I'd noticed the echoes in the halls of Bellmore Castle as we made our way around putting up equipment, but it had nothing on Bellmore Castle after dark.

Maybe it was the uneasiness that had already settled in my gut, but it had my anxiety ramping up with each step we took.

"Darklings, this is your first real look at Bellmore Castle after dark. I can't say that during the daylight hours, it's warm and inviting. Nighttime has the shadows coming out to play."

"That it does," Lincoln said with a chuckle. He panned his flashlight over the hall and I followed the movement before continuing.

"Lincoln and I are focusing on the main floor. Down the hall is a library, offices, and a lounge. Ryker is in the data center while Ethan and Ben are walking the kitchens, dining room, and entryway."

"Where do you guys think we should start?" Lincoln asked, flashing me a smile. I was wearing my normal vlogging glasses, so he didn't have to stare awkwardly at the camera—just me.

We paused for a second before reaching the first set of rooms, waiting for our answer. Ryker's voice piped up into the comms in our ears.

“Everyone is voting for the library.”

“Guys, I was in this library reading a book, and it was what all book nerds dream about,” I gushed, walking ahead and pushing open the door to the library.

Only now, there was no fire roaring in the fireplace, and the sconces on the walls were all turned off. The only light was from our equipment.

Lincoln panned the beam of his flashlight over the room, and I followed, moving my head slowly as he did to give them a full view of the room.

“Sure, cozy is definitely the word I would use,” Lincoln said. My laughter bounced off the highest ceilings around us, and I shook my head, walking further in.

Thank god for Ryker upgrading our streaming glasses to have night vision or I’d be stumbling my way around here. It was darker than normal despite the large windows along the east wall.

“Is anyone in here who would like to talk?” I called out.

We were met with silence. Something creaked in the distance but outside of that the room was dead.

“I’ve got a device here that you can speak into,” Lincoln said as he put the spirit box and speaker on the ground in front of us. “All you have to do is talk to us.”

The white noise filled the once quiet library, and we both strained to listen to the words that would filter through it.

“Help.”

It was a male voice, distinct and almost booming.

“What can we help you with?” I asked. “Are you the one bothering Elizabeth?”

“Help me.”

This time the voice was still male but sounded younger and had the rasp of a teenager.

“You have to give us more than that for us to help you. If you need to move on, you can look for the light. You don’t have to stay here at the castle. It’s okay.”

“No.”

The answer was immediate again, that blunt voice that spoke to us first.

“What do you need?” Lincoln asked, his voice matching the tone of the man’s.

“Help.”

It wasn’t the first time that we were talking circles around a ghost. It wasn’t like they could communicate easily. It also took energy for them to speak through these boxes.

I had my mental blocks up, afraid that if I let them down during an investigation, especially one that the Darklings were watching, it would not end well.

The comm sounded off in my ear, and I pressed my hand to it, trying to block out the white noise so I could hear Ryker.

“Hey, they’re saying that you need to look between the shelves ahead of you. They keep seeing something moving ahead.”

I realized I’d been staring at the spirit box, so I glanced up, shifting enough that the glasses faced straight ahead. Lincoln moved the flashlight so the beam gave a slight red glow to the space between the shelves.

At first I didn’t see anything but as I turned away something moved in my periphery.

“Do you guys see something I don’t? To me, it’s just empty.”

It was a lie but I was curious if they were seeing what I just did.

“Nothing for me,” Lincoln agreed.

“They’re saying it was a black figure, like shadows just at the edge of your frames,” Ryker explained. “No one sees it now.”

Interesting. They'd caught exactly what I saw.

Ethan had mentioned the same thing when we got back from our walk earlier. Something I definitely wasn't going to mention now.

"Last chance to tell us what we can help you with," I called out. "Give us more information, and we'll try. If you just say 'help,' there's nothing we can do."

"Innocent."

It was a teenager this time, but it was almost like the two voices were overlapping, even though his was more prominent.

"Innocent."

It came again, this time with a deeper voice at the front. They overlapped each other, taking turns repeating it over and over again until Lincoln had enough and just turned off the box.

"What the fuck was that?" I think it was more to himself than me, but I shook my head anyway.

"That was wild. I don't think I've ever had anything like that happen, Darklings. Usually, it's one word at a time, a simple sentence, nothing like this."

"They're saying the shadows are back."

This time, I didn't move slowly. I shot my head up as fast as I could, and I caught them out of the corner of my eyes. They were moving quickly, slinking away the moment I tried to focus.

It was almost like a fog was rolling out of my line of vision. A dark one, but a fog nonetheless.

"Guys, we have to roll back that footage. This is wild," Ryker said, letting out a startled laugh. "Even I caught them this time."

"Ryker is saying that he caught something on camera. We'll post the shorts of those later for you guys to see," I told my viewers.

“Guys, Ethan and Ben are in the dining hall right now, and they’re asking for you guys to come down and see this. I’m switching over the Darkling feed for a minute.”

“We’ll be on our way in just a second. For now, Darklings, you’re moving to Ethan and Ben. We’ll see you on the other side,” I said before clicking my glasses off and taking a breath.

Lincoln blinked at me for a second, both of us at a loss for words.

“We can take a second to process that, right?”

“Definitely,” I agreed. “He sounded excited, not urgent.”

“I’ve never heard them overlap like that,” Lincoln said as he picked up the device from the ground. “Come on, let’s g—”

His words cut off before he could finish.

“Holy shit, look up there,” he said, pointing to the spiraling staircase that went up to the balcony overlooking the library. It was such a small staircase that I hadn’t paid much attention to it, nor had any desire to go to the second level.

Lincoln was already taking off in wide strides that had me rushing to keep up with him. He was up the stairs in seconds, and I waited until he was at the top before joining him, not sure how sturdy these stairs were.

“What did you see?” I demanded.

I had the answer myself only moments later when the sound of wet feet hitting the floor had us looking down at a trail of bloody footprints.

He shifted his light from red to white so we could see it better.

I watched in shock as they led away, one step after the other. The first ones were already fading, leaving no residue behind. It was like they weren’t there at all.

We followed the footsteps deeper into the loft until they stopped at a painting on the back wall.

It was another one of the signature Bellmore Castle landscape scenes with mountains and deer on the grasslands in

front of it.

“They stop here, almost like this is a door,” Lincoln muttered as he ran his hands alongside it.

We both gasped as something clicked and the picture started to swing forward. He caught it before it could smack us at least.

Lincoln moved me behind him and panned the flashlight into the small space beyond. It was a narrow walkway that was unfinished.

“Maybe a servants’ hall from back in the day?” I whispered.

“Maybe. Let’s see where this leads,” he said in a low voice. He shot me a grin and I couldn’t argue. I was just as curious to see where this was going to lead. And I sure as hell wasn’t staying behind in the dark.

There were no windows or doors as we walked down the walkway. It wasn’t until we turned a corner that we finally found another doorway.

This one was wide but it pushed open a lot easier than the first. When it swung free I stepped into the room, realizing we’d found the lounge.

It had a perfect view of the bar. This time there was no woman tapping away as she sang.

The squish of wet footprints had Lincoln searching the ground. They started in the middle of the room and led out into the hallway.

As we stepped away the picture swung closed with a loud thud that had a small squeak escaping me. Lincoln jumped next to me, reaching for me and wrapping his arm around my wrist.

My heart was pounding hard against my ribcage and adrenaline was pumping through me. This felt more like a murder mystery, not an investigation.

I didn’t even bother to look at Lincoln, knowing both of us were judging ourselves at this point. We were professional

ghost hunters and still jumping at noises.

It was quiet then and the footsteps were gone.

Just when I let my guard down, a flash of white caught my attention. A bloody figure stumbled down the hallway in front of us. Before I could say anything it was gone.

“Did you see that?” I hissed.

“No?” Lincoln asked more than said.

At this point, I took off at a jog to follow the direction the figure was heading, Lincoln keeping up easily.

“What did you see?” he demanded.

“It looked like a man. He’s hurt, blood dripping, which I guess makes sense for the footsteps,” I said as the man appeared again.

Once again he flickered out of view, appearing further down again.

He led us further into the castle. We’d only explored the one hallway but he’d led us through an unfamiliar area, ending at a balcony overlooking the ballroom below.

I had no clue how we’d even get back at this point.

“This place is crazy,” I said. “It’s like a maze.”

Lincoln started to answer when he stumbled forward, nearly toppling over the railing that was not tall enough for his large frame.

His hand caught in the banister at the same moment that I reached for him, gripping the back of his shirt and dropping my weight to keep him from tumbling over the edge.

Even as I tugged on him he was still moving forward, like something was shoving him over the edge. I grunted against the pressure. My fingers were aching but I refused to let go.

“Let me go!” he growled, his own fingers white as he clutched the railing for dear life.

My pulse was loud in my ears as I looked around frantically.

This time it wasn't the white figure behind us but another black shadow that disappeared into the nothingness.

Lincoln dropped down next to me on the floor and looked back with wild eyes.

“Something fucking pushed me,” Lincoln said. His voice was shaking with nerves. It was somehow more startling coming from him. He was always the calm one.

Neither one of us were willing to stand next to that banister again, even if the shadows had receded.

“What the actual fuck?”

“I don't know,” was all I could offer.

Weirdly, I had a feeling that the two hauntings were not related. The bloody figure was leading us to something, probably trying to prove his innocence that he so loudly tried to tell us about earlier.

Until something intervened.

Now the air felt heavy. It was almost hard to take a breath, and that uneasiness I had earlier wasn't just a small feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was an overwhelming anxiety that clutched at me, clawed at my chest, and dragged me down.

“We have to get out of here,” I said. We scooted away from the railing before we even tried to stand up. Even then, I stayed crouched as we put distance between us and the balcony.

I don't think I took a proper breath until we were back in the main hall. We were so shaken that neither one of us bothered to talk about it, and I was almost frustrated that I didn't get it on video.

Not that I would have shown that to the Darklings, but it was definitely something to show to Elizabeth.

I didn't want anyone to get hurt, especially the staff.

In fact, I had half a mind to talk to Margaret in the morning. She might think we lost our minds but I wanted to warn her to keep the staff away from the balconies for now.



“Come on, let’s find the others,” Lincoln said, practically dragging me out of the unknown area and back to familiar ground.

I hoped they had a far less eventful night than we did.

Of course, I was wrong.

The noise reached us before we even pushed open the doors to the dining room.

Ethan and Ben were talking loudly as we opened the door. One glance around told me that whatever was happening was pure fucking chaos.

The dishes that had been stacked neatly before were now thrown in the middle, some broken as they made a large pile.

“Duck!” Ethan yelled before Lincoln pulled me to the floor. The platter shattered in a ceramic explosion behind me.

This place definitely had our attention now.

CHAPTER  
**NINE**

*Brea*

“**W**e’re looking at record snowfall on the horizon,” the newscaster said with a bit more enthusiasm than was appropriate.

I asked for snow, not a blizzard.

Honestly, if I was anywhere else, I might be excited. But being stranded inside Bellmore Castle sounded like my own personal hell. Especially after last night when it nearly killed Lincoln in front of me.

That, and half the dishes were broken.

Of course, in the morning when we told everything to Margaret and Logan, they both looked completely unfazed, like this was just an everyday wake-up.

Even the balcony thing was apparently no big deal.

I was still flabbergasted after that conversation.

“I need coffee. Join me, red?” Ben asked as he walked over, putting his hands on my chin and pulling me closer so he could brush his lips over mine. “Really, I just want to steal you away for a minute, and I know coffee is always a proper incentive.”

“You had me at coffee. Just let me bundle up first. Apparently, we’re going to need it.”

“Yeah, temps are already dropping.”

“Why don’t you go around and see if anybody needs us to grab anything before the snowstorm hits?”

Lincoln walked into the room at the same moment and waved it off. “You’re good. Margaret already came in and gave us the whole snowstorm spiel. There’s plenty of food, supplies, and extra firewood at all the fireplaces.”

“They even have snacks,” Ethan said as he walked in with a bowl full of popcorn in his hands.

Knowing Logan, it was not just run-of-the-mill popcorn. I held myself back from diving into the snack, knowing that Ben and I were heading to the coffee shop.

We’d polished off all our pastries last time, and I was looking forward to finding another cheese danish.

We took a different route to the coffee shop this time because I wanted to check out the second row of shops.

The moment I spotted an antique shop, I was yanking Ben inside.

“You don’t have to convince me,” he laughed. “Especially not after we found those amazing cameras last time.”

Between his obsession with old photography and my obsession with all things antiques, I knew we would not be leaving here empty-handed. There may be limited space in the van, but I was more than okay with shipping boxes of my treasures home if I had to.

“I wondered when you’d find your way in here,” someone called out from the front. We looked up to see a woman behind the counter waving at us.

She was wearing a long, flowy dress that had a wave of color following her every move. Her silver hair was in a bun on top of her head, secured in place by a bright-red flower pin. This lady was a colorful character.

“It seems our names precede us, and you are?” Ben questioned, giving her a slight bow that had the woman’s cheeks flaming red.

I swear, one flash of those dimples, and everyone was a goner. Including me.

“Yes, I’ve been following the Spirit Vlog for a while. I also happen to know that you like antiques.”

We posted about them several times throughout the years, so she clearly was a follower.

“Anything we should check out as we look around?” I questioned as I looked around the room. There was a never-ending sea of knickknacks and random antiques. It would take forever to sort through it all.

“I think you will appreciate aisle fifty-seven. Each one is numbered,” she promised. “I won’t say anything else.”

She mimed zipping her lips and giving us a conspiratorial wink.

With that, Ben and I took off. She didn’t have to say more to pique our curiosity. It was our downfall in shops like this.

At first I was shocked by the sheer amount of aisles, but quickly realized they were more sections than aisles.

Hopefully, the snowstorm held off long enough for us to take our time. It was still a lot to take in.

The owner was a smart businesswoman. She had stacks of shopping baskets littered throughout the store.

First, I picked up one when I found a few cute, little knickknacks. Ben did the same a few aisles later when he spotted something.

We’d only made it to aisle thirty-five, and both our baskets were pretty much full.

It wasn’t my fault that I couldn’t resist a cute, vintage snack tin for Ethan. For Lincoln, I had snagged some memorabilia from one of his favorite TV shows. Then Ben spotted an entire row of cameras, so he had already filled part of his basket with that.

I had yet to find anything for Ryker but there was still time.

They even had a row of old journals and I'd snagged one for myself.

The aisles continued on and we skipped as many as we could. We didn't need old floral arrangements or various glass bottles.

Finally, I spotted the sign for fifty-seven.

"It's over there," I said, already taking off so Ben was forced to rush after me or lose sight of me in the maze of shelves.

She had to have bought several of the storefronts in town to make this place go on as long as it did.

My jaw dropped when I turned down the aisle.

"Holy shit, this has to be one of the oldest EMF readers I've ever seen."

It looked more like a Geiger counter than the device we used that lit up different colors. I tucked it into my basket for Ryker. He'd love it.

She also had a couple of dowsing rods, crystals, and a few old thermometers that I wasn't going to buy.

I'd stick with the current ones I had, thank you very much.

"Oh man, look at this voice recorder," I said, holding it up. It was on a display with several little tapes. I'd bought a converter for mine that let me put the tapes in and hook it up to the computer. That meant I already had the equipment to transfer over anything we caught and I wasn't about to leave without this one.

I didn't even look at the price as I added it to my basket.

"I don't know how we're going to get this back to the castle and juggle coffee," I muttered.

As if we had summoned her, the owner was moving toward us, her heels clicking along the floor.

"Let me take those from you. There are new baskets just up ahead if you need them," she said, giving us a wink before

picking up both heavy baskets like it was nothing and sweeping her way back to the front of the shop.

“Oh, by the way, I can package this all up and deliver it to the castle so you don’t have to walk it back,” she yelled from the front.

“Thank you!” I called over the shelves. I was definitely going to take her up on that.

“Oh my gosh, look at this vintage coat.” I said as we rounded another corner. It was a seventies-style, wool-lined coat for myself. Ben grabbed a brown-leather bomber jacket and modeled it for me.

Between his haircut, the jacket, and those dimples, it was a definite winner. It fit his usual style. He always dressed up a bit nicer than the rest of us in a mix of vintage and modern clothes. Not everyone could pull it off but I loved his style.

“Okay, let’s leave,” Ben said as he shrugged out of the new coat. “The guys are going to send out a search party soon,” Ben added reluctantly as he folded both of our coats over his arm.

We managed to make it back to the front of the store without adding anything else to our stack.

The owner was grinning like the Cheshire Cat as we piled on the last of her finds. I couldn’t blame her at all once she read off the total. We probably gave her more revenue than most other people did, but I had no regrets.

“You should take a business card. I also have a website listed on it. If I have anything of interest to you, I’ll send you a little message,” she promised.

“Thank you, we’ll definitely check it out,” I promised as Ben paid.

“I’m going to close up shop here a little early tonight because of the snowstorm. I’ll swing by the castle before I head home, so you don’t have to wait for your things,” she promised.

Once we left the shop and texted the guys a heads up, we continued down the road.

We passed a clothing shop that specialized in men's clothing and I went inside. With how low temps were about to get, I wanted to snag the guys some extra warm things to make it through the snowstorm. I snagged a few flannels for myself, too. Men's clothes were sometimes more comfortable than women's.

With our arms full of bags, we finally made it to the coffee shop.

I could spend every day in this town and not get tired of the little shops and the greetings that we got every time we walked in.

It wasn't that they recognized us most of the time. They just smiled and treated everyone like an old friend. It was refreshing.

"I'm glad we got to do this," Ben said as we sat down at our table with coffees in hand. He was giving me that soft smile, the one that had crinkles forming around his brown eyes and made butterflies dance in my stomach.

It was crazy that they still had an effect on me after all this time together, but they did.

"Me, too," I said. We were sitting close enough that I put my hand on his thigh, slowly moving it upward and giving him a sweet, innocent smile.

Though, inside I was on fire for him. We spent the afternoon together and this was all I could think about now.

He leaned in close, giving me sweet kisses that didn't border on indecent for public.

As much as I loved going on dates like this and getting alone time, I also really loved being able to make him cry out my name as he came.

Ben's breath hitched as I bit my lip. He downed the rest of his coffee and I did the same, tossing our empty cups into the trash before heading back.

I didn't bother to get a single pastry this time. I had a feeling that Logan would be making enough things for us to last a few days and I wanted to get Ben home.

Now.

Voices drifted from the dining room when we walked inside, but I ignored them, dropping our bags by the front hall and heading for the stairs.

"I can't wait," Ben rasped out, opening the first door he could and pulling me inside with him.

It was a linen closet. Thankfully it smelled like fresh laundry but as he clicked the lock I ignored everything else but him.

Ben stalked towards me with promise in his eyes. My stomach warmed with heat and anticipation as he gripped my belt loop and yanked me into him. One of his hands went to the side of my neck, the other tangling in my hair as he slanted his lips over mine.

Ben let out a groan as he owned my mouth, the possessive kiss leaving my knees weak and my hands gripping his belt trying to get him out of his clothes.

He didn't lose focus as I managed to yank his belt free and unzip his pants, forcing them over his hips until his cock was in my hand.

I wrapped my hands around him, pumping him a few times.

When I used my thumb to capture the precum, using it as lube, he couldn't hold back anymore. We separated long enough to tug off our clothes until we were naked, hands roaming over the exposed skin like we'd never fucked before.

This wasn't soft and sweet, but hungry and desperate.

I needed him like I needed air to breathe. He was filling my senses and I craved him inside of me.

"Are you ready for me? I don't know how long I can wait. I wanted you the entire time we were out today. There's just



something about the way you light up when you're happy that does it for me," he husked.

The way they saw me always took me by surprise. He didn't give me time to say anything back before he scooped me up with his hands under my ass, forcing me to wrap my legs around him.

I shifted my hips back, rubbing my wet pussy over his length as his tongue warred with mine. My heart was pounding in my chest and my breath came in quick, desperate pants.

Ben's were just as desperate, his focus moving from my mouth to my jaw before trailing his tongue down my neck.

I reached between us, positioning him at my entrance and sinking down on his cock. We both groaned as I fucked myself on him before he took over. His hands gripped my ass and lifted me off of him before slamming me down on his cock.

His strength was impressive and the way his muscles rippled as he fucked me had me letting out a soft whimper.

We had to keep our noise down since we were not exactly in our rooms but I had a feeling anybody walking by knew what we were doing.

He shifted again, pinning me to the door with his body and slamming into me so it slammed with each thrust.

Ben picked up the pace, pistoning into me like his life depended on it. His teeth turned from teasing to actual claiming bites that I knew would leave marks along my skin.

I was biting my lip so hard that I could taste the tang of blood but I ignored it, meeting him thrust for thrust as my nails raked along his skin.

He reached between us, his fingers swirling over my clit in a rhythm that had my moans escaping.

My head fell back against the door. It just shoved my breasts higher and he sucked one nipple into his mouth, his fingers putting more pressure on my clit.

The combination sent me over the edge. The moment I clenched around him he was groaning out my name as he

slammed into me one last time, going even deeper and hitting that spot inside of me that had my walls clamping around him again.

I didn't even care that I'd have to do the walk of shame once we finished. This moment was everything I didn't know I needed. It helped chase away the stress that had built since the investigation.

"Fuck, red, that was amazing. You feel so good," he praised as he placed softer kisses against my skin. "But I'm going to need a repeat right now."

Ben snagged a sheet from the closest shelf and dropped me to my feet, wrapping it around me before grabbing his own clothes.

"If you don't want anyone to see you, you better run," he growled, smacking me on the ass before unlocking the door and shoving it open. I had no choice but to do what he asked, the sound of his footsteps pounding behind me had me biting back my laughter as we escaped to my room for another round.

CHAPTER  
TEN

*Ethan*

“So, I did a thing,” I said as I entered the room, holding up a box.

It just so happened that it was delivered yesterday and fit with the whole snowed-in theme.

Brea would appreciate it... Lincoln, not so much.

“Face masks?” she asked excitedly. Man, she was gorgeous when she smiled, which was a lot more often lately.

Fuck Mack for ever taking that from her.

“Maybe,” I teased as I dropped it on the table we’d claimed in the library. We had been scouring the shelves for a few hours looking for books on the history of the Bellmores, but so far had come up empty.

It was a bit surprising given how much they thought about their family name.

What we needed now was a break.

“First, I want to start by saying that we need to do a Q&A session with the Darklings, especially after the footage we posted of the dishes and all that. They are feral for more information.”

“I can set it up; we’ll just do an impromptu live,” Ryker said easily, “What’s in the box?”

“Man, none of you trust me, do you?” I feigned hurt as I started pulling the tape off the box. I had to dodge as a pillow

launched at my head, Lincoln looking unapologetic as he glared at me.

“Oh, now you’re going first,” I said, pulling it open and fishing around before throwing the package at him.

At this point, it just looked fuzzy inside, like a squished plushy.

I tossed the rest out one by one, barely holding back my laughter as they ripped them open to discover the onesies I bought us all.

“Oh my God, no, you didn’t,” Brea laughed as she pulled out her alpaca onesie. She didn’t hesitate to stand up and start pulling it on.

I knew it was going to make her happy. She was the type to live in the moment and love the little things. And I was a sucker for making her happy.

“What the fuck is this?” Lincoln demanded as he inspected the gray and white onesie. He shifted it so the tail swished back and forth and sent me a glare.

Brea spotted what he was immediately.

“Are you going to be Grumpy Cat?” she gasped, bursting into laughter as she pulled the hood down to show the frowning cat face.

Ryker was a good sport and put on his fox onesie. He shook his head but the small smile on his lips as she gushed over him meant he wasn’t upset.

Ben’s was a bear and the softest of the bunch. Brea snuggled into him the moment he’d zipped it up. He let out a happy sigh.

“At first, I was skeptical, but this thing is warm,” he said, giving me a grin over Brea’s head.

“Okay, now what’s yours?” Lincoln demanded, still glaring at me over his Grumpy Cat onesie.

“A golden retriever, of course,” I said, pulling on my own now that we’d gotten this far.

Brea turned to Lincoln, hands on her hips, which just looked hysterical with the fluffy alpaca wool around her.

He rolled his eyes but complied, unable to tell her no. Seeing the big giant of a man pulling on a cat onesie was hilarious.

I pulled out my phone and started snapping pictures, hoping I at least got a few good ones.

Brea stretched up on her tiptoes to kiss his face, and I snapped that quickly, too, before they could protest.

“So, a Q&A in our onesies?” She grinned and did a little dance in her wool-covered onesie. “That might top face masks.”

“Oh no, I got those, too,” I said, pulling out a tube of the peel masks that she loved. They had a holographic sheen to them and smelled like fruit. I was man enough to admit that I loved them, as long as they stayed away from my beard.

“Let me go grab a tripod and the tablet for the live,” Ryker said, walking out. We all had to bite back a laugh as his foxtail switched behind him as he went.

“I’m going to work on a post,” Ben said, sitting back down in his teddy bear onesie and typing it out. A few moments later, he tapped the screen with purpose.

“Alright, the live announcement just went across all our platforms, site traffic is already booming.”

It didn’t take long for Ryker to come back and set up the tripod. We moved to the couch in front of it and shifted so we could all be seen on the screen.

Brea sat on the back and I took my place in front of her. Ben sat next to me with Lincoln taking the last spot. Ryker started the live before climbing over him to reach the back, Ben and Lincoln groaned as he used them as a stepstool.

“Hey, Darklings,” Brea said, “As you can see, we’re having a cozy snowed-in night. There’s enough snow here that everybody’s just stuck where they are in town, so we thought we’d take advantage of it before our hunt tonight to do a little

Q&A. We've got the phone in front of us, so as you type in questions, we'll answer what we can. I know as usual that we won't be able to get to them all, but we appreciate everyone for throwing anything you've got at us."

"The first question is, what's with the onesies?" Ben asked, nudging me with his elbow.

"That was all me," I said, taking credit for where it was due. "I thought it would liven up our evening, plus they're extra warm."

"I can't argue with that," Ben said, laughing a little to himself, "This is the first time I haven't been shivering in this drafty castle."

"Have you had any experiences off-camera?" Ryker asked the group, picking the next question.

"Aside from me nearly being shoved over a balcony by something," Lincoln said in a dry tone before picking something a little less serious. "I think Brea has had the most, but that's not unusual."

"They want to know more about what Brea has seen," I said.

She tapped her chin for a moment before answering. "After we did our investigation here in the library last time, Lincoln and I saw what looked like bloody footprints. We followed them into this long servants' hall that runs between all the rooms down here. It was definitely unsettling."

"We'll post the pictures, though they're hard to see," Lincoln admitted. "It was a lot more intense in person."

Ryker checked for the next question. Usually these lives were fast paced so we could get to as many questions as possible.

"What's it like living in a castle, even if it's temporary?" he asked.

"Amazing," I said. "We're getting spoiled here. The Bellmores already have a chef, a caretaker, and some maids on staff, so we haven't had to worry about cooking for ourselves

or anything like that. It's been a true vacation on top of an investigation. There won't be another one like this."

"Are you going to be sad leaving?" Ben asked, laughing a little to himself. "Oh yeah, we are. Chef Logan's cooking is impressive."

"What have you guys found on the history of Bellmore Castle?" Ben asked, reading the next question.

"This one's all you, Ben," I said.

He shook his head, but once he started talking, he was using his hands and giving them a full rundown. The man lived for history. He covered everything from the family line, to the building of the castle, to its various occupants. A lot of it was stuff that they could have looked up themselves, but I swear the way Ben spoke made it feel like you were getting a personal lesson from a historian.

"And then it all comes down to the last death, which was Patrick Bellmore. His daughter is now the only surviving heir of Bellmore Castle, and ever since his death, the activity here has tripled, according to our sources."

"Do you think Patrick Bellmore is haunting the castle?" Ryker asked for the viewers.

"I do," Brea said, nodding her head, "Something here feels really possessive, as if they have a claim on this place. I don't know who else other than him would have that sort of claim, especially if it's out of the ordinary."

"Aside from Lincoln's encounter with near-death, do you feel safe while you're investigating there?" Ben asked, reading the next question.

"For the most part, we do," I offered. "There are moments where things feel heavy in the air, unsettled, but overall, we're safe in our wing. We have some witchy stuff we've worked with before. As you know, you can tune into Astrid anytime you want to see a little bit about the crystals and herbs that we use."

Brea nodded. "We always protect ourselves and carry it with us as well. We don't take unnecessary chances."

Lincoln held up his wrist to show off his bracelet, Brea a necklace, and Ben unzipped his hoodie enough to show off his belt clip with charms. I couldn't exactly pull out the rocks that I kept in my pocket, so I just held up my bracelet as well.

We showed them off before I finished.

“No one is truly fully safe if an entity has strong enough energy. Not everything we encounter is wholesome. In fact, most of the things we encounter during our investigations are the opposite. The best we can do is to be vigilant and watch each other's backs, which is why we never investigate alone, and you shouldn't, either.”

“Well said,” Lincoln agreed, nodding in approval. “And the night that I was almost pushed over the balcony, I noticed that I forgot to put my bracelet back on after my shower that day.”

“I have a feeling Astrid's shop is going to blow up tonight,” Brea chuckled, “But I swear by her stuff,” she tacked on.

“Oh interesting, there's a local investigator who said he's been dying to get a peek at the castle. He's heard some good stories,” Ben said.

“Send us a message,” Brea said. “We have a contact thing on the website for investigators. Use that, and we'll look into it. I'm not making any promises, but maybe if the snowstorm blows over, there will be a night we can investigate together.”

She looked at us for approval, and we all nodded. We were never afraid to work with other investigators or to give our advice. That's why we put the contact form specifically for them on our site.

Sometimes you got insight from other investigators that turned the tide of a haunt. Plus, we'd all been in their shoes. Everyone started somewhere, we just managed to hit it big on our socials.

We continued on, answering a few more questions as the night ticked down until Brea's stomach rumbled.



“Okay, on that note, we have to go prepare for the investigation tonight and get some dinner in. Make sure you tune back in, the fun starts at midnight. The countdown’s on the site,” Ryker said before climbing back down, ignoring Lincoln’s groans of protest as he stepped on him before clicking off the live.

“Okay, I’m officially starving to death. Logan said he was leaving us some prepared meals, so let’s go see what’s in the kitchen,” she said.

“You had me at food,” I said, falling into step behind her and letting the others trail behind us.

“I’m curious to see who this investigator is,” Lincoln mused.

“He hasn’t messaged yet,” Ryker answered the unspoken question.

“Though I’m kind of curious to see who this guy is.”

We wound our way through the hall back to the kitchens.

Logan had left a notebook on the counter outlining everything he left behind for every meal and the snacks he’d prepared. He made pastries on top of enough meals to get us through several days. The snow was letting up tomorrow but he planned ahead just in case.

The town had made it clear that their plows wouldn’t even tackle it until it was done snowing for a few hours and we were quickly learning these snow storms could rage on for days.

“Is anybody opposed to just doing sandwiches? He left a whole tray,” Brea asked as she ransacked the fridge. Eventually, turning around with the tray when nobody protested. “There’re chips in the pantry, along with a fresh jar of pickles, which somebody better grab out for me.”

She turned around and grabbed a few more things for the sandwiches, then followed the instructions to find the bread. He outlined everything, leaving nothing for us to guess about.

“Okay, I found the investigator,” Ben said. When he didn’t offer more, we all turned to him, going silent until he realized what he was doing.

“Sorry, guys,” he laughed us off, completely unfazed. “This guy is like a fucking model.”

Ben turned the tablet around to show us the man. He was handsome as hell and covered in tattoos. His clothes were that alternative style of black with silver chains on his leather jacket and rings shining on his fingers.

He had a lip ring and an eyebrow piercing. He also had these deep cheekbones and a cut jawline. I’d almost be jealous if I thought he was anywhere near Brea’s type.

“He said that he’s part of this ghost-hunting association, and he even included a few pictures and clips to show that he’s the real deal. He’s about an hour away for another investigation, so he said he could swing by the next few days if we do decide to invite him along.”

“What’s his name?” Brea asked.

“Hale Bradshaw,” Ben answered. “He’s got some badass pictures.”

He turned the screen to show us again. The spread of pictures showcased some abandoned locations and a few selfies like he couldn’t help but including thirst traps.

But damn, if I looked like that, I’d do the same.

“So, do we invite him in for a joint investigation?” I questioned, curious what everyone thought.

“I’m in,” Lincoln said, “It could be nice to see how an outsider perceives this place because we haven’t told them everything. I’m also curious about this Ghost Hunter’s Association. It’d be nice to have some contacts in case we ever needed anything.”

“Sending a message now,” Ben agreed. “Then we need to decide where to investigate tonight.”

CHAPTER  
**ELEVEN**

*Brea*

“Can anyone understand what this man is saying?” I asked as I stared at the spirit box, trying to make sense of it all.

“Use that fancy new recorder you got from the antique shop,” Ryker said. He pulled his EMF reader out of his bag and showed it to me, a grin on his face as he turned it on.

The EMF reader started ticking like crazy as something crashed nearby.

“Good idea,” I said as I fished it out of my bag. I had already put in a fresh tape and made sure the batteries were new before the investigation, just in case I wanted to use it.

However, I had forgotten about it until now. The ghost down here was a mess and impossible to understand.

“We’re just trying to help you. If you say something, I’ll try to catch it on my device here. Just talk into it.” I pulled it away from my face, my fingers still on the record button.

I held it out into the darkness surrounding us. We had ventured down into the cellars tonight. The ceilings were a lot lower than they were in the rest of the castle but the echoes were just as haunting.

It was also cold as fuck. The onesies didn’t do much to ward off the chill, but I was thankful for the extra barrier nonetheless.

Even Lincoln wasn't complaining about his Grumpy Cat now.

"Maybe it's a different language," Lincoln suggested.

I shook my head. "No, it sounded like English. I swear I caught the words 'lost' and 'home.'"

It had been long enough that I hoped I caught something, so I stopped recording and rewound, playing it back. We all leaned in close, huddling together for shared warmth and to listen.

"Ssssmmy home," the ghost whispered in the background.

"I swear this ghost sounds drunk," Ethan laughed.

Something crashed nearby, proving his point. That broke the intensity of the moment and we all laughed, the sound filling the stretch of hallway ahead of us.

So far, we'd only encountered a few storage rooms close to the stairs, but as we forged ahead, it was getting dusty and damp. The cement floors were giving way to dirt and the stone walls were rough.

It was the perfect setting for a scary movie.

The long hallway was silent until we reached this strange ghost.

Basements were always one of those taboo things for people, where they thought most ghosts would lurk. Honestly, in a place this big, with a family this prominent, the only ones we'd find out here would be the servants that frequented these halls. Maybe a homeless person escaping the cold.

We opted to stick together for this investigation, not wanting to get lost in the catacombs that formed the underbelly of the castle.

Even Graham had warned us when he gave us our maps that he wasn't certain of their accuracy. They didn't have access outside. With one way in and out, they kept it locked most of the time and didn't bother doing rounds down here.

I couldn't blame them.

We all stopped walking as the hallway forked in two directions.

Only the footsteps didn't stop with us. I could hear them stomping around, as if they were coming from all directions.

We listened, barely moving and holding our breath as we focused.

Lincoln switched his beam from red to white light, giving us better illumination of the dark hallways ahead.

There was nothing standing there, of course. Even the dust was undisturbed on the floor.

"Well, I definitely say we're not alone down here," Ethan mumbled as he moved, sending a fresh wave of dust into the air. I let out a cough as I waved it off.

"Brea, do you have your inhaler?" Lincoln questioned. I couldn't blame him for asking, this was not exactly an asthmatic's paradise.

"Yes, and I took it before I came down, I promise."

He nodded but I knew he'd be keeping an extra eye on me now.

We continued down the hallway and I had to keep my cool as the ghost of an old man stumbled out of a nearby doorway. Something clattered at the same time, so if the Darklings saw me jump they'd brush it off.

I kept my mouth shut as he nearly toppled into me.

Of course, Ethan saw right through it, likely picking up on my panic and narrowed his eyes at me. I just gave him a quick shake of my head.

It took about two more times of this ghost stumbling in and out of view when I realized why we couldn't understand him.

The man was drunk.

He likely stumbled down here after some sort of dinner party and never made his way out. Why he was still drunk as a

ghost, I had no clue, but soon, I was having to bite back my laughter.

“Anyooooone know the way to the johnnn?” he asked.

Of course, it didn’t pick up on the spirit box, but I heard him loud and clear now that I was aware of him.

He came to a halt again, looking at each one of us and trying to get our attention. I purposely didn’t look at him. At least not yet.

Maybe I could get the poor guy to pass on, but I wasn’t sure he would understand. He was three sheets to the wind.

Even in his transparent form I could see a darker color to his face, like it was splotched red. His hair was tousled and his clothes all askew.

My heart ached for the soul. It seemed wrong for him to be in this state even in his afterlife.

Maybe this is when he was the happiest or most comfortable, and that’s why he was drunk and stumbling through the dark, but that was even more sad to think about. I had never seen anyone in need of moving on more than this ghost.

The guys kept looking at me strangely as the man stumbled in and out of view. I’d accidentally stopped talking to the Darklings mid sentence more than once.

It got so bad that eventually, I had to give them an excuse to end things early tonight.

“I have a headache. I’m so sorry, guys. Something about this is just making me feel unwell. I’m sorry to cut our night short tonight, but I really just have to go.” I turned off the glasses without further fanfare, and the guys were all turning to me.

“Okay, now tell us what’s actually going on,” Lincoln said.

He glanced around, obviously uneasy, his eyebrows furrowed and his hands fisted at his side. It was always funny to me that Lincoln always looked ready for a fight, even though we were facing the supernatural.

He could punch a ghost all he wanted, but it wouldn't do any good.

“There's a ghost down here. Oddly enough, he's drunk. That's why we couldn't understand him. He's slurring his words.”

“What?” Ethan asked, holding back a laugh.

Just as he said that, the ghost stumbled through the door, landing on his feet right in front of us.

Then, he was standing in Lincoln's leg.

Poor Lincoln gave a full-body shudder before jumping backward, freeing himself of standing in a ghostly body part.

I bit back my amusement and crouched down so I could look at him. “Can you tell me what your name is?”

The man's eyes widened as he looked up at me. “Can you see me?” Then he narrowed them. “Were you just playing a trick on me?”

“I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you're dead, sir. And it's not really normal for people to go around talking to someone everyone else can't see.”

“You mean to tell me they can't seeeee me?” he questioned as he struggled to his feet. He started dancing around, waving his hands in front of the guys, and that's when I just lost it.

I couldn't hold my laughter back. It quickly turned into full belly laughs as he turned circles around Lincoln, waving his hand frantically in front of his face before stumbling right through Ethan, who gave a shudder and shot me a horrified look.

At this point, I could barely see him through my tears.

“Oh my god. Sir, tell me your name,” I said instinctively, reaching out for him. My hands went right through him as he fell again.

“My name is Henry Blackwell, the black sheeeep. Really, I only get invited to Christmas when it's jussst family.”

There was a bitter edge to his words, and I wanted to know his story, but I wasn't going to get it out of him.

“Henry, do you see a light?”

“Oh, I'veee been avoidinggg iiiit. I thought I wassss jusst hungover,” he said, blinking up at something and wincing. Likely the brightness of the light.

“You should go through it. There's someone waiting for you.”

“Grace?” he asked, and for the first time, the ghost seemed sober. The words came out clear and strong. He even stood straighter. I couldn't see what he saw, but he stepped forward before blinking out of existence.

The air around us heated up as he faded completely. Henry was gone.

“I think he's gone. His name is Henry Blackwell, and he was talking to someone named Grace before he moved on.”

“Baby, you just helped someone move on to the other side,” Ryker said in a hushed tone.

I blinked over at him as I let it process, and then my eyes widened. It never got any less strange when we encountered ghosts like this, and I hadn't expected to help anyone move on in this house other than to forcibly remove them if they were bad spirits.

This wasn't my expertise.

Another crash sounded, bursting the moment. We all turned to look back the way we came.

Lincoln shifted his flashlight to let the beam fill the hallway, but something black was rolling toward us until we couldn't see anything but darkness.

“Do you guys see that?” I asked.

“Run!” Ben barked out the order, and every single one of us listened, turning and running down the hallway.

It sounded like thunder rolling through the basement, urging us to run faster. Adrenaline was pumping through me



so fast that my heart was pounding in my chest, and my head was spinning.

I was way too asthmatic to be running this fast, especially in a place that's dusty.

The guys didn't let me fall behind. Lincoln put his hand on my wrist, pulling me with him as he ran. We glanced back every few feet but it was constantly right on our heels.

My lungs started to burn, my chest aching, and I finally came to a stop. I had to believe in the supernatural protection we had. The guys tried to pull me with them but I stood my ground, squaring off with the entity.

"Patrick, stop this!" I screamed the word so loudly that my ears were ringing. It was like time slowed down. The rolling fog toward us stopped as if it hit a barrier.

Maybe it was the protection, or maybe it was the words I spoke. I couldn't be certain.

Either way, it was blocking us from the only exit in this place and if we moved deeper into these cellars we'd never find our way back.

Running wasn't an option.

"Start walking," I said. I could feel them moving close behind me, four hands finding me so we were moving as one unit.

Every step forward we took, the fog seemed to inch away until finally, it disappeared, revealing the stairway beyond.

There was no hesitation as we ran up the stairs and slammed the door behind us, engaging the lock. Whatever was down there could stay the fuck down there.

"What the hell was that?" Ethan choked out as he struggled for breath, leaning down and placing his hands on his knees as he tried to regain his composure.

"Sunshine, if you ever do something like that again," Lincoln warned. It wasn't anger in his voice, only fear. It had really rattled him. "I'll spank your ass."

“I couldn’t do it anymore. I wasn’t going to run from this, and we were just going to be trapped like rats in a cage. There was one exit down there and we had protection.”

“I don’t want to hear your logic right now,” he grumbled, pacing around the kitchen, clutching at his hair.

“That thing wasn’t down there when we walked in,” Ben pointed out. “Even I could feel the difference when it showed up.”

“It appeared right after you helped that man cross over,” Ryker pointed out. “Whatever’s here doesn’t want anyone else to leave.”

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

*Brea*

I'd never been so thrown off by an investigation before. This castle was far more than just an idyllic town and retreat.

In fact, it was full of activity.

The problem?

Not all of the activity was good, and not all was bad.

Whatever was trying to scare us away or hurt us was something dark and sinister. It made the air thick with its power and drained the life from this place.

Then there were the resident ghosts, like Remington. They simply weren't wanting to cross over and were causing no harm.

I'd never had to face the moral dilemma of letting ghosts stay and not forcing them to the other side. The idea of making someone like Remington cross over against his will felt wrong.

"What's that face about?" Ethan asked as he passed me a cookie. We'd been curled up on the couches in the library with the fire roaring. The snowstorm had let up already, and the sun was shining outside. It was still freezing so I had no plans to venture out yet.

Despite the frigid temperatures, the sun was melting the snow off the pavement already. Hopefully, we'd be able to do our normal coffee and snack run soon.

“I’m conflicted with this place,” I admitted. “Not all of the ghosts seem to want to leave and they’re just existing here alongside each other. Or they were. They have stories to tell but the only darkness I’m getting is the one we encountered downstairs.”

“Until that thing appeared, we were,” Remington scoffed. I jumped at the sudden intrusion and accidentally sent my book flying.

“I take it Remi is here?” Ethan asked, glancing around and biting back a laugh.

“Remington,” the ghost corrected in a snotty voice, enunciating it as if Ethan was too stupid to understand.

“Sorry,” Ethan said, not even needing me to explain what Remington said. He likely felt the indignation loud and clear.

“What is that entity that trapped us in the basement?” I asked. “Is it Patrick Bellmore?”

“I have no idea. One day, we were all just going about our business, making sure the staff was treating our home well, then the next, it was here. Anytime it’s close it drains us, and we lose our energy.”

“It’s feeding off of the other ghosts,” I explained out loud. He must have texted the others while I was distracted. They started filing in moments later, and I repeated what Remington had said.

“How many ghosts are here?” Lincoln asked. “Ghosts like Remington who know they’re dead and are just living here?”

He put air quotes around living.

“There are several of us,” Remington hedged. “Not everyone is aware.”

He blinked out of existence as I relayed the message to the others. When he came back... he wasn’t alone.

“This is the Blackwell family,” Remington said proudly. He named each ghost in turn, explaining how they died like it was a badge of honor.

He walked over to an older woman with her silver hair pulled into a tight bun on her head. She wore a pantsuit and had severe features. The bright lipstick on her lips only added to the harsh angles of her face.

“This is Eleanor. She died when her heel broke, and she tumbled down the stairs,” he said. Eleanor’s features split into a wide grin, and a laugh filled the space.

“It was glorious. The most exciting entrance I’ve ever made. You should have seen the look on those ungrateful brats’ faces. My siblings were in shock.” She laughed heartily as she re-lived the memory.

“This is Theodore. He was the second eldest of my brother’s children,” Remington continued. “He died when his younger brother was playing a game of ‘cops and robbers.’ Of course, he didn’t know the gun was loaded.”

Theodore winced at the reminder and ran a hand absently over his chest where blood stained his white linen shirt.

“Watch out for this one,” Remington said as he continued down the line, pointing at a young maid. “Claire has a mischievous streak.”

“It’s not my fault that my boss was a complete jerk,” she huffed, rolling her eyes. This girl couldn’t have been older than twenty. Her hair and makeup style screamed fifties, along with the wide skirt and cinched waist of her maid’s dress. “How was I to know that someone would let the raccoons in to scavenge the kitchens?”

They all cracked up, used to her antics. It was crazy to see them all talking and interacting like they were living.

An older man was glaring at her as she spoke, his mouth twisting into a grimace at their easy camaraderie.

“And who might you be?” I questioned. He shot me a glare and ignored my question.

Remington let out a little huff. “That’s George. Don’t expect an answer out of him. He was poisoned during a dinner party. His brother wanted the house and money even though he was the youngest.”

“Bastard,” George growled. Despite how angry he was, there was no malice in his tone.

“Why don’t you find peace, George, if you’re miserable here?”

“You won’t get my house either, missy,” he hissed.

The guys shifted closer, Ethan picking up on the anger and indignation in George and the guys following suit.

Remington ignored us and moved on, going through the entire group. Most of the ghosts disappeared right after their introduction, but others stayed.

By the time he finished it was just him, Eleanor, Theodore, George, and Claire.

“Do any of you want to cross over?” I questioned.

Their answer was a swift, collective no, and I let it drop. There was no point in worrying them about how we’d handle this darker entity.

That was a discussion for the witches.

“Where should we investigate next?”

“Oh, for your TV show?” Claire asked, clapping her hands excitedly. “I always wanted to be a movie star.”

“It’s not on TV, just streams our live videos online so people can watch it. They see what we see through my glasses,” I tried to explain but they all looked baffled.

“What about the lake?” Ryker asked, changing the subject.

He’d been the most interested in the lake.

Me? I was willing to skip that icy trip altogether at this point. Especially after Ethan’s encounter.

“No, we don’t venture outside of the walls. Anything out there is beyond our knowledge,” Remington said. His voice was deadly serious and a bit nervous.

Whatever was out there worried him.

“He said they don’t leave the castle,” I answered Ryker. “They seem a bit nervous about what’s out there.”

“Then the lake it is,” Ryker said. “We can save the other wings of the castle for when Hale comes. Feel free to amp up the interactions then, by the way.”

He shot a grin toward the ghosts who all started whispering to themselves. They popped out a moment later, leaving us alone again.

“They’re gone and a bit too excited about that,” I said as I flopped back on the couch. “That was exhausting.”

“We can take it easy until tonight,” Lincoln promised, sitting down next to me and pulling me into his lap.

Ben walked to the fireplace, adding more logs and stoking the embers to get it roaring again before they all settled onto the various couches.

Except for Ben, who sat at the table, diving into more research.

Between the warmth of the fire and Lincoln’s body, and the exhaustion that wouldn’t let me go, I drifted off to sleep.

“Wake up!” The loud, booming voice jolted me from my sleep. My body jerked awake suddenly, and I sat up, glancing around the now-dark Library.

It looked different than it had when I’d fallen asleep. There was no warmth at all, not even embers in the fireplace. The lights were out, and there was a thick fog hanging in the room. It wasn’t the black fog that was in the basement but a gray fog that obscured the room around it.

“Lincoln? Ben? Ethan? Ryker?” I called out their names one by one, my voice smaller than I meant for it to be, but something about this moment felt too ominous to shout.

“You need to leave this Castle. It’s not meant for you.”

The man speaking walked into the room. There was a purpose to his stride, heavy steps that echoed in the quiet. His face was set in a grim mask and his arm swung with each step until he stopped a few feet in front of me.

“You are not a Bellmore.”

“No, I’m not,” I agreed. “However, I was hired to be here by a Bellmore.”

The man lifted his face slightly so his nose was in the air, making his already sharp features even more angular. His silver hair was combed back, and he had on a tailored suit. He’d have been handsome if he wasn’t such an asshole.

“So, you’re the help,” he clarified. That had me laughing and shaking my head.

“It’s wild to me that you refer to anybody that is hired to do a job as the help. I’m fairly certain that your money didn’t just appear out of thin air. It was brought about by someone somewhere along your family line working and earning that wealth. Was the business that gained your status simply ‘the help’?” I demanded.

He let out a condescending laugh.

“You stupid girl. You dare to insinuate someone of my status could be the help? We are *not* lowly servants. We’re the bosses, the ones who run this world. Our money counts for more than yours ever will, and our wealth far exceeds yours.”

“The way I’m tempted to buy this castle from Elizabeth and take it out of the Bellmore family just so you know that you’re not the only one in the world that has influence.”

“You could never afford this castle,” he scoffed. “Plus, it’s willed to stay in the family. The heir couldn’t sell it to you if they wanted to.”

“I have a feeling there’re loopholes for everything. After all, isn’t that what bosses like you do, look for loopholes to exploit?”

His eyes narrowed as his anger rose, dark waves of fog rolling off of him, filling the library and surrounding us until all I could see was his angry face.

“Are you telling me that you plan to exploit my family to take our castle from us, to use whatever dirty money you have to try to sweep my entire legacy under the rug?”



With each word, his voice deepened until it was a feral roar that filled the space around us, reverberating in my ears and shaking me to the core.

Maybe taunting the angry, rich ghost was a bad plan.

I'd been in plenty of scary situations as an investigator. Some I'd barely survived.

But this moment was by far one of the most terrifying.

"You can't hurt me and you can't scare us out of this house. We were hired to do a job and part of that job is getting you out of here. Go ahead and accuse me of running your family out of here, but you're doing that yourself. You've terrified Elizabeth so badly that she's ready to abandon this castle and run. All you're accomplishing is creating an abandoned castle that will turn to ruins and this entire town will go down with it."

There were no words this time. His answer was a deafening screech. I clutched my ears and crouched down, folding in on myself as I tried to ward off the sound that was shaking the entire room around me like an earthquake.

"Brea!"

Ethan's voice was desperate and loud, breaking through the roaring storm. I let go of my ears and looked up. The noise had dropped to normal levels and I was somehow stretched across Lincoln on the couch still. He was shaking me, only stopping when I opened my eyes.

They were all staring down at me in horror.

"Do you want to tell me what just happened?" Lincoln begged. "I've never seen you act like that. I know it wasn't just a nightmare."

"No, whatever Blackwell ghost is haunting this place... he's angry and escalating and he wants us out. There's no reasoning with him, but I think we first need to find out who he is."

"I'll start working on a family tree," Ben said. He gave my hand a squeeze and hurried back to his laptop.

Lincoln wasn't about to let me go. Instead he held me closer, his hand stroking over my hair and glaring around the room like he could ward off evil with his indignation alone.

Too bad we need a whole hell of a lot more than that to fight whatever or whoever I just spoke to.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**

*Lincoln*

“**A**lrigh**t**, Darklings. We split up the team tonight. On this feed, you’ll have me and Ben to keep you company. We thought we’d take a peek at the attic while the others went out to the lake.”

“That’s one investigation I’m not sad I missed,” Ben said. “It’s cold enough in this drafty castle. I couldn’t imagine being out there in the snow after dark.”

“They did say they wouldn’t last long, so if you wanted to tune in to their feed first, you could always come back here when they give up,” I explained to the viewers.

I wasn’t used to being the one talking but Brea had slid the glasses on my face, giving me no choice in the matter. She loved pushing me and I couldn’t tell her no. Not on something so simple.

“Is this the right way?” Ben questioned as he held the map in front of his face. He tilted it one way before trying the other, attempting to make sense of our location.

We’d been searching for the stairs for the better part of twenty minutes.

I took the map from him, peeking into a few rooms in an attempt to figure out where we were.

“No, you were in the wrong wing, Ben. We’re here,” I tapped the map to show him, and he took it back.

“This place needs GPS,” he muttered before trailing his finger over a path. “Alright, we need to head down this hall, hook a right, take a left, and then go all the way to the end of the hall.”

We started walking again and shared a glance as another set of footsteps joined ours.

The moment we paused, they did too.

“Darklings, listen to these footsteps. Are you hearing this?”

Ben turned around before meeting my gaze. “It sounds like somebody is walking with us.”

“Walk,” I hissed, both of us falling into step again. Instead of one set around us it was as if an army joined. The cacophony of stomping boots filled the hall until it was almost deafening.

My hand gripped Ben by the hoodie and forced him to stop without warning.

This time the footsteps kept going for a few beats before they stopped.

“Well, we’re definitely not alone,” Ben said, letting out a nervous laugh before we took off again.

This was our first time on the second floor outside of the wing we claimed and warded. There were three wings of the castle we’d left unexplored yet but we were leaving the family wings for another time.

It felt like an invasion of privacy.

Apparently the ghosts here weren’t willing to let us ignore them for long. They were practically screaming for us to notice them now. It would make for amazing evidence but was hell on my nerves.

I wanted to keep Brea and the others safe and I couldn’t do that against the unknown. Especially the chaotic and dangerous unknown.

Finally, we turned into the last hallway, stopping at the very end and turning the knob. The door swung open a bit too easily, a musty air wafting down to us, and a large staircase looming ahead.

“I don’t see a light switch down here,” Ben said as he stepped through the door, checking the walls just inside. I leaned back a little to check the walls outside of the room, but I didn’t see anything there.

“It wouldn’t be the first time we go into the dark, that’s what we do, right?” I reminded him. He shot me a look but didn’t argue as he started up the steps.

“Night vision for the win,” he muttered as he reluctantly made his way upstairs.

The room stretching around us looked more like a storage room in a museum than an attic. There were a few mannequins standing tall just off the stairwell. Each one was wearing elaborate dresses and fancy coats that were covered in a layer of dust.

Crates and boxes were stacked as far as the eyes could see. It would be difficult to make our way around them but it wasn’t our first investigation that involved a cluttered attic.

The dangerous part would be the shelves to the right lined with glassware and knickknacks that looked like they could break easily. If the ghost went on a tantrum they’d ruin thousands if not more worth of Bellmore history.

A loud clang echoed in the quiet and I shifted my light toward a giant grandfather clock resting against a beam. It was beautiful and made of intricately carved wood then polished to perfection. Somehow the clock had escaped the dust the rest of the items were coated in.

Each turn we made exposed more and more collectibles and random heirlooms. I had never seen so many expensive things in one place, especially not discarded items like this.

“Oh look, it’s their Christmas collection,” Ben said. “It’s like a Christmas tree farm.”

They had no less than ten trees standing in the back, barren of their decorations. How they managed to safely tuck them away in the back was beyond me.

“Maybe it’s a good thing Ethan and Brea didn’t come up here,” I laughed. “We wouldn’t need to worry about the ghosts knocking shit over, they’d do it for them.”

“I’m afraid to breathe up here,” Ben said drily. “I can’t say anything.” He jumped and rubbed a hand over his hoodie, trying to scare off the spider that landed on him.

“You’d think they would store them differently instead of letting the spiders have them,” I mused.

“I doubt this is all of them. They’re tucked in the back and this castle is way too big to have only ten small trees.”

“They do seem the type for a twenty-foot tree in the foyer,” I agreed. He turned and walked further into the attic.

We needed to get started before the others finished. This attic would be a killer on Brea’s asthma.

“Where do we want to start?”

“I snagged Brea’s recorder,” he said, clicking a button and holding it out. “Is there anybody up here who would like to talk to us? Maybe tell us a little bit about yourself. Who are you, and how did you wind up in Bellmore Castle?”

There was an unintelligible whisper in the air, something we couldn’t quite catch. Ben stopped recording and rewound, playing it again.

“It’s my home,” a low, female voice said. His eyes shot to mine, wide and excited and his dimple deepening as he grinned.

This was the kind of evidence we lived for.

Once the recording ended, Ben hit the button again.

“Why are you still here? Do you not want to leave? Are you alone here?” I asked. We both knew the answer to that question thanks to Brea’s abilities, but the Darklings didn’t know about all that.

The sound of something rolling caught our attention. I scanned the room slowly, looking for whatever it was until I saw a small object moving towards us. It didn't stop until it bumped against my black boots with a soft thud.

I bent down to pick up the object and held it in the beam of my light.

"Is it a crystal ball?" Ben asked, letting out a surprised laugh.

"It seems a little small for that. To me, it looks like one of those orbs that David Bowie played with in the movie *Labyrinth*." Brea had made us watch that one enough he knew the reference.

There was a clink, a thud, and then more glass orbs were rolling towards us, one hitting Ben's shoe, the other mine.

Again, we both went down and picked them up. This time, I didn't wait for more to come our way before walking further into the attic, following the direction they came from.

I scanned the floor with my flashlight as we looked for the source. It didn't take long to spot the collection of glass orbs that had spilled free from their basket. There were several more inside, and one by one, they started rolling out until they all hit our feet.

When the last had dropped, Ben crouched down, fixing the basket and putting all of them back inside.

It would have been a death trap for anyone trying to come up here, especially Brea. That woman could trip over nothing.

"Did these belong to you?" Ben questioned, holding the recorder in front of him again.

"Do they have a special meaning?" I tacked on as I inspected them.

"Can you tell us your name?" Ben added. "It will be a whole lot easier to find you in my notes if we have a name."

Another thud sounded across the room. Then another. Footsteps followed from every direction so it sounded like the ghosts were circling us and caging us in.

“Well, you have our attention now,” Ben said as I panned the light over the room. For the first time in a long time I was ready to turn tail and run.

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### *Brea*

THE WIND WAS BITTERLY COLD, lashing at us as we fought our way through the snow to the dock.

The last time I'd been here, there was only a thin layer of ice on top and actual water. Now it was frozen solid with a layer of snow blowing around like a sandstorm.

“This is going to be the shortest investigation of our life, Darklings,” I said with chattering teeth.

After my awful dream, the guys had tried to convince me to take the night off, but I wasn't willing to. I was more determined than ever to put an end to this haunting.

It was too late in the day to call the witches, but that was my goal for tomorrow. We needed to find a way to get rid of this entity so Elizabeth could come into her home without fearing for her life.

“Is anyone out here?” Ethan called out. He had the spirit box in his hand, but even that didn't seem as loud with the wind snatching away the sound. I wasn't sure we'd get any real footage out here.

“Maybe we should just call it,” I mused as I shielded my face from a fresh wave of snow blowing at us.

“Don't give up yet,” Ryker said. I wasn't sure why he was so obsessed with this place, but he couldn't seem to let the lake go. It was starting to make me a little nervous.

Ryker was logical and not the type to dive into an investigation to the point of obsession. Hell, he spent half of his time in the data center.

Why was he changing that now?



I suddenly wished that I'd gone with Lincoln and Ben to the attic. I was already half-frozen, and we'd just started.

"What is that?" Ethan asked. He'd made his way to the end of the dock and was crouching down on his hands and knees as he peered into the water. You'd think he'd have more fear after seeing an apparition in the water last time but clearly, he was pretending that didn't happen.

The air seemed to be charged with electricity as I moved forward and I panicked. After the incident with Lincoln nearly tumbling over, I rushed forward, grabbing the back of his belt and holding him in place.

"Ethan, are you crazy?" I growled, tugging on him until I glanced at the ice. Something was moving under the surface. I caught glimpses of flowing hair or hands pushing at the ice.

"Are you guys seeing this? Darklings, I swear we are not using any kind of special filters. If you can't see what we are seeing, it looks like something is moving under the ice."

"No, no!" Ryker's voice was frantic and desperate, which had me letting go of Ethan and turning around.

He was backing down the other leg of the dock, not looking where he was going. His eyes were fixed on something I couldn't see in front of him.

"Ryker! Snap out of it!" I screamed over the wind. "Whatever you see isn't there."

Hoping Ethan would listen and back away, I ran after Ryker.

Ryker flinched and pleaded with the ghost. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not Stanton," he protested.

I'd finally reached him but he didn't react to my touch or my words. I wrapped my hand around his wrist and tried to lead him away but something tugged him back in a fucked-up version of tug of war.

Ethan had made it to my side at this point and tried to help me get Ryker away from the edge of the dock but it was useless.

“Let him go!” I screamed, not even sure what I was yelling at. For once, I couldn’t see it. My panic wasn’t helping matters either.

Everything we said was snatched away as the wind picked up again, my hair whipping violently around my face.

Ryker’s breath came out in a loud whoosh as if someone had punched him in the gut. He bent over as a horrified scream escaped him. His hands clutched at his stomach, shaking as he pulled one away to stare down at it in horror.

Ryker stumbled back despite our hold until he was ripped from our hands completely, tripping over the edge and onto the ice.

“No!” I screamed as we both lunged for him. I managed to grip his sweater to lift him up as Ethan grabbed his belt loop. If we let go I knew he’d go through and I’d never see him again.

“Call for backup,” Ethan groaned as he held onto Ryker for dear life. He was doing most of the lifting, so I didn’t hesitate to touch my comm so I could reach the others.

“Guys, we need you on the dock. Ryker’s about to go through the ice!” That was all I could get out before I needed both hands again.

Ethan and I both struggled to get him on the dock, and if not for our grip on his sweater and belt loop, that ice would have cracked the rest of the way.

He fought us every step of the way, flailing and kicking, but there were no screams. He hadn’t even taken a breath since he’d fallen.

His mouth was shut, his cheeks puffed out like he was underwater. The ghosts were convincing him that he was drowning.

At one point, his hand brushed against my head, knocking the glasses from my face and sending them skidding across the ice. They were a lost cause, not one of us was going to go out there to retrieve them.

Someday, they'd live on the bottom of this lake, but for right now, I just needed Ryker not to.

“Ryker, wake up! I need you to wake up!” I begged.

“Ryker!” Ethan's voice was loud, booming, and deep, cutting through the sound of the wind and making sure that he could be heard.

It felt like hours before the others were running down the dock toward us. It wasn't until all four of us were pulling on the frightened man that we finally got him back on solid ground.

We didn't stop at the dock. We carried him all the way up to the grounds and eventually got him through the front doors.

The moment we stepped through the front door, something shifted and he came back to himself.

Ryker blinked rapidly and took in a shuddering breath. His lips had started to turn blue and the color had drained from his face. He was moments away from passing out and my hands shook as I tried to soothe him.

After a few breaths he was looking around wildly, his chest heaving as he tried to regain his composure.

“How am I not dead?”

CHAPTER  
**FOURTEEN**

*Brea*

**A**fter the previous night's investigation we had to put out a quick post for the Darklings to reassure them we were alright. My glasses had taken in the entire situation until they were flung onto the ice, so they'd had front row seats to that fiasco.

It was a quick post saying that we were all safe and needed a night to recover, but Ryker thought we should do a video to show we were actually alright.

In reality, we were terrified and more than a little shaken. I was not okay in the least. This ghost was trying to take my men from me. There was nothing I wanted to do more than leave.

But leaving meant it would target someone else and I couldn't live with that outcome either.

Getting them out of here might not be in the cards but I could do something to help us get out of our heads for a bit. I snuck away earlier to talk to Margaret and fill her in on my plan. She was calling in some masseuses for us and said she'd set them up near the pool and sauna rooms.

How I had missed the indoor pool and sauna on the map, I had no idea, but I was excited to spend the day there.

Hale had confirmed he'd be here in a few days and I was considering waiting for him to get here to do anything else. Until then, we could focus on each other and our mental health.

I was hoping to fit the ghost tour in instead of an investigation tonight. We needed some time away from the castle itself.

Maybe I'd talk to Sadie's dad and to see if I could wear my glasses during the tour. We could donate a portion of our earnings from that stream to him or his tour and he could get some marketing for the tour itself.

We were camped out at the dining room table to give the Darklings a better explanation. We had an array of snacks on the table thanks to Logan being back and were nibbling away as Ry set up the equipment.

One of the cleaning crew hurried through the room, checking for things to pick up and whisked away a few wrappers in the process.

The castle felt alive again with the entire staff coming in. The maids were working, and we were trying to stay out of their way.

Margaret had been shuffling about, keeping tabs on the castle itself. The groundskeepers were clearing the long driveway out now.

In the light of day and noise in the castle it was hard to believe how crazy our nights had gotten.

"Alright, we're ready," Ryker said before sitting next to me and facing the camera. "Go, Brea, in three, two, one."

He hit play and I put a smile on my face. I didn't feel it but I hoped they wouldn't notice.

"Hey, Darklings, we just wanted to tell you that everybody is fine. Last night, things went a bit crazy, which is definitely the understatement of the century," I said with a humorless laugh. "We aren't really sure what happened, but Ryker was stuck in some sort of trance. Once we got him off of the dock, he was fine. We'll have to look into some sort of protection for that dock before someone gets seriously hurt."

Lincoln moved into the frame and added to my statement.

“We haven’t been able to update the others about the attic last night,” he said as he took the seat next to me.

“Well, spill,” I demanded, focused on him now instead of the camera.

Lincoln recounted the activity in the attic, from the voice clippings that they heard and the glass orbs.

“We haven’t had a chance to look at the audio yet, but I guarantee we’ll have plenty,” Lincoln concluded.

“I think we have officially gotten more footage here in the last few days than we have in any other investigation to date,” Ben said. “The activity here is strong.”

“Too bad it isn’t just all harmless activity,” Ryker said. He hadn’t looked the same since last night. He was still slightly pale and had been quiet. His blond hair was sticking up from one too many times of running his hands through it. The dark circles around his eyes were startling today.

I hoped our spa day would help get him back to normal, making him forget about this place for a little bit.

We truly wanted to make sure that we could protect Elizabeth from whatever was here. But if it was to the detriment of my guys, I wasn’t sure I could do it.

“So, now we are going to take some time for ourselves today. The guys don’t know it yet, but I hired some masseuses to come in, and they’ll be here in about half an hour to give us full-body massages. Apparently, this place also has a pool and a sauna, which means it’s about to be the best spa day of our lives... face masks and all. We’ll make sure to post all the pictures on the blog so make sure you check that out later today!”

I laughed as the guys all chimed in with their excitement at the surprise. I loved that they were secure enough in their manliness to love massages and pampering as much as I did.

We said a quick goodbye and turned off the cameras.

I’d been meaning to put more pictures on the blog but we’d been so preoccupied that I kept forgetting.

“Let’s make sure to take some aesthetic pictures today—get any of the castle, the grounds—just stay away from the lake,” I said as I pulled out my phone and took a picture of the snack spread.

“No worries there,” Ryker said. “I don’t know what came over me but I never want to go back out there.”

“You hadn’t really been able to tell us more than just you thought you were drowning. Did you see anybody out there? It looked like you were talking to someone,” Ethan said.

“There’s a man holding what looks like a big blade. It was a machete or something. It’s hard to remember the details now. Everything is kind of fuzzy. He was yelling and running toward me.” He paused, trying to remember the details. “Oh, he was calling me Stanton. Maybe keep that in mind when you do your family tree, Ben.”

“Already on it,” Ben promised, jotting down a note in his phone.

“Then he eventually stabbed me, and I fell into the lake. I was drowning, fighting against something dragging me down and I couldn’t swim to the top. The water was warm, though, like it was summertime. Is that even possible up here?”

“I’m not sure. We’re pretty close to the mountains,” I said. “Either way, it was a vision, so anything could be possible.”

There was a loud knock on the door and Margaret poked her head in.

“Your masseuse has arrived early. I’ve got them setting up if you want to follow me. I’ll show you where you need to go.”

“Were you as surprised as I was to find out there was a pool here?” I demanded.

“Yes,” Ethan grumbled. “You know I’d have been there at least once a day if I knew.”

“I’ve been here for years and only in the last few months or so, don’t get lost in the halls,” Margaret chuckled. “The

cleaning crew has a policy that makes sure they clean in pairs or have a phone on them in case someone gets lost.”

“I believe it,” I said. “We’ve been investigating a few times and I think it would take a year or more to get to every single space.”

“It would,” she agreed.

“So, what are we in for, red?” Ben asked as she led us through the back halls toward the gardens.

“Massages,” I said before Margaret chimed in, giving me a wink.

“They have an esthetician on board as well. She specializes in relaxation, so I had her come along to do more than just massages. She has a few techniques she specializes in like acupuncture and masks.”

“Margaret, you didn’t have to do that,” I protested.

She waved it off. “We insist as a thank you for putting up with all the craziness that Bellmore has to offer.”

“I take it you watched the stream last night?” Ethan guessed.

She nodded, giving us a dark look. “Yes, I did. I’m glad you’re safe.”

“Me, too. Thanks for setting this all up. I could use a massage and a face mask or two.”

I was definitely going to have to take pictures with the guys with their clay masks on.

My phone started to go off, and I pulled it out to see messages from Hale rolling in. He’d been pretty quiet after we made plans for him to come up the following week.

Hale: I saw the stream. You guys alright? Activity seems to be pretty bad there.

Brea: It’s not pretty. This is the most activity we’ve had with sentient ghosts.



Hale: I'll talk to my team about what we can do for protection and to help cleanse the house.

Brea: About that... we should talk before you do. Not all of the ghosts here are ready to cross over, nor are they all harmful.

Hale: Got it. That's not a first for me.

Brea: Really? That makes me feel a whole lot better. This is the first location that isn't full of bad vibes. It's a divide, and according to what we've figured out, a recent change.

Hale: Interesting. I can't wait to hear what all you've uncovered. I have a few tricks up my sleeve, too. I'll help you figure it out. You're not on your own.

We weren't on our own now. We had each other and the witches, but I wasn't going to turn down an even bigger network.

I typed a quick goodbye for now. We were getting close to the pool. I could scent chlorine in the air.

Margaret stopped walking and pushed open a door to reveal a small spa. Several massage tables were already set up and there was a team waiting for us. They had on white scrubs with the company's logo on the pocket.

"You aren't the only ones who like massages and getting pampered every once in a while," Margaret said. "Have fun. Let me know if you need anything."

She backed out of the room, leaving us with the masseuses.

"This is quite the place," a blonde woman said as she stepped forward with a bubbly smile.

She had her hair in a tight ponytail and her makeup was flawless. The four men standing around her didn't say much, letting her speak for them.

"I'm Lynn, and I own the spa. Every one of us is highly trained. I'm going to play some music and we'll be talking in low voices from here on out after the introductions. We will,

of course, step out and give you privacy while you get into position on the tables.”

“They are not touching our girl,” Lincoln said, speaking up before that could even be a question. He shot a glare at the men who bit back their amusements.

Lynn nodded respectfully. “Of course, sir. That’s why I’m here. We tend to stick to the same gender for massages.”

“Perfect,” he said, satisfied. I rolled my eyes and tried not to laugh, but honestly, the thought of her putting her hands on my men didn’t sound that great either.

“I promise you we’re all professionals. Is there anything anyone is not comfortable with? We’ve got full-body massages, we can do cupping, I’ve got hot stones, the works. I also believe that you have someone else coming in about an hour for masks and skincare, so we have time.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “I’m open to anything.” The guys all quickly agreed before she instructed us how to get ready and to lay on the tables.

They all stepped out and we quickly pulled off our clothes and settled onto the tables with a sheet draped over to cover anything that they shouldn’t see.

I expected Lincoln to protest more, but he just made sure he was next to me. It was nice to have someone always there to look out for me.

“We’re ready,” I called out. They came into the room and turned the lights low. I closed my eyes as she started some relaxation music.

Lynn had magic hands. The moment she started spreading the warm massage oil over my skin and working my muscles, it was like nothing else in the world mattered.

For the next hour, I was just in a pure state of bliss while she worked out every stubborn knot in my body until my muscles were all relaxed. I felt boneless laying on this table.

From the groans of relief that filtered through the room, the guys felt the same. This was definitely something we all

needed.

“That’s it for us,” Lynn said in a gentle voice. “We’re going to gather our things and leave, but you can take your time. You still have about ten minutes before your esthetician arrives.”

I took a solid five minutes before I finally opened my eyes and climbed carefully off my table.

We just managed to put our clothes back on before there was a knock on the door. Ben was the closest, so he pulled it open, letting in a group of women. They had totes in hand and moved into the room with purpose.

“I hear that you guys are nice and relaxed and ready for us,” one of the women greeted, “I also happen to know that this is a group that loves face masks. Those are my specialty.”

She launched into an explanation of what she could do and we all picked different ones. I opted for a full jelly mask.

The guys went first and I snagged a few pictures to post later.

“You’re up,” she said, having me lay back down so she could spread the cooling mask on my face.

Here, with the scent of the mask and the soothing music, I wanted to be at peace. Yet, I felt like I was holding my breath the entire time waiting for one of the ghosts to come forward.

CHAPTER  
**FIFTEEN**

*Brea*

“Guys, I found something really weird,” Ryker said as he stormed into the dining hall. I was just about to send out a search party for him, he was supposed to be here thirty minutes ago.

He sat in his usual seat with his laptop, turning it toward us.

“This would have been better on my screens in the data room, but I couldn’t wait. I keep finding his face in all of our footage.”

“Wait, what?” I questioned, leaning forward. “I don’t even see a face in this.” The picture was black and white, like it was a screenshot of our video feed. It was far too fuzzy to notice anything more than the outlines of furniture.

Ryker closed it with a groan. “No, we need to go back to the data room. I need to show you guys this. Fuck food.”

We all looked at each other but followed him as he stormed out of the room. He must have run because he was nowhere to be found until we got to the room in question.

He had every screen already filled with a different picture. With a few clicks, the resolution changed, brightening them and sharpening the image.

“Do you see it?”

“No,” Ben admitted. “Where are they?”

He used his mouse to circle the faces one by one. Once he showed us one, I could easily spot the rest.

It was the same face every time.

And I recognized it.

“That’s the man from my dream,” I said as I stepped forward. My face was almost touching the screen at this point. I switched to another screen to confirm, one after the other, until I tapped one with my finger. “Look, his hair was slicked back just like this. It’s definitely him. He has that same gaunt look, too.”

Ben rushed out of the room and came back with his laptop.

“Look, I’ve been working on the family tree. I wish that we were home so I could print this shit, but hook me up to the screens, Ry.”

“On it,” Ryker said, grabbing a cord and attaching his laptop to one of the towers. It didn’t take long before Ben’s slideshow was up.

He came over and started clicking through until he had a long row of pictures. They started old, sepia, then black and white, before gaining color and quality.

“So, this is as far back as I could find. This was the original family that built the house. I still have no idea where the wealth came from, but it seems like most of them ran their own kind of business—real estate, high-end jobs, big CEOs, things like that.”

“Do you recognize him?” I asked, trying to find a match and not seeing one right away.

“Those features fit like six of these guys,” he said, talking with his hands as he spoke. He clicked through the closest matches but I couldn’t find the man.

This meant he likely wasn’t Patrick like we suspected.

He was definitely a Bellmore, though.

“Maybe we call Elizabeth and show her the picture. She might have something.”

“I’ll just text,” I said before turning to Ryker. “Can you clear any of these up so we have an actual picture to show her?”

“Here, I’ll just run it through this program. It’ll create a picture for us like a police sketch.”

Ryker clicked a few buttons and the screens condensed down to one. He pulled up the website and zoomed in on one of the pictures, submitting it to the website. We watched as it slowly started the sketch, line by line.

This was going to take a while.

While we waited, Lincoln disappeared and came back with a plate for Ryker, slamming it down on the desk with a bottle of water.

“Eat,” he demanded. Ryker went to protest, but he saw the look on Lincoln’s face and picked up the sandwich instead. He took a bite before dropping it back down on the plate with a huff.

He managed to get half the sandwich down before a notification popped up that it was finished.

The picture was much easier to make out and if I had any doubts before, they were gone now.

This was the man haunting Bellmore Castle.

But who was he?

“Can you send me that picture, please?” The question barely left my lips before it popped up on my phone. I saved it and opened up my text thread with Elizabeth.

She was living her best life in the sun and sand, and I didn’t think that she’d respond very quickly. But almost as soon as I messaged, she was answering.

Brea: Hey, we caught a photo of something. If I send it, could you tell us if you recognize this man?

Elizabeth: Sure, you caught me between cocktails. Hit me with it.

I sent the photo, and I saw the little bubbles pop up like she was typing. A few moments later they would disappear. It did that over and over while I tapped my foot, anxiously waiting for the response.

“Either she has no clue, or this struck a nerve. She’s not responding right away,” I sighed.

Eventually she gave up altogether, my phone ringing and her name flashing across the screen.

“Hello?”

“Is this a photo you caught during your investigation?” she questioned, her voice a bit shaky.

“Yes,” I said. I wasn’t going to lie to her. She hired us for a reason. We were investigators, and we sometimes did catch things that were hard for our clients to see.

“I can’t be one hundred percent certain, and I’ll explain why, but it might be my dad.”

“Wait, we have his photo in our files. We created a family tree to try to piece these ghosts together. This doesn’t look like the man in the photo.”

“That’s because he aged. This is what my dad looked like when I was in elementary school.”

“Then why aren’t you certain?” Lincoln questioned.

“He had a twin.”

“Had?” Ryker asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Yeah, let’s just say that those two were obsessed with the Bellmore name and that castle. Fuck that place,” she muttered the last part under her breath. “It was so bad that they feuded for years. In fact, they split the castle in half for a long time, keeping two wings each. But before my father met my mother, my uncle disappeared.”

“Sounds suspicious,” Ben said, hanging onto her words.

“Definitely,” she agreed. “I only knew about him because I found a photo one time when I was snooping around. My mom got super weird about it and made me promise her that I

wouldn't say anything to my dad. It wasn't until a few years later that my grandma was here for Christmas, and she mentioned missing her boys together. A few eggnogs later, and she told me the whole story."

"Patrick allowed that?" I asked.

"He was drunk and showing something off," she said. "She said that my uncle had died in his room. It was a self-inflicted wound. She admitted that it didn't make sense. He had a thirst for life and adventure and loved this house; that he wouldn't do that."

"Where did your dad die?" I questioned. "I'm sorry for the crass question, but it might help us."

"No, it's fine. He also died in the house. His was a heart attack. But let's just say things were not good in the end. My dad was delusional at best, and his obsession turned into something psychotic. He tried to make me sign papers that I would never sell the house. There was just a lot of crazy, old-man ranting."

"We think whoever is in these photos is behind the bulk of the haunting here."

"The bulk," she questioned. Elizabeth was smart and she didn't miss what I was trying to hide.

"Well, he's not the *only* ghost here. He's just the only harmful one."

"You know, I knew that place was haunted for my entire life. Nobody ever believed me. As I grew up, I noticed it less and less. Until dad died, at least. Part of me wonders if it is actually him at fault or if it's both brothers going at each other's throats again."

"That's a real possibility," I said. "We're going to do our best to help you, Elizabeth, to give you your home back."

"After being here, I'm not so certain I want to be back," she said with a deep sigh. "I also don't want to be haunted forever if I sell it."



“If you’re ever interested in selling, let us know,” Lincoln said, surprising us all.

“Let me think it over,” she said. “Good luck, guys.”

The call ended abruptly, and we all blinked over at Lincoln, who just shrugged.

“When we get rid of whatever is causing all this turmoil, this house is gorgeous. It’s growing on me.”

“Lincoln, it’s not a house, it is a castle,” Ryker corrected, looking at him like he’d grown an extra head. “We can’t run or own a castle. We have a home.”

“I didn’t say we had to live in it full time,” Lincoln said. “Just imagine if she sold this place to someone else. That person would be terrified even if it wasn’t malicious supernatural activity.”

“So, you want to buy it just to save someone else?” Ethan asked. He was rubbing a hand through his beard and staring at Lincoln with more curiosity than shock.

“It would make a really cool hotel or museum, or a mix of the two,” I offered. Now they all turned and looked at me. I shrugged and continued. “What? I thought the same thing. I just figured Elizabeth would never sell this place. It’s been in her family for centuries.”

“If she’s not willing to sell, we could propose something shared. We could fund the changes, turn it into some sort of partnership, come up with a contract, submit the details, the works,” Lincoln said as he ran a hand through his hair.

Ryker still wasn’t convinced. He started pacing and tapping his fingers on his leg as he walked. “We would have to be here. What about the house we’ve put years into?”

“It would still be there,” Lincoln said. “We would just have to figure out a way to balance between the two and fit in some investigations. We have nothing tying us to one place for very long. Onyx could come here with us.”

“So would your parents,” I said. “Your dad’s been talking about wanting to retire. We could always turn our house into a

vacation rental for half the year and take our important things with us or store them.”

We all fell quiet as we thought it over. The plan honestly had merit, though that rested on sending this entity to the other side.

He'd overstayed his welcome.

“What we really need to do is call the witches,” I said with a sigh, pulling my phone out for the second time and dialing Astrid.

She answered on the third ring, her voice a little breathless as the video call started. “Sorry, girl, we were having a coven night.”

“Oh, I don't want to interrupt,” I said, but she waved me off. “Girl, you know they all want to say hi.” She started walking with the phone before setting me against something so Grandma Rose and others came into view.

“Oh, you need us,” Grandma Rose said. She had a penetrating stare that I swear saw into my soul. She only looked for a few moments before tapping her nails against the table, thinking things over.

“What's going on?” Astrid asked. Now everyone was leaning in, trying to see what we were dealing with this time.

“A really old family line, possible family feud, and a bad haunting,” I started before diving into the entire explanation. Everything from Lincoln nearly tumbling over the balcony to Ryker's incident with the lake, and my dream.

“He infiltrated your dream in your protected area?” Rose asked, stopping me with a hand in the air. She looked like she was taking it personally.

“No, I stupidly fell asleep in the library. We were just relaxing. I didn't think much of it,” I admitted.

She pursed her lips. “Still, you have protection on your body, do you not?”

“I do,” I admitted, “but I've been working on letting my barriers down so I can communicate with the ghosts. Maybe it

was down a bit too far?”

“What else?” she demanded. “I feel conflict.”

“There are a lot of ghosts here that don’t want to leave. They were happy, Rose, not restless or vindictive. Until this entity came along and started causing havoc.”

“It takes a kind soul to have compassion for the dead,” Rose said as gently as possible. “But this entity is no simple ghost. He has to be dealt with first.”

“Are we dealing with the demon again?” Astrid asked. It was my next question, too. Rose shook her head.

“No. From the story, it sounds like we’re dealing with a twisted spirit. There are a lot of things that we take with us after we die. We may lose our body, but we don’t lose who we were. It sounds like his brother did not go willingly. For someone to do that to family, they are already a very corrupted soul. Sometimes when a soul corrupts, their harshest emotions can turn into something else. It’s quite possible that at its core, your ghost is Patrick, but he’s conjured this entity, a manifestation of his greed and hate and guilt, and brought his brother to life through that.”

“So, it’s not just him, but a twisted extension of himself as well?” I asked, trying to summarize.

“Exactly. Two halves of a whole,” she agreed.

“So, how do we get rid of it without evicting all the other souls here who don’t want to go and don’t necessarily need to go?” Lincoln asked.

“You will have to trap it. That’s the only way. Tell the others to stay away until you’ve dealt with it. If they come close after your warning, that is not on your conscience. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lincoln said with a nod of respect.

“Good boy,” she said fondly. “And once it’s trapped,” Ethan hedged. “What do we do then?”

“What we always do,” Rose said. “We send it where it belongs and let the afterlife sort it from there.”

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

*Brea*

“Darklings, we have a special guest tonight. This is Victor, he is the one who leads Bellmore ghost tours. We met him and his daughter briefly at the coffee shop in town, and they told us about this tour. You know that we couldn’t wait to take it. So tonight, he’s going to take us along and teach us a little bit about this adorable little town.”

I turned toward Victor and gave him a smile, urging him without words to say hello. He gave an awkward wave and grinned at the camera.

He was an adorable older man, between his silver hair and crinkly eyes, he looked downright approachable. They were going to love him.

I had a feeling that he was going to be just as passionate about this tour as Ben is with his history, too, so the viewers would eat it up.

He turned to the crowd which was us and a few other older couples. They had graciously agreed to be on the stream as well.

“Alright, a big welcome to everyone joining us tonight. Thank you for agreeing to be on camera for the Spirit Vlog. I hope that we can get some more people out for this tour in the future. We always love tourists here in Bellmore. But, as you can see, this town is far more than pretty lights and vendor fairs on weekends. It has a pretty spooky past.”

I swear this man could narrate a TV show. His voice was smooth and captivating. The moment he started to talk, I was absolutely hooked.

We walked down the street, starting at the coffee shop then toward the old library. It was an old, stone building, not as big as most libraries, but it still had character. There was a stone statue outside of children reading books.

“This is Bellmore’s library and one of the oldest buildings in town. When they took this small, little ghost town and turned it into a thriving, little community, this was one of the first things that the Bellmores insisted on building.”

“Do the Bellmores own everything in this town?” a lady in the crowd asked. From the sound of her voice, she wasn’t very impressed by that.

“No, but they do have several businesses. With the revenue that they brought in and put into this town, it’s really given jobs and built this community into what it is now. Twenty years ago, it was one of those towns that you wouldn’t have looked twice at—no gas station, no grocery store, just a few homes and a town hall.”

It was nice to see that Victor had respect for the Bellmore family, and it wasn’t just them lording over the town. They helped build it from the ground up and didn’t take away from the town’s character.

“Now, this particular haunt is pretty interesting,” Victor continued, ignoring any further questions the lady was about to shout. “There are rumors that Lydia Simms, the librarian who first worked here, loved this library so much that when she died, she came back. It started with small things like books moving over the years, lights flickering, the sound of a woman humming to herself as she worked. But it wasn’t until they installed security cameras that they started to catch something pretty significant.”

“Yeah, right,” someone scoffed before his wife shushed him.

Victor let out a low chuckle and shook his head. He didn't let the skepticism get to him.

"Don't worry. I know that we have plenty of skeptics that come along. But if you check our website where you booked the tour, there are photos included for each location. Make sure you leave a comment and tell me what you think about them.

"Is it just Lydia, here?" I asked, curious now.

"Funny you should ask," he said excitedly. "There have been several reports of children laughing when the library is empty. This is also not the only building that it's heard in."

"Is there a story behind it?" Ethan asked.

"There is," Victor said. "As you know the snow out here can get pretty bad. It goes south fast. There was a school bus heading from some homes on the outskirts into town when a snowstorm hit. The driver was taking it as slow as possible but black ice can be deadly. In this case it took ten lives."

"Oh how sad," I breathed out, my chest tightening at the thought of losing so many small lives. They were probably so scared.

"The rescue crew was quick and did what they could," Victor said in a somber tone. "There's a memorial about a mile outside of town for those who didn't make it."

The group was quiet and he took the opportunity to move us along. We continued down the road until we reached the local elementary school.

"In the history of this school, there have never been any reported deaths of children. But the night crew and janitors who work to keep the school clean and running have reported the sound of children running up and down the halls. The gym has had balls bouncing and rolling around. The police have had to come out to answer a few calls of breaking and entering but only ever found things out of place, no forced entry."

"Is it only at night?" someone asked.

“No,” Victor admitted. “The teachers themselves report school supplies moving places. Another came in one morning to find every chair in her classroom upside down even though she had left them under the desks the night before. It’s all harmless pranks, but in my opinion, children are probably the creepiest type of haunting there can be.”

“Amen to that,” Ben said. We shared a small smile. We dealt with child ghosts in an amusement park we investigated a few years ago. It was one of those things that stuck with you.

“Are we actually going to get to go into any of these buildings or do we just get to talk about them on the outside?” It was the same lady from before, and I had to bite back an eye roll. I just knew my Darklings were tearing this woman apart for being so rude.

“As I outlined in the tour itinerary, when you buy tickets, we will be doing a walking tour of the town, and then we will be ending in our most haunted location yet. There you’ll get to explore if you dare.”

The lady let out a huff but didn’t complain any further. I was going to count that as a win.

“A little bit further down this road and we’ll find the train station. Now, this particular location is what we call a transient haunting, which is quite fitting for the location itself. There’s not one particular haunt here. No one stands out above the rest, even with all the stories it’s accumulated over the years. No two reports have been the same. We can only conclude that these ghosts aren’t here to stay. It’s simply a waypoint in their travels.”

“Is the station running?” Ryker asked. At this time of day, the parking lot was empty, so it was hard to tell.

“Yes,” Victor said. “The last train runs before the tour, though.”

“Have you ever encountered a place like this? With ghosts that aren’t consistent?” a man in the crowd asked.

“Actually, no,” Victor said. “I don’t think I have. Why don’t we ask our professional ghost hunters here?”

I glanced over at Lincoln, seeing if he wanted to answer for me.

“Well, Brea used to investigate on her own so she might have a different answer. As for us, we only encountered a similar haunting once before. It was an old city council building that was previously a jailhouse. We chalked it up to negative energy, but it definitely could have been something similar to this.”

He turned to me and gestured for me to take over.

“I don’t think I’ve encountered anything like this. Generally, we do a lot of research on the history of a place, kind of like Victor here has done for Bellmore, and there’s usually someone that stands out. We figure out why they’re haunting or what they’re doing, and put a face to the activity. So no, I would say this is a very unique haunting.”

Victor beamed at our answer. He took pride in this town and the tour. As he should. He put a lot of work into it.

When he started walking again, there was a bit more enthusiasm in his step. I couldn’t blame him. Having someone else validating your findings was an unmatched feeling.

“Now we get to go to my favorite haunt in this town. And no, don’t worry, it’s not the cemetery. We actually have no reports in the cemetery.”

“Thank the lord for that,” someone muttered under their breath, making us all crack up. It was funny how people reacted on tours like this.

People love to be scared and a tour guide who knows where to go and where not to go gives them a safe place to explore. But the moment you put them in a haunted building that has a story attached, they started to get nervous.

Even the skeptics.

“This building here was originally the first bank in Bellmore. Now, it has been converted into an apartment building in recent years. We never realized it was haunted until people started staying the night.”



He gestured at the apartment building ahead. It was just as quiet as the other buildings and I wondered what the tenants thought about their home being on display like this.

“The tenants report knocks on the doors late at night. Some have said there’s a loud creaking and metal shifting like somebody opening a bank vault. They even hear the chimes over the doors that no longer exist.

He paused for dramatic effect.

“It seems someone is still going about their business in this town, not realizing that the location has changed.”

We all turned to the dark lobby and I swore for a moment I saw a flash of something behind the glass. No one else reacted, so I kept that news to myself. This town definitely had a history and the spirits to back it up.

Usually, with this level of activity in one condensed place, there was a lot more to the story than simple death or strong emotions.

This place used to either be sacred land or some sort of hotspot.

There are certain places in the world that energy was drawn to. It built in that location and grew over the years.

I had a feeling Bellmore was one of those places.

At this point, it was so cold outside that my hands were going numb and my cheeks burned from the cold. I was about ready to ask for a coffee pit stop when he announced that we were on the final leg of the tour.

“Now that you’ve seen a few of the buildings in town and you know a little bit of the history of Bellmore, we’re going to the final location. This building is one of our newer buildings, but it was built on the remains of a funeral home that burned down when one of their incinerators exploded. It was ruled accidental, but with the amount of activity here, I’m not so sure supernatural forces weren’t at play.”

“What is it now?” someone asked, peering around for a sign. I didn’t see one either.

“This was rebuilt as a community center at one point, but then they built a bigger one across town. Since it was abandoned, it’s been several things—a gym, a church, a banquet hall. Nothing ever lasted very long. Now, I like to refer to it as the Bellmore Ghost Society’s Headquarters.”

He typed in a code outside the front doors. The keypad flashed green and the door unlocked. Victor pushed the doors open, and a light flared to life behind him, illuminating a lobby.

They’d gone over the top, making it into a gothic dream. The walls and furniture were black and the carpets a dark gray.

“Those pictures that I mentioned on the website are actually displayed here. There are labels under each one to tell you about them. I’ll be here to answer any questions you have. Otherwise, you are more than welcome to explore.”

“Is there equipment?” a man asked excitedly.

“Yes, our back table has ghost hunting equipment for you to play around with. You can explore the rest of the building at your pace. And please help yourself to coffee or cookies while you’re here.” He gestured to a refreshment table nearby.

“Is it just abandoned offices now?” someone questioned.

“In a way,” he answered thoughtfully. “We’ve put work into cleaning up as much as we could, but it’s full of empty offices and open spaces. Explore at your own risk.”

And that was what the waivers were for on the website.

I wasn’t interested in doing more investigations, especially not after the activity that we have encountered up at Bellmore Castle. I was more interested in chatting with Victor.

I said a quick goodbye to the viewers and ended the stream, letting everyone wave goodbye.

With that, everyone dispersed, most going toward the table for the cookies and coffee, others checking out the ghost-hunting equipment. We rounded on Victor.

“Well, how did I do for my first televised ghost tour?”

“You did amazing,” I promised him. “I didn’t get to read the comments because we were too enthralled in the tour, but I’m sure they’re going to be amazing. Don’t forget to give me your information so I can send proceeds over for whatever we made tonight.

“I told you that I didn’t want to be paid for that.”

“Then consider it a donation,” Lincoln said. Victor looked up at Lincoln’s challenging stare. My man was practically begging Victor to complain. Finally, he just rolled his eyes and nodded.

“Well, the Bellmore Ghost Society is thankful for your donation. Maybe we can do a little bit more to the back if it goes well. I’m not sure anybody is going to want to watch it.”

“There’s been over five hundred thousand hits already on that live,” Ryker admitted. I just checked the numbers. It’s one of our most popular yet.”

Victor’s eyes bugged out at that. “Holy hell,” he gasped.

“You might just have some more visitors in the future,” I grinned.

It was really nice when we could give back like this. We tried to incorporate local businesses like his and he deserved the recognition. This was his passion and it showed in the stories and work he put into the tour.

“So, what kind of activity have you encountered working here? I’m assuming you’ve spent plenty of late nights alone in this building,” Ethan said. Apparently, at some point, he’d gone off and grabbed some cookies, handing one to me and giving a wink before turning his attention back to our tour guide.

“There’s a ghost here that I like to call Sally. I don’t really know why but the name just came to me one day. Now, I hate to admit it, but I’m a bonafide slob. I’m terrible about leaving my water bottles around or not picking up everything or tidying up after the guests because I’m tired after a long day of tours. I’ll come in the next day, and everything is in its place

like I had a cleaning crew in. There was one time I even found something in the sink that I knew I left in my office.”

He spoke so fondly of the ghost. It was how I felt about Remington and the others we'd met. Not every ghost deserved to be forced to the other side; something I was just now learning. There was so much we didn't know about life beyond the veil.

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

*Brea*

From the moment I stepped foot in Bellmore, I thought the town was gorgeous. It was even better on the weekend now that they had good enough weather to do their normal vendor Saturdays.

The air smelled like sweet treats, mountain air, and spiced nuts. They had booths set up along the street in front of the shops. There was everything from antiques, to little trinkets, and handmade items.

There were also more people here than I've ever seen set foot in Bellmore at one time. The line at the coffee shop was insane, but Ben, who had more patience than the rest of us, promised to go in and get our order and meet us back outside.

"So, what do you want to look at today?" Ethan asked as he hooked his arm through mine. I looked up at my bearded man. He looked adorable with his rosy cheeks and wide, excited eyes. He was the epitome of a golden retriever boyfriend, and I loved that about him.

"I'm not sure," I said as I glanced around. "I'm just going to start at the beginning."

"Works for me," he said, leading me toward the first stall.

The table had tiny wooden figures carved to look like animals. They were intricate and beautiful, and I knew each one took time.

“Oh, look, it looks like Onyx,” I said, plucking a tiny black cat off of the table. It was one of the few that he had painted, and her bright-yellow eyes and fluffy tail looked exactly like my sweet cat.

“We’ll take this one,” I said to the old man sitting in the booth. He was wearing denim overalls and a puffy jacket. The sock hat on his head barely contained his wild, white hair.

He gave me a wide grin, showcasing the half of his teeth that were missing.

“That’s one of my favorites. I knew I’d find a good home for it.”

“She looks just like my cat. I can’t wait to put it up on my mantle at home.”

“Well, if you like cat things, make sure you keep an eye out for Miss Betty down the road here. She’s got a whole pet table. You’ll have plenty to spoil your little cat with.”

“Thanks for the tip,” I said, giving him a few extra dollars and a wink before tucking the small bag under my arm and heading for the next table.

It was so nice to see people coming together like this to share their art with the world. I never felt any judgment or competition among them, even though several tables were selling similar things. Here, there was enough space for everyone. They all talked to each other from table to table, and it just added to the atmosphere.

“Handcrafted chocolates!” Ethan sang out, letting go of me for the first time to join the line that was forming. I didn’t follow him yet because I was heading down one side, then the other.

Lincoln quickly took his place and grinned down at me, his bright-blue eyes flashing in the afternoon sun. He was gorgeous and it still took my breath away sometimes.

“I was waiting for the perfect moment to cut in,” he said. “Having a good time, sunshine?”

“I am,” I agreed. “I really like this town. Sure, I love Shadow Ridge and being close to your parents, but there’s just something about this place that I love.”

“Is it the dark energy that hovers in the halls of the castle?” he teased. At least he was cracking jokes about it.

I nudged him with my elbow and rolled my eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“You’re right,” he relented. “I just feel like this is more of a family town.”

“And we’re not a family? Just because we don’t have children doesn’t make us any less of a family. And who better to run some sort of hotel or museum that has ghosts than people who know ghosts?”

I dropped my voice so nobody overheard us. Lincoln thought it over, but his words had a spark of doubt, failing me.

“Are you second-guessing not having kids?” I asked quietly. My chest constricted at the thought of him having doubts. There was nothing that wrecked a relationship faster than being on different paths.

Lincoln shook his head quickly. “Absolutely not. I’m not saying that we couldn’t consider adopting or something in the future, but as of now, I like this. I like us.”

“Me, too,” I agreed as he pulled me in close. I snuggled into his side, breathing in the scent of his cologne and letting out a contented sigh.

“Sorry, sunshine. I didn’t mean to freak you out. I was just wondering if we would fit in here.”

“We could. I don’t think they demand you have a dog and a kid before becoming a Bellmore citizen,” I said as I looked through the rings on display at the next booth.

“Wouldn’t that be something,” the old lady chuckled. “Me and my wife didn’t have kids or a dog. If you want to move here, do it. I haven’t regretted it.”

“See,” I told Lincoln, giving her a wink. “We’re definitely considering it.”

“The more the merrier,” she agreed, beaming at us.

“Liv would love this,” I said, picking up a pretty, steampunk-style ring. “I’ll take this.”

“Do you think Olivia would come out here to visit you here?” he teased.

My poor best friend might have been even more traumatized by the situation with Mack than I was. He posed as her boyfriend, got close to her, built an entire fake relationship with her that she didn’t know was fake. When it all came to a head she was horrified.

During that time, she was also introduced to ghosts for the first time, realizing that maybe this wasn’t just a hobby after all but a reality.

“Maybe. Imagine if we invited her and our family up here for Christmas. We could even invite the witches, have a real celebration. I always wanted to have big family gatherings.”

“I think if we stick in one place long enough like this, you might just find some more friends to add to our family of misfits.”

“Only if they’ve got an open mind,” I deadpanned. “They’d think I was crazy if I started talking to Remington or something. Knowing me, I’d forget that not everyone else can see him.”

“Yeah, if we can figure out a way to get rid of that ghost and save all the others. No pressure, right?”

He ran a hand over his stubble, his telltale sign that he was out of sorts. It wasn’t just weighing on me, it was dragging us all down.

We had several souls in our hands, and we couldn’t let them down.

We dropped the heavy subjects as the afternoon wore on, the other guys joining us as we looked through all of the booths.

Ben and I found the antique store again. Ethan snagged several bags full of treats. I found a journal and some cool



trinkets. Ryker and Lincoln were the only ones who didn't find anything they wanted to take home outside of some delicious food.

As the sun started to go down, music filled the air. A live band was setting up in front of town hall.

They lit several bonfires in front, and people gathered around, listening to music, chatting, and just enjoying the night.

Between the crisp night air and the mountains in the background, the soft music playing, and the crackling of the fire, it was hard to believe that we were dealing with something so dark up at the castle.

In this moment, it was just us and this gorgeous town.

Ryker moved in next to me, his fingers tangling with mine, while Ethan and Ben chatted right behind us.

Unlike a lot of places we went, nobody gave us strange looks for being so close, and me being the only woman among all the guys.

By now, we hardly kept our relationship a secret. Sometimes that backfired on us. Thankfully, it didn't here.

My phone started to ring, bringing me out of the moment. I glanced down to see Hale's number. He mentioned that he was going to try to come this weekend, but he didn't have an exact time yet.

"Hey, Hale, how's it going?" I said as I answered.

"Not bad," he said, his voice deep and gravelly. "I'm glad I finally got a hold of you. I've been trying to get through all afternoon. The signal out in these mountains are horrendous."

"Oh no, is everything all right?" I asked quickly. I had all the guys' attention now. They were leaning in to hear him better so I didn't have to use the speakerphone.

"Oh yeah, I just cleared things up a little bit early, so I'm literally pulling into town now. But they've got everything barricaded off."

Lincoln took the phone from me, stepping away so he could give Hale directions.

He must have figured out where Hale was coming from, turning in the direction of a black SUV as it skirted around the main part of town, eventually coming to a stop at the gates of Bellmore Castle.

That was our cue to leave, so we started following Lincoln up the path.

He'd hung up and handed my phone back. By the time we got up to the driveway, Hale had already parked.

"Oh shit, he's going to be trouble, isn't he?" Ben joked as the man stepped out of his car.

Even I could admit that Hale was gorgeous, though he wasn't exactly my type. He was lean and tall, in a bulky, leather jacket, some kind of band tee, and tight-fitting jeans.

He had on biker boots that looked like they'd been worn down over the years. His hair was shaved on the sides and long on the top, flipped over to the side and obscuring part of his face.

He grinned, showing off his lip piercing, and I spotted one on his eyebrow as well. His cheekbones were well-defined, sunken just enough to give them extra definition and met a strong jawline. The man was carved from stone and could have been a model easily.

"Hey, sorry for the lack of notice. I tried," he said as we walked up.

"No problem," I reassured him. "We're glad you made it okay. If you'd come a few days earlier, that storm would have made it impossible."

"Oh, trust me, I know. I was stranded at the worst motel of my life," he groaned as he popped open his trunk and pulled out a leather duffle bag.

"Well, I promise this will not be the worst stay of your life, except for the haunting. We've been spoiled," Ethan promised.

“I finally get to meet the infamous Brea. At least a bit more formally. I used to follow the Spirit Vlog in the early days of that amazing blue RV,” he grinned. “I actually met you when you first started out.”

My jaw dropped. “No, you didn’t. When? I’m pretty sure that I’d remember you.”

“Nah, I was just a kid back then, and you were a nervous wreck,” he said, wincing. “Sorry, was that too blunt?”

Of course, my guys, being the assholes they were, completely lost it.

“I believe it. She’s only now comfortable talking to people.”

“This is why I work behind the glasses,” I grumbled playfully, shoving Ethan, who was laughing the hardest. “You guys are dicks.”

Ben stepped up and waved us inside. “Come on, I’ve been out in the cold too long. I talked to Margaret earlier today, and she’s got you up in the north wing. I put a few things out to keep the ghost away, but you can do your own thing, too. We’re in the south wing if you need anything, though.”

“We’ll give you a quick tour since she’s not around,” Ethan said, heading inside.

“I am too around,” Margaret said teasingly as we stepped inside. She’d opened up a lot in the last few days. She definitely smiled more and was relaxed around us. Probably realizing we were not the uptight people that she was used to. Though, I had a suspicion that Elizabeth wasn’t either.

“I’m Margaret, caretaker here at Bellmore Castle. If you follow me...”

“I’ll catch up with you guys in the morning, if that’s all right,” Hale said. “I’m exhausted.” Now that he said it, I could see the dark circles under his eyes.

“Of course, we’ll see you at breakfast,” I said quickly. We all gave him a little wave before Margaret started her tour.

We started heading upstairs. It wasn't that late yet, and we were opting for no investigation tonight, especially now that Hale arrived.

That and we needed a break.

"I've got Brea tonight," Lincoln said, snatching me and taking me to his room before anybody could protest.

"Getting a little possessive, are we, Lincoln? Is that jealousy because there's another man here?"

"Absolutely not," he growled, the slight pout telling me I'd hit the nail right on the head.

"Very convincing," I laughed.

"Don't make me spank that ass of yours," he said, pulling me close and pressing his lips to mine. I melted into his kiss without further protest before he was picking me up and throwing me on the bed.

He followed me, crawling up the bed toward me. The way he could turn into a predator, ready to devour me, had my body burning for him.

Lincoln didn't say a word as he started to undress me, kissing every inch of skin that he exposed. The rough rub of his stubble was quickly soothed away by gentle kisses and teasing swirls of his tongue.

With just a few moments of attention my pussy was aching, my hips seeking his as I bit my lip to stop myself from crying out as he reached my breasts, sucking one sensitive nipple into his mouth and rolling the other between his fingers.

Lincoln finally pulled my pants off of me and tossed them aside before taking in my naked form. His eyes were dark and his chest heaving as he studied me.

"You're fucking gorgeous," he said, his fingers trailing over my pale skin. "And you'll look even prettier with my handprint on your ass."

"Yes," I groaned, rolling over before he could even ask me to. He rubbed a hand over my rounded ass as I put it on display for him.

The first smack was loud, the sting sending a jolt of pleasure straight to my pussy. Another followed right after, putting his handprint on my other cheek.

By the time he was satisfied my ass was burning with heat and my pussy was throbbing and dripping wet.

“Fuck me, please,” I begged him. “Take me, sir.”

He groaned at the nickname and lifted me to my knees. His fingers dipped between my legs to test if I was ready.

“Good girl, you’re so fucking wet for me. You love this as much as I do, don’t you?” he praised.

“Yes,” I agreed, pushing against his fingers, desperate to come now.

For once, he didn’t deny me. His fingers sought out my clit, circling around it as he pushed two fingers inside of me. He pumped his hand in and out of me, the other focusing on my clit, and soon I was gripping the sheet and letting the orgasm wash over me.

My pussy clenched around him as I came, his name a cry on my lips.

There was no reprieve before he was slamming into my swollen pussy, fucking me into the mattress with a hand fisted in my hair. I was completely at his mercy and loving every fucking second of it.

Lincoln kept a bruising pace, one hand holding me steady while he used the one in my hair to pull my head back, brushing a kiss over my temple as he slammed into me.

“I’m going to come,” I gasped out as he shifted position, hitting me in just the right spot.

It wasn’t long before I was collapsing onto the mattress as my orgasm took over. My vision blurred as I cried out, the sensitivity of it almost too much to bear.

Lincoln came with me, slamming home one last time before pumping his seed into me and holding it there.

“Rest up sunshine, that was only round one. I plan to own this gorgeous body all night long.”

“Yes, sir.”

CHAPTER  
**EIGHTEEN**

*Brea*

A spirit flew out of the fireplace, coming right for Hale and stopping inches away. I bit my tongue as he bent over, studying the man who was just trying to enjoy his eggs.

A question was on the tip of my tongue. I wanted to ask if he had a gift or if he didn't notice these ghosts.

I would say, from the tension in his body and the side eyes that he quickly shifted around, he was seeing everything I was.

The guys around me were none the wiser. My boyfriends believed in ghosts and the supernatural to a level that most never could, but that didn't mean they had the ability to see or hear them like I did.

"They feel curious," Ethan muttered under his breath. I nodded to let him know that I heard him and bit back a smile as I watched Remington shoo the spirit away. He was standing vigil behind Hale, trying to give the man some peace.

"Can you hear us?" the spirit screamed right in his ear. Poor Hale choked on the bite that he just took, coughing against it before Remington moved up. I could see the surging energy as he pulled his hand back, then the lights flickered as he slammed a hand on Hale's back.

The piece of sausage flew out of his mouth and landed on the table while everybody looked on in a mix of horror and shock.

“You can see them,” I accused. Hale’s head snapped up, his eyes widening, and his face paling just slightly. He couldn’t even speak yet as his coughing continued.

Ben, who was closest to him, poured him a fresh glass of orange juice and slid it closer.

Hale took a long gulp and tried to catch his breath. For a moment, I thought he was going to play it off like I had never spoken at all, but to his credit, he finally met my eyes.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Claire was moving closer. The way she was walking, with an extra sway in her hips, said that she thought she was going to land her a man.

“Hey there, handsome. Are you going to stick around a while?” she teased, bending over so her spectral cleavage was just inches from his face.

Poor Hale. His face had turned a beet red, and he looked anywhere but at the ghost next to him.

“Could you please give me some space?” he finally said. He still didn’t look at her and waited until she backed away.

“Her boobs are out of your face,” I offered, and he let out a startled laugh and turned to her.

“Yes, I can see you guys. I can hear you guys. I was trying to keep it under wraps because not everybody can understand, but clearly that’s not necessary here. Holy shit, I need a shot of whiskey in my coffee today.”

He rubbed his temples before a cabinet across the room slowly creaked open. We all turned that way to see the line of bottles, full of rich, amber liquid.

“Ask and you shall receive,” Lincoln said, getting up and choosing one before bringing it over to Hale. He didn’t hesitate to pour a quick shot into his coffee before he sucked the entire thing down.

“So, I can see, hear, and talk to the dead. Sometimes, I can relive moments in their history,” I offered as a starting point.

“That makes sense with the gloves,” he said, pointing to my hands. It was such second nature to wear them now that I



didn't feel the need to explain myself anymore. I just forgot about it most of the time. "I wondered why the new addition."

"Yes," I agreed. "I don't do it at home, but I do anytime we go out in public. Especially in locations like this. I don't want to get sucked into a memory at the wrong time."

"The amount of times I've almost talked to ghosts in public," Hale said, chuckling to himself. "I was definitely labeled the weird kid in school."

"I'm sorry. Hopefully, you had somebody in your corner. I definitely didn't outside of my grandpa. When he died, I left it all behind. Though, this ability is new."

"Wait," he said, leaning forward slightly. "You're just now able to do this?"

"According to the coven we're in contact with, it's probably something I've been able to do, I just didn't realize. I've always had more supernatural things occurring around me than normal. I just didn't know why. They suspect I had naturally strong mental walls that were blocking some of it."

"That makes sense. Sometimes these things can come from near-death experiences, severe trauma, those things. But it also can just be something people are born with."

"The near-death definitely fits," I said. Hale winced, realizing what he'd dredged up.

"Shit, I'm sorry. I don't usually just put my foot in my mouth like that. I did hear about what happened in the mines. Well, the gossip, probably not the actual truth, but I can surmise that it could have definitely led to this."

"It's okay. Not everybody knows the details, but yes, there was a lot of trauma, and someone did die during that altercation."

"People are fucking crazy," he said, giving me a sympathetic smile.

"Thankfully, we had the witches around to help us. And we've got each other. I wasn't alone."

“You have to tell me more about this coven. We could use someone like them as a contact.”

“You keep mentioning ‘we,’” Lincoln said. “Tell us more about this group.”

“It’s the Ghost Hunters Association. We formed it a little while ago. By ‘we,’ I mean some contacts I had in the supernatural world. I was able to connect with some people via message boards, and we all kind of consulted back and forth anytime we had a tricky case. Then it just turned into this network that we created. Now we work together and are given jobs that come in. It’s grown a lot.”

“That’s amazing,” Ben said. “I know we’re lucky because we have enough of us that Ryker handles the electronics, I handle the history, Lincoln security, Ethan the emotions, and Brea the ghosts. We all have our strengths.”

“Do any of you guys have abilities?” he asked, scanning over the rest of the group.

“Ethan is an empath,” I supplied, explaining the emotions comment. Hale raised his eyebrows.

“That’s unique. Overwhelming, too, I’d wager.”

Ethan nodded. “It can be. I don’t get hit with it all the time, though.”

“Good, good,” Hale said before looking at the others.

“The rest of us are pretty boring,” Ryker admitted.

“I doubt anything about your life is boring,” Hale joked. “It’s been hard getting close to anyone because, like Brea, it’s like being a beacon. The ghosts can sense that you’re open to them, and they just gravitate toward you, whether they realize it or not. Definitely not first date material.”

“We were lucky. We met during an investigation. They were the Ghost Dudes. We were all in the community already. Before that it was just me and my RV.”

“I always thought that was really great, and I always understood why you traveled alone,” he said, earning a glare

from Lincoln who didn't like this guy focusing on me for long. At least he wasn't being rude to Hale.

"It was lonely, though. I didn't realize how bad it was until I met them. We've never looked back."

"That's awesome," he said. He gave a sad smile, and I had a feeling that he was worried he'd never find something similar. I hoped with everything in me he would. I knew how lonely that life was, and I would never wish it on anyone.

"So, this question might be off the wall," Ethan said, "but have you ever encountered anything other than ghosts?"

Ben snorted. "What, like vampires and werewolves?"

Hale let out a laugh, but it sounded off. He knew more about the supernatural world but wasn't willing to share just yet.

"We have bigger problems than stories," Lincoln said. "We have got to figure out what to do about this guy. Have you ever encountered anything this strong?"

"I haven't been able to interact with this particular spirit yet, but I felt him in my wing the moment I stepped out of my protected door. It's like it's pushing down on you."

"It's usually quieter during the day," Ryker said. "I've got some footage if you want to see what he's done so far before you join us tonight."

"I'd actually really like that," he agreed. "I want to go on a walk of the castle, kind of get a feel of the land, see what I can come across, chat with some of the ghosts."

"Feel free. We won't start until nightfall. I actually need to call the coven, Astrid said she had something for us this morning."

"If you're done, I can take you that way," Ryker offered.

"Let's do it," Hale agreed. They both disappeared with Ethan in tow.

Ben cracked open his laptop. "I'm going to stick around here and do some more research into split entities after that

talk about his twin. I just can't shake that that's what he's doing, pulling on his worst memories and guilt and twisting it into this."

"Maybe we should head to his room tonight. We haven't gone there yet," I said. The idea made my skin crawl but we were running out of options.

"Works for me," I said. Lincoln shifted seats so he was closer to me while I pulled up Astrid's contact and called her.

The moment she was on screen, she tucked a strand of her colored hair behind her ears and looked at us eagerly. "I take it you got our message."

"I did," I confirmed. "We're going to go check out Patrick's wing tonight. I'm pretty convinced it's him. If not we can try the cellars. That's been our worst encounter here."

"Grandma Rose did some meditating earlier. She's pretty convinced that he is using something to tether himself here. Maybe it's an item or some kind of spell. Who knows who he had contact with before he died? Desperate men are willing to do desperate things."

"We've seen that before," I muttered. Hopefully, he wasn't making deals with demons. Dealing with that once in a lifetime was enough for me.

"We definitely think you're going to have to trap it in order to expel it. You just need to find that tether first."

"How do we trap him?" Lincoln questioned.

"Grandma Rose said that she sent you plenty of black tourmaline and amethyst. Do you have it with you?"

"We do. We make sure to pack all of that stuff with us every time we go now," I confirmed.

"All right, she sent specific instructions. I'll email them to you. Essentially, you want to find where you're going to trap this thing. Put the black tourmaline in an area arcing around it but leaving an entry open for the ghost. Once he comes in, toss the final piece in place. Then he will be stuck inside because you're protecting the rooms completely around him. It's like

the eye of the storm, containing him completely. He won't be able to escape that center. Once he's there, you'll have to banish him."

"Okay, and how do we do that?" Lincoln demanded before he realized how he sounded. "I'm sorry. I'm just stressed."

"I get it, Captain Grumpy," she said, rolling her eyes before she was all business again. "That depends on what you find. If it's an object, salt and burn it. If it's some sort of rune or spell written out, we will figure it out then. It's hard to know exactly but the coven is getting together to send you guys protective energy and be here when you call. We'll figure it out together."

"We're going to set up the room and do some more research today," Ben said.

"Oh hey, Ben," she greeted. "Sounds like you've got a plan then."

"We do. We'll call you when we need you."

"We're going to go channel our energy, get all of our goodies together, and make sure that we're here when you call."

"Thanks," I said before we ended the call.

"I'm going to go check on our crystal supply. You good here, Ben?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, barely looking up from his laptop and waving us off.

"I'll come with you," Lincoln promised. He put his hand in mine as we headed upstairs.

The moment we got inside our room he pulled me close, his hands on my cheeks as he forced me to look at him.

"Sunshine, everything is going to be fine. *We're* going to be fine," he pressed his lips to mine. It wasn't just a kiss, it was a promise, putting all of his possessive protectiveness into that. It warmed me from the inside out.

Only now, I wasn't thinking about ghosts. I was thinking about him. My hands teased over the waistband of his jeans before I reached for the button.

A loud crash outside of the window had us both pulling apart. The light was still streaming in but the castle shook around us like lightning had struck.

Something was tired of being ignored. I could feel it pushing at our barriers.

The negative energy was now leaking through a bit at a time until my skin was crawling and my heart was pounding in my chest.

Patrick was here and was ready to fight back against our plans to banish him to the other side.

CHAPTER  
**NINETEEN**

*Brea*

“Am I tripping or is that painting changing?” Hale asked as we both watched the screaming figure in the painting move closer and closer.

“We both might be because I see it, too,” I mused.

It wasn’t actually scary but definitely strange.

“This isn’t the first illusion we’ve seen here,” I admitted. “Have you ever seen a haunting like this?”

“No, this is wild,” he said with a shake of his head. “So, the pool is this way?”

“Yes,” I said, leading him further in. The smell of chlorine hit us right before we found the door. I pushed it open and we stepped inside the humid room, stopping when something splashed in the water.

“Remington?” I called out.

He popped in right in front of us, so we both jumped.

“Jesus, maybe don’t appear right in front of me next time?” I pleaded.

“You called,” Remington huffed, crossing his arms.

“Sorry. Someone was in the pool and I was asking if it was you. Clearly not, though.”

“Oh, that’s probably Claire, she likes to pretend,” he said before popping out.

“Claire?” I said as we stepped close to the edge.

The water was still now but before we could turn to leave a wave of water was launched at us, covering us both.

Her laughter filled the air at our expense. We both looked like drowned rats now, my hair stuck in front of my face in a twisted, wet mess.

“Cute, Claire. Thanks for that,” I grumbled.

“Aw, show me what’s under that shirt, handsome!” she yelled. Hale grinned and lifted his shirt to show an impressive display of abs that had her giggling and rushing off through the wall.

He dropped his shirt and shook his head.

“So, we have ghosts making us think we’re losing our minds and a flirty ghost demanding to see my abs. This place is something.”

“Too bad you couldn’t stay longer, I have a feeling we’d see a whole lot of wild shit between us,” I laughed.

He nodded. “I would if I didn’t have another job lined up. There’s a mom desperate to get some answers for her daughter who’s being haunted nonstop.”

“You’re better off there then,” I agreed. “Do you go on trips like that often?”

“I do. It doesn’t pay as well as yours probably do but I get by. When my grandma died, she left me enough to keep me going,” he said. His smile was sad now.

“I’m sorry, it sounds like you were close. When my grandfather died, I left town. Nothing replaces a bond like that.”

“She was the only one who ever believed me,” he admitted. “She visits me from time to time still, which is weird and kind of awesome. It’s like she can tell when I’m struggling with things.”

“That’s amazing, Hale,” I gasped. “There’s so much I feel like I don’t know about ghosts still.”



“The group will help a lot with that. I’ve learned more from them than I have doing my own research.”

“I have to get out of these clothes,” I complained, picking at my shirt that was still dripping and now I was getting cold.

“Same,” he agreed. “Remind me to steer clear of Claire from now on.”

“Ward your room,” I warned. “She doesn’t seem fond of boundaries.”

“Noted,” he laughed as we wound our way back to the front of the castle and up the stairs, parting ways to go to our respective wings.

“What happened to you?” Ben laughed when he saw me.

“Claire thought it would be fun to end our tour with a tidal wave from the pool,” I said as I started to strip out of the dripping-wet clothes. “Where are you headed?”

“To Patrick’s room with the tourmaline. Want to join?”

“Let me shower while you get it ready,” I said, slipping into the bathroom and taking a quick shower. Now that I was clean and free of chlorine, I put on dry clothes.

“Ready?” he asked as I joined him again. He had a bag full of thick, black stones.

“To go visit Patrick? Especially after him slamming into our wing earlier? No. But it has to get done, right?”

“Right,” he said, looking just as nervous as I was.

We managed to get the rooms surrounding his loaded with the stones. The air in these rooms was musty and felt heavier than the rest of the castle. He definitely was tethered here or something important was kept here.

Though, I wasn’t willing to explore his quarters without our full team.

“He’s been quiet during this,” I hissed, almost afraid he’d overhear me.

“The castle is usually pretty calm this time of day. I have a feeling he’s building his energy up for tonight. Let’s hurry.”

Just as we placed the final rock it was like Patrick woke up. A rumbling filled the air as we hurried from the wing.

The door slammed shut behind us and a loud scream filled the air. Patrick was making it known that we would regret returning.

What other choice did we have?

CHAPTER  
TWENTY

*Brea*

The walls shook as we walked down the hallway toward Patrick's room. Paintings shifted on the wall, dropping to the floor one at a time.

"Duck!" Lincoln yelled, putting his hand on my head and forcing me to crouch down just as a small statue flew across the path, slamming into the wall and shattering into a million pieces as it hit the floor.

"Run!" Hale demanded as a new one lifted into the air. His order had us moving faster, trying to outrun the attack.

The moment we set out to investigate, hell, the moment we stepped out of our barriers, he was ready to fight.

It was hard to breathe or think in here. The negative energy was pushing against us all and we hadn't even reached his door yet.

Even worse, every time we'd see a flicker of any other ghost, it was immediately extinguished, like he was forcing them into submission. He was taking their energy, not allowing them enough to even exist.

It was making him stronger and tonight he was desperate, selfishly extinguishing their flames to ignite his own.

Instead of an investigation, tonight we were eradicating a spirit. Thank fuck we'd brought stuff up here earlier.

"I wonder if having both of us here is what triggered this," Hale said. "Maybe I shouldn't have come."

“No, I’m glad you’re here,” Lincoln argued. “Not only is it going to be nice to have two people to watch our backs while we deal with this, but now we won’t have to hunt him down to get rid of his ass.”

As if Patrick was listening, the rug was yanked out from under our feet, sending us all tumbling forward. There was no way to catch ourselves when we were being hurled off a rug.

I landed right on top of Ethan’s legs, who slammed into Ryker. Hale was pinned under Lincoln’s big body and Ben was slammed into the wall as we collapsed into one big pile.

“I’ve never had anything attack me like this.” Hale sounded terrified now and I couldn’t blame him.

“What exactly are we looking for in here?” Ethan asked as we crawled toward the doors. Ben had come here earlier to try to make sure that we were in the right place, but he couldn’t get in.

Margaret had found us a skeleton key and it was clutched in my palm. I was glad I hadn’t lost it yet. Then again, I was holding it so tight that my hand was starting to ache, but I refused to let it go.

One moment of distraction, and it would be gone.

“Get Brea to the door, she can get it unlocked,” Lincoln said, pushing me ahead.

We’d already set up our trap. Everything but this hallway leading into this room was protected.

We even went as far as borrowing a ladder from the groundskeeper and putting some of the few smaller pieces of black tourmaline on the eaves outside of his wing.

The guys worked together, surrounding me with their bodies, protecting us as we inched closer to the room.

A screech echoed in the hallway, ear-piercing and forcing us to cover our ears. The disembodied yell was horrifying, filled with something dark and angry. It had every hair on my body standing on end and goosebumps erupting on my skin.

“He’s losing control,” Ben muttered. If they could hear it, then he was stronger than I had anticipated.

When I finally reached the door, I tried my best to shove the key into the lock. It took four tries before I managed to make contact.

It felt like the door itself was fighting against me. I was using all my strength to turn it and it wouldn’t budge.

Finally, Lincoln reached over me to help. I moved my hand as his gripped the key, forcing the lock to click.

The moment it was no longer engaged, the door flew open. We scrambled inside and closed the door behind us, saving ourselves from the death trap the hallway had become.

I doubted it would offer much protection. This was the hub of it all, if we were right. Judging from the storm we just passed to get here, I definitely thought we were on the right path.

“Tear this room apart. Find what is keeping him here. It’s not going to be something simple like clothes,” Lincoln ordered. “The Witches said to look for something that holds sentimental value. Something nostalgic. And if you see even the hint of runes or anything like that—ripped wallpaper, anything—call out!”

He had to yell so his voice was heard over the noise outside. Patrick was banging on the door and pelting things against it. The constant explosions of stone and plaster had me on edge the entire time.

My teeth gritted together as I searched the room, my muscles aching with how tense I was.

I just wanted this hell to end.

We all split up and I went for the large bookshelf, grabbing for one of the thick books.

“Stop!” The loud voice was deep and angry, reverberating off the walls as the book I was searching was ripped from my hand and slammed against the other wall, nearly taking Ben out in the process.

“I think she’s on the right track,” Lincoln said, urging everyone over so they were helping rip the shelf apart.

When we turned up empty, Lincoln still wasn’t satisfied.

“Move the shelf,” he demanded. I moved aside as the guys reached for the shelf, forcing it to topple over.

“What’s that on the wallpaper?” Hale asked.

There was something seeping through the wallpaper. It was dark, like ink, and oozing into the crack between the seams of the wallpaper.

I reached up for the edge of the paper and pulled. It peeled away without any effort, revealing a sigil of some kind.

It wasn’t a rune circle that trapped demons, it was something else altogether.

“Here’s hoping my phone survived that attack,” I muttered as I pulled it out of my pocket and called the witches, putting them on speaker.

“Oh my God, are you in a wind tunnel?” Astrid asked. I didn’t answer, simply yelling over the noise.

“I’m sending over a picture now of what we found. He’s fighting hard.”

“Okay, we’re waiting.”

I snapped the picture and sent it into the group text.

“That’s not it,” Rose said. “That is simply strengthening the supernatural abilities. You should definitely get rid of it, but this is not what you need.”

“Damn!” Ben cursed, pulling his sleeve over his palm and rubbing it against the paint. It had been there too long for that to work but the last thing any of us wanted to do was pull out a blade of some kind.

“The fireplace,” Ryker said, reaching for the small shovel they used to scoop out ashes. He started hacking away at it, scraping at the paint and not caring that he was chipping away at the wall a bit.

I don't think Elizabeth would have cared, either.

"Keep looking," Lincoln said, "there's something else."

"Try the rugs," Ben suggested. Ethan stayed behind, his back pressed to Ryker's as he worked, offering protection.

We were a family, a team, and they were brothers first and foremost. They weren't going to let anything happen to each other. That was the only reason I was able to walk away to keep looking.

The wind picked up in the room, anything loose swirling around us in a small tornado. Bits of wallpaper and decor joined the swirling wind and I had to keep my hands up so a rogue book or vase didn't give me a concussion.

"This is fucking insane!" Hale yelled as he dropped to the floor, ripping away the plush rugs to reveal the hardwood underneath. "There's nothing hiding under them."

Not sure what else to do I started knocking at boards, searching for a loose one.

Lincoln was ripping paintings off the walls, looking at the backs and ripping off the paper to make sure they weren't hidden.

Ben had moved on to other pieces of furniture, pulling them away from the walls and seeing if there was anything else behind them.

"Stop." The voice was distorted now, almost like it was using some creepy sound filter.

My stomach lurched as I was plucked from the ground and lifted into the air. The guys were screaming my name, but I was too busy clawing at my throat to answer.

It was hard to get a breath in. I couldn't even say anything back as I gripped at the invisible fingers clutched around me.

What good was my ability if I couldn't even see my attacker now.

The invisible man raised my body until I was pinned to the ceiling. With the storm raging below me and a long way down,

my panic was rising.

My vision was tunneling, dark spots dancing in my eyes as I fought to take a real breath.

“Be ready to catch her,” Lincoln warned the others. They all stood around, following as he moved me from the center of the ceiling and slammed me into the wall before moving me back.

I was slammed around like a ragdoll, my ears ringing and my body aching from the attack. I was desperate for air now and my head was starting to spin.

“I’ve got the rune off. How is he this strong still?” Ryker asked, his voice desperate and scared.

They were terrified.

But so was I.

I could feel Patrick’s hands on me, pushing me into the ceiling as the negative energy burrowed into my skin.

It was a cold ache that settled into my bones and filled my veins. My stomach rolled at the darkness overtaking me.

“They don’t even want you.” The thought wasn’t my own, but it pushed against my psyche. “You’re a burden to them. They think you’re a fraud, a liar.”

“No, they don’t. They love me!” I choked out, fighting back against his words.

“They’d be better off without you,” he taunted. “You’re nothing.”

He was using all of my insecurities against me. The dark thoughts that I kept at bay most days were creeping back in. He was planting seeds of doubt that I couldn’t ignore.

Every vicious lie he uttered grew like dark vines curling around my brain, keeping me in their hold so I couldn’t escape.

Tears were flowing down my cheeks, and he was giving me just enough air now to breathe, to live just long enough to torment me.



“You’re going to die here, Brea. This will be the last investigation you ever do.”

Then his voice shifted, morphing so he was speaking in Mack’s voice.

“I was always your biggest fan, Brea, but you killed me. You pushed me down that mineshaft. Then you left my broken body at the bottom.”

“You tried to kill me,” I sobbed. “I didn’t want to hurt anyone.” His death haunted me still, in so many ways. Partick had gone past my barriers and was picking apart my weaknesses and using them like weapons against me.

“I’m going to kill you like you killed me. You were always mine. Now you’ll be mine forever.”

“No, no.” I repeated it over and over in my head, trying my best to not believe any of the stuff that was coming my way.

This man wasn’t just a negative force, a spirit twisted by greed and anger; he was a fucking monster.

“Let her go!” It wasn’t my men that yelled this time or Hale, it was Remington. I tried to blink through the black spots still dancing in my eyes to see a flash of white as the ghost came to my aid.

They were solid as they shoved against Patrick. His form retreated just enough that I was released. I would have fallen to my death if not for one for the wisps slowing my fall so I landed softly into Ethan’s arms.

He clutched me, holding me close as I sobbed against him. It was all too much. I was overwhelmed, my brain a little bit twisted and broken now.

I was useless to them, just like he said.

My hysteria might end up hurting us but there was nothing I could do to stop it.

“He’s distracted, keep looking,” Hale said. Ethan didn’t move, didn’t bother to help as he tried to hold me together.

“Brea, you listen to me. I don’t know what happened there on that ceiling, but I saw your face. Don’t you dare let anything that happened up there make you doubt us or yourself. We are here for you. We love you. You are amazing, and you are going to help free these spirits from the hold he has on them.”

I glanced up at the spirits above us. Their forms had faded into a thick, white smoke that pushed against his black smog. It was a war of good and evil and right now, it was tied.

“I doubt the spirits would have helped a person they didn’t think was worthy,” he continued, whispering his thoughts to me. His voice chased off the panic that was still clutching at me until I could breathe normally again.

When I shifted to rub my aching throat, he let out a relieved sigh and squeezed me just a little bit tighter. “Come on, angel, help me. We have to end this. You can do this.”

“I can,” I rasped, my voice sounding off.

He pulled me with him as we started ripping things apart, searching for whatever it was that Patrick had used.

“Break the mirror.”

I wasn’t sure which ghost had told me but I repeated the words.

Hale reached it first, trying to tug it off the wall. Lincoln helped but when it didn’t move, Ethan grabbed one of the wrought-iron pokers from the fireplace.

“Everyone, get back! Protect her,” he told Lincoln specifically. We all turned away from the mirror until I heard the thud a few times and the sound of glass shattering.

When I turned back, we knew we’d found it. Where the mirror had been fused to the wall was now busted away, so we could see the wall underneath.

A set of runes ran down the wall. They were arranged in a straight line, starting at the top and going nearly to the bottom. I couldn’t tell if it was in its entirety, but I hoped it was.

“Call back the coven,” Ben said quickly. I snapped a photo and sent it to them. Astrid’s call was immediate.

“You found it?” she said. “The good news is it’s not a demon. The bad news is he used this to tether himself to this house. Grandma Rose thinks that we can shift the rune line to release him. We’re going to send pictures. You’re going to change a few things. Hang tight, you guys can do this.”

She hung up, and we all waited, barely breathing, bracing ourselves for another incoming attack.

There was an angry storm raging above us—white and black clouds pushing against each other. They were fighting so hard to give us a chance to finish this.

We couldn’t fail them.

When the picture finally came through, Lincoln handed me the permanent marker that he had and the black stone from his pocket. He hurried to the door, opening it enough to tumble out a few rocks of tourmaline before coming back. Patrick was trapped with us, though I doubted he noticed.

“Do it,” Lincoln demanded.

Even as the wind blew my hair into my face, I forged ahead, looking at the picture and changing the lines until his angry runes were something different altogether.

Now we had Patrick’s attention. He pushed away from the spirits and rushed toward us.

The spirits he left behind were weak now, barely visible as they flickered in and out of existence.

So was he.

“Stop!” he yelled, but the flickering got worse with every line that I added. Every rune that I changed had him losing just a bit more juice until he was merely a ghost standing here.

The darkness had left him and his power was gone.

“You need to leave; you’re not wanted here. You don’t get to hurt your family anymore.”

“This is my legacy, my house, and I will always be a part of it.”

“Only in memory,” I said as I added the last line.

There was no huge boom of noise, no crack of thunder. Instead, we were met with silence and an eerie stillness that filled the air.

As the wind died, the figure in front of us blinked out of existence.

Patrick was gone.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-ONE**

*Brea*

“Hey there, angel,” Ethan said the moment I blinked open my eyes, I was resting on his chest, and he was stroking my hair away from my face, smiling down at me.

“How are you feeling?”

That was a loaded question after yesterday’s encounter. I barely remembered the rest of the night after we banished Patrick’s spirit from the house. Everything seemed to settle into an eerie calm but I was too exhausted to stay awake.

“Still a bit off,” I admitted.

“What can I do to help?”

“Remind me that I’m important to you. What he said wasn’t true.”

“You are the most important person in my life,” Ethan promised, leaning down to press his lips to mine.

“Then show me,” I pleaded as tears burned in my eyes.

Ethan was gentle with me and I appreciated it. His kisses weren’t hungry or rushed. They were sweet and healing.

He kissed my lips first before moving lower, worshipping my naked body and mending the fracture in my soul.

With firm hands he spread my thighs before settling between them. He started with slow strokes of his tongue that

built the pressure slowly. I closed my eyes as warmth spread through me and pleasure coiled in my belly.

He stoked the fire before sliding two fingers into my core. His thrusts were slow and purposeful, his tongue and fingers working together until my release was on the cusp of taking over.

“Come for me, angel,” he whispered as he curled his fingers inside of me.

My orgasm was so intense it left tears falling down my cheeks and my body shaking against the insane pleasure he'd managed to coax from me.

We could have gone further but Ethan didn't push it. He moved back up to my mouth and placed one last kiss on my lips.

“Shower time,” he explained, leading me in. I expected him to take things further but he never did. Instead, he cleaned my body and washed my hair, taking his time mending my broken pieces until I felt whole.

“Thank you,” I whispered as he held me tight.

“I'm always here for you,” he promised, kissing my forehead and squeezing me tight.

When we both stepped out of the shower and got dressed, I knew we couldn't avoid the rest of our group any longer.

Not that I wanted to. I was just reluctant to ruin this little bubble of peace we'd found.

Hale was probably eager to get out of here. He was only planning to stay for one night... though, that was one hell of a night.

Hand in hand, we walked toward the dining room. I could hear the voices drifting up, and everybody turned to us when we entered.

“Hey, sunshine. Are you all right?” Lincoln asked, giving me a small smile.

“So, last night was interesting,” Hale offered, breaking the tension. We all let out a startled laugh.

“Last night was probably the wildest night I’ve ever had as an investigator *and* as a person who can see and hear the dead.”

“A medium, is that the right word?” Ethan asked.

“I feel like we’re something more than that,” Hale said. “It never felt like a fitting word, but I don’t know what else to call it other than gifted.”

“It feels different in here today,” Ethan said. “I hadn’t realized that there was an undercurrent of negativity I was feeling throughout the whole house. But I feel lighter today.”

“I agree,” I said. “I think he’s gone.”

“Do you guys need help protecting the rest of the house?” Hale was sweet to offer but he had his own life to return to. This was our responsibility.

“No, we need to catch up with Margaret today, let her know what happened. We can handle putting a few runes around the outside of the castle to keep it protected.”

“In that case, I’ve sent an email over to Ben giving all the instructions on how to join the Ghost Hunters Association. I really hope you’ll consider it, especially after all this.”

“We’ll be joining,” I promised. “We can’t always promise to go wherever we’re needed. We have to live for us, too. But we’ll definitely try when we can.”

“That’s all any of us are asking for,” he promised. “I’ve had to turn a few down and there’s always someone who’s willing to take our place.”

“Good to know.”

“Everything won’t be resting on your shoulders,” Hale promised. “You’re an additional resource, like we all are. Sometimes all we need is a sounding board, kind of like when you called the coven. I’d also really like it if you could give them my email and have them contact me. I’d love to include them.”

“I’ll let them know,” I promised.

“In that case, I’m off. Thanks for letting me come. This was definitely an experience,” he chuckled. He gave us a salute before heading out. He must have already had his backpack because a few moments later, the front door opened and closed, leaving us all in silence.

The guys filled my plate with some french toast and bacon. I nibbled at it, not really hungry but not willing to get a lecture from Lincoln for not taking care of myself.

“Have you seen the ghost today?” Ethan asked.

I shook my head, frowning. It had been bugging me since last night. They used too much energy to save me and I worried that we had somehow forced them out along with Patrick.

“We were keeping our distance,” Remington’s voice echoed in the room as he moved through the closed doorway and into the room with us.

I let out a huge sigh of relief, clutching my chest. “Remington. I was worried. We were trying hard to get rid of him without hurting any of you. We didn’t mean for you to be in the room. What you guys did...” I trailed off, not really sure how to put into words that they literally saved my life.

“We did what was right,” Remington said, his voice strong and proud. “Did we help?”

“More than you could ever know,” I promised. “I would have lost my life up there if not for you.”

His smile was beaming. “Then I’m glad we did it. We’re all here and fine, those of us who want to be.”

“Did someone else move on?” I asked.

“A few of the ghosts did after Patrick was gone. They felt like they’d done their duty, and that was okay. But don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

“You guys may need to go easy on Elizabeth when she comes home,” I warned.



He frowned. “I hadn’t even considered the fact that she would be coming back, and you would be leaving.”

He let out a sad sigh.

“Not to be rude, but it was nice to have someone here who could hear us and see us.”

“Elizabeth was reluctant to move back in again. I don’t know if she’ll consider our offer but we’re hoping to convince her to let us turn this into a hotel. Then you’d have us around fairly often.”

“Ooh, you do? I’m all ears,” he said excitedly.

Remington let out a whistle, and soon, Claire and other ghosts were floating through the door to join us. I turned to the guys so I could translate.

“They want to know what our plans are if you guys still want it after last night.”

Ben tried to speak, his face falling.

“If you want to leave, I get it. We promised we’d protect you, and we—” his voice broke as he cut off.

I stood up and went around, pulling him into a hug that he returned, burying his face into my sweater and fighting off his own inner demons.

“Listen to me, guys. There was nothing any of you could have done. We knew the risks when we came in. We knew that something like this could happen. You didn’t let anyone hurt me, that you could stop, and you didn’t just sit idly by while I was attacked.”

“The ghosts are the ones who saved you,” Ethan pointed out before talking to them directly. “Thank you, guys. I know I can’t see you, but you saved the person we love, and we could never repay that kind of debt.”

“It’s not a debt,” Remington said. “It was a gift. Giving us a voice again has meant just as much to us.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, my voice thick with emotion, “and thank you.”

“Now, on to your plans,” Remington said, clapping his hands.

“He wants to know about our plans,” I reminded them around my laughter. Their enthusiasm was contagious.

Lincoln started the conversation, looking in the direction I had, even if he couldn't see them. “Well, we don't know if Elizabeth will be receptive to our proposal, but we would love to make this into something new. Allow people to come in and experience the spooky attraction.”

“Brea also had an idea to give you guys some recognition and let the guests know who is haunting the castle,” Ethan tacked on.

Remington gasped, turning to me.

“I thought it would be kind of cool to do a museum of sorts. Have you guys give us your histories so other people can learn about the ghosts that reside here. And you guys would be free to tease the guests in subtle ways, keep the haunting alive, if you will.”

“Oh, we would love that,” Claire said, letting out an excited laugh. Theo shook his head, but he didn't look any less amused.

“Won't you be giving up a life to be here? A home most likely?” Theo asked. They were so sweet. Even though they were stuck here and without us, would be silenced, they still wanted us to be happy.

“We wouldn't be giving up anything,” I promised. “We love the home that we have, but this could be a second home. We would split our time between the two, though I feel like we'd be here a lot more during that initial year so we can get things up and running.”

“You could involve that young man in town who does the ghost tours,” Remington suggested.

“He's not so young anymore,” Claire said with a giggle. “He's a silver fox now.” I translated for the guys, leaving out the silver fox comment.

“He might,” Lincoln agreed.

“I bet Victor would love to join the association, too,” Ben added.

“Would you be changing much about the castle?” Claire asked, forging ahead. This felt like a bit of an inquisition but I indulged them.

“Only what we have to,” I promised. “We would have to change the foyer and add in a check-in desk of some kind. The rooms would change but I think we’d leave some of the castle off limits to guests so it could be the same.”

“I want a space for us,” Claire said. “Somewhere we can claim as ours. Maybe add a TV, a window with a nice view...” she trailed off as she likely thought over more demands.

“We could arrange that,” I agreed.

“And what about the staff?” Remington demanded.

“If they wanted to, they would have a job here. I would never just displace any of them. If given the opportunity, I think that Logan could help run an amazing kitchen, and Margaret could be the same caretaker she always has been. Maybe Elizabeth will still want to be involved. This could be an adventure that she’d be excited for. A way to reclaim her home.”

“You truly want us to be involved?” Remington asked. There was a hint of vulnerability and worry in his tone. After years of being in these halls, roaming and seeing the living interact but never being able to talk to them, it had to be hard.

I would never do that to them. If we were here, they would always have a voice. They were part of Bellmore Castle, and I think they’d be surprised by how often the guests would want them around, too. Just like the ghost tours... people loved to be scared.

“This is your home. We won’t take it away, not if we have any say in it.”

There was a possibility that Elizabeth would say no, that she would thank us for our duty here and send us on our way.

I guess we'd find out tomorrow.

"I'm sending word to Elizabeth now," Ben said. "I told her that there was some damage, that we had plenty of footage to give her, and that we had gotten rid of the spirit that was causing the haunting. I didn't tell her about all of them, but I figured that was something we could do in person. We'll explain that they don't mean any harm."

"We certainly don't," Remington said. "This is simply our home, and we're not willing to leave it. Not yet."

"If ever," Theo agreed.

"We understand," I promised. "We'll make sure to tell her anything you want her to know."

"Good. We'll discuss that," Remington said before they popped out of the room.

"They're gone now," I said, turning to the guys. "Lincoln, do you think your parents would be willing to come here, too?"

"I'm sure they would," he said. "Dad's retired now, and you know Mom would love it. I bet she would be willing to help you decide how to greet guests and what treats to offer. Actually, she'd be perfect for this," he mused.

"Do you think we can pull it off? We're not exactly the stay-in-one-place kind of people," Ethan pointed out.

"I'm not saying we have to be. We would just need to be around long enough to get this place up and running. I think the ghosts would keep us pretty occupied. I don't think I'd feel like I was missing out on anything."

"We also have an entire association in our corner. They may call us from time to time. We'd still be doing what we loved, and I guarantee the Darklings would love a series on renovating the castle."

"We'd go stir crazy if we didn't do any local investigations. You can't tell me these mountains don't hold plenty of supernatural secrets."

"So, we're in?" I questioned.

“We’re in,” they all agreed.

“Ben and I’ll work up a proposal tonight,” Lincoln said. “We’ll have it ready for her tomorrow. Her plane lands at noon. Until then, we make sure we have a pitch that she can’t refuse.”

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-TWO**

*Brea*

The black Town Car drove up the driveway as we all stood on the porch, waiting for it to arrive. Elizabeth texted that she was a few minutes away, trying to give us a heads up, but we were so antsy we couldn't help but greet her at the door, just like she greeted us the first night we arrived.

Elizabeth climbed out of the backseat of the car and walked up to join us.

This time, she wasn't wearing heels but flats, and looked a lot more casual and relaxed than she had before.

The vacation had done her wonders.

Her demeanor changed as she looked up at the looming castle behind us.

"I'd like to say it's nice to be home again, but I'm filled with dread. I just want to leave. Let's make this quick," she proposed.

"Follow us, and we can show you what we have," I said. "If you want to see everything."

"I'm the curious sort. Let's do it," she said, squaring her shoulders, determination crossing over her features.

Ryker led the way to the data room. He'd already prepared the best footage and had the clips already queued up to watch.

She walked in, her eyes widening at how we'd transformed the small room.

"I knew you guys were the real deal, but I didn't expect all this," she said.

"Here, you'll probably want to have a seat," Ben said. He rolled over a chair, and she took a seat, shifting uncomfortably.

"Can we just rip off this Band-Aid? I'm ready to move on with my life," she said in a shaky voice. Her leg was shaking as she waited for us to begin.

"We're going to start with one of the first clips that we caught. It was a figure that we watched flashing in and out of existence. We've got some accompanying photos."

I played the footage of the ghost that we had followed with the bloody footsteps. I hadn't realized we caught it on film until Ryker had pulled it out of the other evidence.

He had slowed down the video so she could see what we did, flashes of white taking over the screen. They were quick, but it was unmistakably a human figure. You could catch an arm and a torso in one, moving legs in another.

It continued as we asked questions, our voices distorted thanks to the slowed down pace. She looked amused and horrified as she watched it disappear into the wall.

"Here are the photos. They go along with that footage. It was easier to capture the screenshots and enhance them, but when they followed this ghost, there was a trail of footsteps."

"They looked like bloody footsteps," I clarified before he flipped through, showing exactly that on the screen. It was crazy to see what we were seeing in person in hard evidence, but you could see the red footprints clear as day on the screen.

"That's not ominous at all," she said, swallowing hard. "This is the light stuff?"

"Yes," I said. "There are plenty of stories that we could give you. On the lake, for instance, we had an encounter. Something shoved Ryker onto the ice and another of us saw a

floating figure. They had even made one of us believe that we were falling in.”

Elizabeth shuddered. “I never did like that dock. I’m not very surprised at hearing all of this.”

We showed her a few more things on the screens, and she watched with rapt attention. But it was clear that she was uncomfortable the entire time.

Her body language was rigid, and she shifted often. She hated every second of this, and I couldn’t blame her. With a father like Patrick, I knew her childhood was anything but kind, and this was just another bad thing to attach to this castle.

“Now we have the final footage. We did not stream this because we knew things were bad, but we did have cameras set up in the room we ended up in: your father’s quarters. After you had identified him, we knew he was at the center of it all.”

“What did he do?” she asked in a shaky tone. Her hands were wringing together and I fought off the urge to go to her.

“He essentially tethered himself to this house, made it so his spirit couldn’t cross over, and then he enhanced the supernatural abilities so he was stronger than the other ghosts here. He used it to torment you, Elizabeth. There’s no nice way to say that.”

“Fucking prick,” she growled. “Show me.”

Ryker hit play, and she watched everything unfold. You could even see me on screen being slammed into the ceiling.

She put a hand over her now-pale face as she watched, wide-eyed and horrified, as everything raged on, from start to finish.

Thankfully, there was no audio, but there didn’t need to be. You could fill in everything with your imagination just by watching that horrifying footage.

“This isn’t exactly something we would release, but we thought you would want to know how bad things got and to



explain the level of damage in that room. It's extensive."

"Is he gone now?" she asked. "For good?"

"Yes. We had some help from some experts with runes, and we turned it to bar any negative activity. He and no other entities in the future will ever be able to inhabit this castle the same way. It's protected now."

"But there are some spirits who remain here?" she asked, looking around uneasy again.

"Not every spirit is bad, but yes. You can call them friendly ghosts if you want. This is their home, and they're not willing to cross over. And I morally can't force them to," I said, slightly apologetic.

"That's..." she started, opening and closing her mouth a few times, trying to put into words what she was feeling.

"I think I knew that."

Whatever I thought she would say, that was definitely not it. We all looked at each other before looking back at her.

"What do you mean?"

"You remember I talked about imaginary friends?" Her eyes flickered to me and I nodded. "There was a little girl here when I was a kid. Her name was Laura. She used to keep me company when I played hide and seek from the staff. We laughed and sang together, and then one day she was just gone. I don't know if I got too old and forgot her or what."

"It's often said that children have the ability to see ghosts. It could just be that life became too serious, and you lost the ability to talk to her. I will say we did not run into any children here."

"Hopefully, she moved on to a better place," Elizabeth said, letting out a sigh and looking relieved.

She stood up and started to pace. This was a lot to process and we weren't here to hurry her or pressure her into anything. This was uncharted territory for us all.

“I truly don’t know what to do. This isn’t home for me. It never has been. It’s not just about the ghosts, the negative or the good ones. I didn’t have good memories here. My father was abusive in his own ways. That man gave me enough trauma to write a psychology textbook about.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “I hate that he tormented you in life and in death.”

“Well, he can’t anymore, can he?” she said, and then a wide smile broke over her face. “He can’t.” she said it again before letting out a light laugh. Elizabeth was a whole lot stronger and smarter than anyone gave her credit for, and I was glad that she finally would get to move on.

Then her smile fell.

“How do I tell Margaret that I don’t want to come back? What am I going to do with this place? Just let it go to ruin? Pay them to exist in a house with no owner or tenants?”

“Well, our proposal still stands, and we’ve actually done a little bit more work on it if you’re interested in looking it over,” I said gently.

“No pressure, of course,” Lincoln said, holding up his hands. “If you do not want to sell or you do not want to entertain the thought, just tell us, and we will end it here, and that’s fine.”

She relaxed at that and nodded. “Thank you. I’m willing to listen. You guys have been respectful, and you’ve done me a favor that no one else could have achieved.”

She didn’t know how true that was. Patrick would have harmed any other investigator she could have hired. She chose well when she found us. At least we could see them to fight back.

We all moved to the dining room. I popped into the kitchen to ask about snacks while Lincoln and Ben went over the details.

“Hey, Logan, can we get a tray of snacks out there? Elizabeth is back, and we’re talking over a few things.”

“Sure,” he offered, pulling out the headphones that he always wore. I had a feeling I knew why now.

“I’ve got a little something here I was preparing anyway,” he said with a wink. “I’ll bring it out in a few.”

“Thank you,” I said before I went back to the dining room.

Elizabeth was smiling broadly, which I would say is a good sign.

“These plans are impressive,” she said. “I love that you’re taking the history and the heritage of Bellmore and turning it into a tribute. I genuinely love it, but...”

She paused, as if she was gathering her thoughts. This was a huge thing we were asking of her, and something that would take a lot of consideration. Not one of us expected her to answer us today.

Her hands slid down to her stomach. The way she was rubbing it told me everything I needed to know.

“I don’t want to be here anymore, and I don’t want to raise this baby here, but I don’t want my baby to have nothing in the future. I want them to know our past.”

“Congratulations,” I said with a smile. She returned it, relaxing again.

“How do you feel about a partnership?” she proposed. “I will give you partial ownership, and if we were ever to part ways or change your mind, then I would just simply buy you out of yours. I’d add that into the contract as well.”

“That’s a reasonable request,” Lincoln said and I couldn’t agree more. It was her family that was tied to this house and we would never want her to lose that.

“I could help fund the changes, but you would have to oversee them. I’d also like you to keep my staff on if they want, even if their job changes. If not, I’ll make sure they have a great severance. They’ve been my rocks through all of this.”

“We were thinking the same thing. We would never want to displace anyone,” I promised.

“In that case, you create a proper business plan, and I want it detailed. Everything from how you’re going to staff it, what you plan to do to run it, the changes that you’re proposing to make. Let’s put it all in writing so I can give it to my lawyers. I’ll have them whip up contracts for us, and then we can sign. We’ll even talk about profit margins. Feel free to negotiate, you know I’m very open. I don’t want a huge chunk of the profits that you bring in. This is your brainchild, after all, and you will be doing most of the work. I just want to have partial ownership of this place. I will help fund repairs, renovations, and then just maybe a yearly percentage of the revenue, and you would keep everything else.”

“Then I look forward to doing business with you. We’ll work on it when we get home. Then we’ll tie up loose ends so we can get started as soon as possible,” Lincoln said.

“You could start tomorrow if you wanted,” she promised. “I will not be here. I’m going to go greet Margaret, say my goodbyes, hear her feedback, and then everything else we can communicate in emails or calls.”

“You’re sure about this? You’re okay with changing Bellmore Castle into something that’s shared with the public?” Ben asked one last time.

“More than okay with it,” she promised. “This is not a home to me. I’d love to have a place to bring my baby to visit from time to time, share our heritage, but it’s never going to be home again. Maybe by then, this house won’t feel so cold and lonely. I know you’ll breathe life into it. Bellmore Castle deserves a second chance.”

It may not be her home ever again, but I could see it becoming ours. I always wanted a big family, maybe it now included a few crazy ghosts and a whole lot of work.

# EPILOGUE

*Brea*

*One Year Later*

The sound of voices and laughter filled the air as I walked into the main foyer of Bellmore Castle.

Elizabeth was right. We had taken the quiet, lonely castle and turned it into a place filled with laughter and life.

We kept most of the decorations, though we did have to make changes to turn it into a hotel.

The dining room stayed the same, just with a bigger table. The kitchen was fully staffed now, and June and Logan had created an almost mother-son relationship that Lincoln would get pouty about.

Still, they were the perfect duo—him doing the cooking, her doing the baking, and making the guests happy every day.

Margaret remained in her caretaker role, ensuring the castle had everything it needed. She was often the first to know when repairs were necessary, bringing it to us so we could make it happen.

Stephen loved to sit behind the front desk, living his best life and reading books, directing guests when they needed help and assisting with check-ins and checkouts.

Onyx was the resident cat, constantly begging for attention from anyone willing to give it. She had made herself right at home. Sometimes, I would worry about her getting lost in the

castle, but she always found her way to our wing at the end of the night.

The south wing was big enough that we were able to convert a few rooms for June and Stephen, a couple for us at the opposite end of the hallway, and ensuring there was plenty of space between us.

We had a standing room for Elizabeth and her son in one of the guest wings—a suite that she could use at any time. In fact, we never let anyone stay there. It was her personal home base, and we would never take that from her.

Working with Elizabeth had been a dream. She truly believed in our vision and was happy to see it through. She didn't come back often, never staying more than a night or two before she was off on another adventure, living her best life. She deserved it after the years she spent within these walls.

The ghosts were happier than anyone, proud to tease the guests and keep the haunting alive. They never took it too far, and I appreciated them for that.

Although we did have to scold Claire a few times for not having any boundaries when it came to privacy if she thought one of the guests was attractive.

She was an eternal flirt, and sometimes that was a problem.

To me, this place had become a different sort of home. Sure, we had Shadow Ridge, and we loved our mansion, but this place was different.

I didn't have to hide here, and I had all of our family in one place. I spent plenty of afternoons baking with June or just enjoying the castle and this cute, little town.

We did have to explain to June and Stephen exactly what I could do. They were shocked at first, but they took it well. It wasn't like they hadn't been around supernatural stuff their whole life thanks to Lincoln.

It may have required some theatrics from the ghosts to prove my point, but Remington was more than happy to play along.

At least they weren't ready to run for the hills the moment they found out about me. They just shrugged it off and went with the flow. They were always easy going people, but it was nice to know I wasn't going to be shunned by another family, that this mother wasn't going to snub her nose at what I could do.

Something I certainly never got from my own family.

Instead, I made my own, and I couldn't be happier.

Elizabeth had talked a lot about legacy, something she could leave for her children. Maybe we would never be ready to have kids of our own, but we had this.

We had the association that we loved being a part of. It was a way for us to talk to other ghost hunters, to give our opinions and help when we could.

Then we had the ghosts here and the guests. I had always been proud of what I had accomplished with the Spirit Vlog, and I had no intentions of stopping anytime soon. But now I had a different sort of calling.

Bellmore's resident ghosts deserved to be heard, and I was so happy that this next leg of our lives would be spent within these halls.

"She's here!" June called out as she poked her head into the library where I was reading. Not so much reading as reminiscing about all the changes we've made to Bellmore and how happy I was here.

That was all forgotten at June's words. I dropped the book and practically ran out of the room.

"There she is," Olivia's voice echoed in the foyer. We were both running across the room until we crashed together. I hugged my best friend tight.

"You're really going to do it?" I questioned.

"My brother is living his best life with his boyfriends, my parents are just my parents, and I will still visit them. But you think I was going to turn down the opportunity to live like a princess in a castle with my best friend? Hell no."

“You’re going to love it here, I promise. Let me show you around.”

Now that my best friend was here, I didn’t think things could get any better. Olivia was on her own healing journey, and I was happy to be part of it, to provide a place for her to start.

When she heard about what we were doing, she was excited and curious. After one visit, we both knew she belonged here.

I had my men with me, my family, and now my best friend. Add a few crazy ghosts who kept us on our toes, and that was a recipe for my version of happily ever after.

### *The End*

Want more supernatural reads with men who are willing to do anything for the woman they love? Then check out [Blood & Moonlight](#), a complete trilogy that has wolf shifters, witches, fated mates, and plenty of spice!

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