

A VALLEY GHOSTS CHRISTMAS

Haunting
DESTINY



BL Maxwell

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CONTENTS

[1. One](#)

[2. Two](#)

[3. Three](#)

[4. Four](#)

[5. Five](#)

[6. Six](#)

[7. Seven](#)

[8. Eight](#)

[9. Nine](#)

[10. Ten](#)

[11. Eleven](#)

[12. Twelve](#)

[13. Thirteen](#)

[14. Fourteen](#)

[15. Epilogue](#)

[About Author](#)

[Also By BL Maxwell](#)



Wade

“HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL be there?” Jason asked as we walked into the house.

We’d received invitations to a Christmas party a few weeks ago. At first I thought it was a joke. The party was an invitation only, black-tie event held every year—one I’d only dreamed of being invited to. But then I found out everyone we knew in the ghost hunting community of Sacramento had been invited. “I’m not sure, it’s on the Spirit of Sacramento, and I know it’s rented out for the evening,” I explained as I hung the tuxedo I’d rented for the party. “It shouldn’t be too many people; the boat’s not that big.” The Spirit of Sacramento was a refurbished paddle-wheeler that was permanently docked in Old Town. It was more a floating restaurant than a boat, but it was popular for parties, and it wasn’t easy to get an invitation.

“Well, at least I get to enjoy seeing my man looking hot in a tux all night,” Jason said as he pulled me close.

“Oh god, you guys, please,” Jimbo said, and covered his eyes as he walked right into the house without knocking.

“You know, this wouldn’t happen if you knocked first like normal people do,” I said, and kissed Jason’s lips with a loud smack.

“Yeah but then you wouldn’t know it was me,” he said and walked past us into the kitchen and opened the door to the refrigerator.

“Don’t you know everything that’s in there by now?” Jason asked, and Jimbo met his eyes over the top of the door.

“Just checking to see if there’s anything I need to bring the next time I stop by,” Jimbo said, and focused on the interior of the fridge again.

“Where’s Dean?” Jason asked and pushed past Jimbo to grab a beer.

“He’s—”

“James, you know we’re supposed to be picking up our tuxes, what are you doing?” Dean asked as he walked in the front door.

“Do any of our friends knock before they come in?” Jason asked, and Dean rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, sorry.” Jimbo rubbed the back of his head. Dean stood right in front of him, hand on his hip looking as in charge as he usually did. “I was in the area and thought I’d stop by and—”

“Check their fridge?” Dean asked, and grinned.

“Sorry, you know I can’t resist coming by to give Jason a hard time.” Jimbo raised his eyebrows and lowered his chin in Jason’s direction before softening his expression to face Dean.

“Well, are you done now?” Dean asked.

“Pretty much. Do you guys already have your suits?” Jimbo immediately tried once again to get Dean’s attention away from him.

“Yeah, we just picked them up. I’m excited about the party. You know everyone who has anything to do with paranormal around Sacramento will be there.” Jimbo looked at me like I’d grown three heads, but Dean shoved past him, his eyes wide with excitement.

“Oh, I didn’t know that. I thought it was just a few ghost hunting groups.” Dean stood in front of Jimbo as he spoke.

“No, it’s urban explorers, psychics, pretty much anyone who has anything to do with the supernatural. It should be an interesting evening.”

“Yeah, sounds great,” Jimbo mumbled, making Dean widen his eyes before rolling them.

“It’ll be fine, James. There’re so many people you know in that community I would think it would be fun for you to spend a night with them.”

“Oh sure, can’t wait to spend the night on a haunted riverboat filled with people who have all been touched by the spirit world. Did any of you even think that just your mere presence, and the combined energies of everyone in one place, would put a target on you from the veil?” He looked at each of us and crossed his arms, reminding me of a father looking at his kids with disappointment after one more prank they’d pulled. “Shit can get bad real fast and being on the water will amplify it even more. Did you know that?”

“It’ll be fine. Between the four of us we’re more than capable of dealing with any spirits who think it’s a good idea to mess with us. You’d think word would spread through the

spirit world to avoid us,” Jason said and bumped me with his hip.

Jason knew a lot about the spirit world, but he hadn’t experienced it the way some of us had. Jimbo’s eyes locked on mine, and I knew he was thinking the same thing I was. Neither of us wanted a repeat of what had happened at the last place, or the place before that. I didn’t want any of us to be in danger, so I knew exactly what we needed to do.

“We’ll need to talk to Janis. She’ll know what we need to do to stay safe. I mean, just in case. I don’t really think anything will happen while we’re there, but it doesn’t hurt to be sure.”

“I want to say right now, if shit starts happening and we’re on the fucking river, I’ll probably be swimming for it. It’s literally the last place I want to be stuck with a boatful of ghosts and a group of people touched by the veil. Thank god Janis isn’t going. If she were shit could really go down.” He wiped his hand down his face and took a deep breath.

“What do you mean?” Dean asked.

“James, why didn’t you tell me you were stopping by.” Mom walked in just like they had, unannounced and without knocking. We seriously needed to start locking the door.

“Oh, he didn’t plan it, he was just trying to avoid going to pick up our tuxes,” Dean said with a lifted brow pointed at Jimbo.

“Did you need some help? I’m more than willing to tag along.” She smiled at the two of them and attempted to control

her excited bouncing, but that only lasted for a fraction of a second.

“N—”

“Yes, I’d love you to go,” Jimbo said, cutting off Dean, and reaching for his hand. “You know how I am with wearing anything more formal than chef’s whites.”

“Aw, yes, I understand. Are you ready to go, Dean?” she asked and took both their arms. Dean tried to control his reaction, but my mom always took him by surprise.

“I—uh I guess so.” Dean looked to Jimbo for some guidance, but he just shrugged his shoulder and smiled.

“She didn’t get to go with us when we picked out the tuxes for the wedding, let’s give her this.” Jimbo leaned over her and kissed Dean while Mom watched with a sappy smile on her face.

“You two,” she whispered, and shook her head. “Come on, let’s go.”

They were gone as fast as they’d arrived, and when my eyes met Jason’s we both bent over in laughter. “Oh my god, the three of them are such a handful,” Jason said when he could finally breathe enough to speak.

“Yeah, but what would we do without them?” He smiled at me, and before I had a chance to say another word, his lips were on mine, but when we started to move toward the bedroom he paused.

“What is it?”

“Insurance,” he said, and locked the door.



Jason

THE WEEK HAD FLOWN by. Between work and the new cases we'd recently taken, there wasn't a lot of time to think about much more than what we were dealing with at the moment. I fiddled with the bowtie of my tux for a good twenty minutes before getting completely annoyed and seeking out Wade.

"Need some help?" he asked and took hold of it before I could answer. My eyes met his, and I wondered how I'd resisted him for so long. His warm eyes drew me in. Reminding me of warm summers spent together getting into all sorts of trouble his mother never needed to know about, and love. The love we'd had as friends that had grown to something I would never be able to describe to anyone and make it clear how much he meant to me.

He smoothed his hand down the front of my jacket and I covered it with mine. "You look nice," he whispered.

I kissed him. Never able to resist those lips if there was an opportunity to taste them. He was more than a friend to me. More than a boyfriend. I thought back through the years and tried to pinpoint the moment I knew we'd end up together, and no one else would ever compare. But then I realized I'd probably felt that way as long as I'd known I was attracted to him.

"What's got you thinking so hard?" Wade brushed his knuckle along my cheek.

“Just thinking how lucky I am that I get to spend the rest of my life with my best friend.”

“Jason, you know I love you. But if we don’t leave in the next two minutes, we’re going to be late. And if Jimbo gets there before we do, he’s gonna freak out at the slight possibility someone might want to talk to him.” He kissed the tip of my nose making me laugh.

“Come on then, we don’t want to inflict Jimbo on everyone there.” The two of us grabbed our phones and were ready go. Just as we opened the door Deidra was reaching her hand out to open the door.

“Hey, boys, do you mind if I ride with you? I was going to call for a ride but I didn’t think you’d mind.” She grinned at the two of us while standing there in a floor-length black dress, her hair piled high on her head, and wearing more makeup than I’d ever seen her wear before.

“Did you get your nails done?” Wade asked and took her hand.

“I wanted to look nice, Wade. James and I went for manicures yesterday.” She grinned and showed off her toes. I froze as her words sunk in.

“Wait, Jimbo—big bald guy with an attitude—grumbles a lot?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, and if it was true then I was going to get as much information as I could before I saw him.

“Yes, he wanted to have a day of beauty before the big party.” She ignored my shocked response and turned to walk toward the car. “When are you guys putting up a tree? It’ll be Christmas soon you know.”

“I’m still absorbing the fact that Jimbo had a ‘day of beauty.’”

Wade laughed and unlocked the car door. “We have the artificial tree so we can put it up anytime.”

“I’ll help you guys tomorrow if you want,” Deidra offered.

“That sounds great. I’ve been collecting ornaments all year, and I can’t wait to show them off,” Wade said as he started the car.

“Have you talked to Dean and Jimbo?” I asked.

“Yes, they should get there around the same time we do,” Deidra said from the back seat.

We arrived in Old Town within fifteen minutes. The riverboat was visible at the end of the street, waiting at the dock for all the partygoers who’d soon be aboard. Wade pulled up in front of The Hitching Post just as Dean and Jimbo walked out of the restaurant. I got out of the car grinning, unable to wait any longer to talk to Jimbo. “Hey, man, I heard you had a ‘day of beauty’ yesterday?”

He nailed me with a look that would have been threatening if I didn’t know him so well. But I did and like it or not, I trusted him with not only my life, but Wade’s too. But one word from Deidra and his mood changed.

“James, are you excited for the party?” Deidra asked as she looped her arms with his and Dean’s. Jimbo smiled back at her but didn’t answer. He was so used to her at this point he didn’t even try to fight it. She loved them both and treated them like her adopted sons. Something Jimbo loved.

I reached for Wade’s hand and the five of us walked across the street to where a line had formed waiting at the entrance of the riverboat to let us on board. “Do you know anyone here?” I asked Jimbo who scanned the crowd.

“Yeah a few of them. There’s literally every asshole who has ever shown any interest in ghosts, right here, all at the same time.” It was obvious he didn’t like it. But Jimbo didn’t like anything. Except for Dean and Deidra. Sometimes he liked Wade, and he pretty much loved giving me grief. All forms of grief.

“So, all your friends are here?” I asked and waited for the look I knew would follow. Wade elbowed me in the ribs but barely contained his own smile.

“Good evening,” a man said as we finally made it to the front of the line. “Name please?”

“Wade Rivers and Jason—”

“They’re the Running Scared crew,” another man with long blonde hair said from behind him. “Come on in, guys, we’ve got your table ready.”

The five of us looked at each other, and back at the guy. His hair was slicked back and pulled into a neat ponytail, and I

tried to ignore the way he looked at Wade, because if I didn't ignore it, we'd be getting kicked out before we even made it to our table. Wade took my hand without looking at me and we all followed ponytail guy to our table.

“This is so exciting, isn't it, boys?” Deidra asked as we entered the riverboat. It was beautiful inside. It had been restored to its original form and had an old-time grandeur that was hard to miss. Jimbo's scowl softened for a split-second before it was back in place. When ponytail guy looked at him, he didn't attempt to smile. I decided in that moment I needed to be nicer to Jimbo. Even if it was just for the time we were here.

“Ah, here we are,” the guy said as he pulled out a chair for Deidra. “My name is Jonas, if there's anything you need just let me know.” His eyes locked on Wade as he spoke, and Jimbo shot me a look. Yep, I needed to be nicer to him.



Wade

WHAT THE FUCK WAS up with the guy leading us in. If he didn't back off, and back off soon, I knew Jason was going to say something. Or do something. I had a sudden flashback to when we were kids and him getting into a fist fight with a kid who thought he'd bully me, and then there was my ex at the haunted house. Yeah, we didn't need that. He gave me a tight smile, and I squeezed his hand as we took a seat at the table we'd been led to.

“Do you know that guy?” I asked Jason.

“Fuck no, but if he doesn't back off, he's about to know exactly who I am.” Deidra's eyes widened when she heard Jason's words and immediately flashed to mine.

“Wade, remember that boy that used to pick on you all the time?” she asked, and nodded at Jason.

“Don't worry, Deidra. I'll behave,” Jason said and smiled at her. But it wasn't his normal smile and everyone at the table knew it.

Jimbo rolled his eyes before he leaned in closer to us. “Jason, he's fucking with you. Let it go. You know if he tries anything we all have your back.”

What th— “Guys, let's just have a good night okay? We all look great, and even if the food's not amazing, we'll still have a nice time.” I tried to take the mood down a little, but Jason

and Jimbo both sat with their arms crossed staring at the guy every time he walked into the room.

“Hey, everyone, mind if we sit here?” Trey Andres asked as he and his husband James stood with the same man—Jonas—who had unknowingly started so much shit.

“Hey, Trey. James,” I said and stood to shake their hands. “Please, it’ll be nice to know someone else who’s here.”

Jason mumbled a hello but didn’t take his eyes off Jonas, who returned his look with a smile. James pulled out Trey’s chair and the two of them settled in as Jonas walked away. “What’s that about?” Trey whispered.

“I’m not sure, that guy keeps pissing off Jason.” Jason’s eyes shot to mine. “What? Am I wrong?”

Jason was about to answer just as Janis walked over to the table. Alone. “Surprise! Good evening, everyone, I had a feeling I’d find you all here. You don’t mind if I join you,” she said, and looked at each of us.

“You had a feeling?” I asked and she grinned back at me.

“Something like that. Okay if I sit here?” she asked Trey, and James stood to help her with her chair. “Thank you. There’s so much energy in this room, I didn’t want to end up at a table with someone who doesn’t know how to clamp down their abilities.”

“Do you think we have any reason to worry while we’re here?” Jason asked.

She glanced around the room before leaning in close. “Trey, open up your ability and see if you see any wayward spirits near.”

Trey closed his eyes and reached for James’s hand before he slowly opened his eyes and scanned the room. “I don’t see anything. Doesn’t mean they’re not here, just that they don’t want us to see them.”

I was tempted to open up my own senses, but I didn’t feel any threat, or any need to see what the other side of the veil hid in this old boat. Janis seemed to sense my thoughts and her eyes met mine. A warning? I wasn’t sure. But I wasn’t willing to test it and find out.

A group of people walked in; five men and one woman. One of the men did a double take when he saw Janis. She smiled and he walked over to our table. “Janis, it’s so good to see you.” He looked around at the rest of us and when he saw Jimbo his smile faded. “Jimbo.”

“Sid.” Jimbo crossed his arms and all of us looked from one to the other waiting for something to happen.

“Wait, you’re Janis’s brother?” Another guy equally as big as this guy Sid, pushed him aside and held his hand out to Jimbo. “I’m Griff Warren, and that’s my boyfriend Dane.” A guy seated at their table gave a slight wave. “Your sister helped save my Dane. If it wasn’t for her—well, I don’t want to even think about what might have happened.” Janis smiled at him while Jimbo’s face softened. Slightly.

Jimbo shook Griff's hand while his eyes met Dane's then he smiled. "You're the urban explorers. Janis told me you'd had a little situation."

"Yeah, I'm happy to say since then we've tried to learn more about the paranormal and the spirits we've encountered."

"Is your boyfriend the one who is able to absorb a spirit?" I asked.

"Yes, him and Sophia too. We don't completely understand it, and after what happened to her, I don't want him to take any chances. We're still trying to understand why they're able to do what they do. But I won't stand back and let him be harmed again."

I remembered all the times either Jason or I had been injured in one way or another by a ghost or spirit. Some were terrifying experiences, most were unnerving, and all were dangerous. "I understand. More than I can ever say. We've had lots of strange things happen. But thankfully Janis has always been able to help us plan for situations that require more than just a ghost box or flashlight." I tried to lighten the mood, but there was no way to talk about what we did without it getting a little heavy at times.

"We didn't go into this looking for ghosts, they found us, well they found Dane and there was no way I was leaving him." He glanced at Dane who stood and stepped up next to Griff and took his hand.

"There're so many haunted places in this area. It's more than kept us busy, but now we're thinking of taking some jobs

out of state,” I said, and Jason and Jimbo looked on.

“We can barely keep up with all the weirdness we’re finding around Sacramento. I doubt we’ll ever be able to get out of state.” Dane laughed and leaned in close to Griff.

“I want to hear more about how your ability works. Some of us have had the bad luck of having a spirit take us over, but it didn’t leave us with a mark.” I looked to Jimbo who was still staring at the other guy, Sid.

“We can talk more later. I want to learn more about how you guys have handled ghosts. We have a trap that we can catch the nastiest ones in, but they’re not really ghosts. They’re—”

“Evil. They’re evil spirits that were never human,” I finished for him.

“Yes exactly.”

“You have a trap?” Jason interrupted, always a fan of the gadgets.

“Yep. Ollie and Blake figured it out. It doesn’t work for them all, but it works for a lot. It makes it easier for us to clear an area,” Dane said.

“How does it work?” Jason asked and turned in his chair to face the other three seated at their table.

“They’ll be talking for hours if it’s left to Jason. He loves gadgets,” I said to Dane.

“It looks like they’re getting ready to serve dinner,” Dean said, and Dane and I ended our conversation with a promise to

continue later.



Jason

I TOOK WADE'S HAND as waiters rushed around and made sure everyone had their first course of either salad or soup. "This is pretty cool. I wasn't sure what to expect but it really is very festive." I glanced around the room, and finally noticed it was decorated for Christmas. Lots of pine boughs were hung across the walls, highlighting the small porthole windows. A large tree was setup and decorated near the front of the room, and the main lights were dimmed so the glow of candles and Christmas lights were highlighted. Holiday music played softly in the background, and if I wasn't so fucking suspicious, I'd think it really was a nice holiday party. But I was suspicious.

"It is. We need to put our tree up. I know it's still early but why wait?" Wade asked, and the look he gave me with his soft smile hit me square in the heart. It was the second time he'd mentioned it so I knew it was important to him.

"Let's do it, with your mom's help since she offered. Maybe we can put a few lights out front this year." I wasn't big on decorating, but I knew Wade loved it, and if it made him happy it made me happy. Jimbo smirked at me. Asshole, he was the exact same with Dean. Whatever made him happy, Jimbo would make sure it happened.

"Like tomorrow?" Wade asked, his eyes bright with excitement.

“Sure, if we need anything we can go fight the rest of the weekend crowds.”

“That sounds great,” Wade said. We all finished our first course and the next course appeared, at the same time ponytail guy stood in the center of the room.

“Good evening, everyone. I hope you’re enjoying your meal so far. I wonder if I might bother you with something?” He clasped his hands behind his back and paced back and forth while looking from table to table. “It seems we’ve had a crime occur here, and since we’re on the water we can’t call the police. So, it’s up to all of you to help us solve the mystery.”

Jimbo shot me his patented what-the-fuck look and I shrugged and waited for ponytail man to continue. “A body was found out on the deck.” A gasp echoed through the room, but most of the paranormal investigators stayed calm and waited for him to continue. “Now, I have spoken with a local investigator who happens to be onboard. Captain Mays, can you fill everyone in.”

This was all so weird. I wasn’t sure exactly what was going on. Some of the people in the audience grinned like they were in on a joke while others like me looked around for answers. Another man walked to the center of the room and started speaking. He was dressed in clothing that looked more like something from the 1800s rather than now, and his handlebar moustache completed the vintage look. He clasped his hands behind his back and began to slowly pace across the room. “Evening, everyone. Now I know—” His words were cut off

by the sound of a scream. We all cringed at the sound and the lights flickered out.

“You’ll all pay for my death,” a woman’s voice screeched. The sound came from all around us, as we turned in our seats trying to pinpoint where the noise came from. The lights flickered as though lightning had flashed, and a rumbling of thunder rattled through the room.

“Sorry about that, this weather is so unpredictable,” Captain Mays said, and after smoothing his moustache, continued to speak. “On this night in 1884, a woman’s body was found on the deck of the Sacramento King. As of today, the case remains unsolved. But her ghost, as you just heard, has remained restless. We need your help to solve the mystery.” He looked out at each of us as he waved his hands around the room, and I was sucked into the story. I wanted to help, and if the way Wade leaned toward the center of the room was any indication, I’d say he felt the same way.

Then I noticed him staring at something, along with Trey. A look passed between the two of them and Wade leaned closer.

“There’s a ghost in the middle of the fucking room,” he whispered. “But she doesn’t look like she died on the deck, she’s soaking wet and looks like she was in the water for a while.” Wade kept his eyes trained on the spot the whole time, same as Trey.

“Trey? What is it?” James asked and leaned closer to him.

Jimbo’s eyes darted between Wade and Trey and if the beads of sweat forming on his forehead were any indication,

he could feel that something was wrong. The energy changed in the room and felt electrified. A whiff of ozone told me something was definitely wrong. Janis's head fell forward and if I hadn't seen her channeling the other side of the veil, I would have thought she'd passed out.

Sid looked nervous as he glanced around at the other tables. Some people were still paying attention to ponytail guy, who I now knew was an actor, while others were staring in the direction Wade was. It was easy in that moment to see who was connected to the veil and who wasn't.

The other guy, Captain Mays, continued his part, "Lottie Preston came here from San Francisco to meet a man who she was promised to in marriage. She was young, but she was smart, and she didn't like it that her father had promised her hand to the son of one of his competitors. Intent on forming a bond between the two companies, and not caring how his daughter felt about this. Now, it's not known how Lottie was killed, only that her body was discovered on the deck." He took out a small writing tablet and pencil and licked the end of the pencil before opening the tablet.

"Says here the boat had arrived here late at night, well after midnight. So, Lottie stayed onboard, waiting for morning and her groom to arrive."

"How old was she?" someone at another table asked.

"I'm not sure, but if I had to guess I'd say twenty," Captain Mays said.

"She's younger than that, maybe eighteen," Wade mumbled.

“What was that?” The captain directed his question to Wade.

“Oh, nothing, just following along.” Wade never lied, so the fact he did told me there was way more to this than just a mock murder mystery dinner and made me pay even more attention to every detail. When the captain moved on and started talking again, Wade leaned close to me. “She needs help. She’s been trapped here for over a century, but she doesn’t know why or how. She’s asking everyone in the room who can hear her, to help her. She’s desperate,” Wade whispered, and his lips brushed against my ear.

Jimbo watched the two of us, and when Wade looked at him, he nodded. He was onboard too. Janis’s head snapped up and her fingers clawed at the table in front of her. Her eyes were wide and full of fright. Deidra leaned away from her, not understanding what was happening and clearly startled. Her eyes shot to Jimbo, then Wade, but Wade was still focused on the center of the room.

“You have to help me, I don’t understand why, but I can’t leave this place. I wasn’t murdered, but something binds my spirit to the deck of this vessel,” a deeper—male voice, and obviously not the ghost Wade saw—spoke through Janis. “Please help me.”

We all listened for more from Janis, and so did the table with the urban explorers. Dane’s expression changed. He’d gone from easy going, to serious around the time the first spirit had shown herself. He may not have been able to see her, but

he knew she was there. The hint of a design glowed softly at the edge of his collar. Griff pulled it up a little higher and attempted to hide it. Across the table the only girl in the group, Sophia's arms were quickly covered with markings. Some of them I recognized but a lot of them I didn't, and they all glowed the same way Dane's did.

"Did you bring any equipment?" I asked everyone at our table. Dean took out an EMF meter, a small recorder, and a flashlight. Jimbo took out a flashlight. Wade took out another EMF and flashlight, and even Deidra had a flashlight hidden down the front of her dress.

"I'm not willing to go anywhere without a flashlight, thank you very much," she said.

"Kinda looks like no one here is willing to go anywhere without a gadget or two," I said, and they all grinned at me.

"Is that all you've brought?" I asked as I took out my own EMF meter and small flashlight. Digging in my pocket I took out the stone Janis had given me for protection and was pleased to see everyone else had brought theirs.

"Deidra, where's yours?"

"Oh, I wasn't taking any chances." She flipped her arm showing off her bracelet, and the stone Janis had chosen for her. "Let's do this," she whispered.



Wade

THE GHOST IN THE center of the room didn't seem to care if we saw her, no, she *wanted* us to. She also knew exactly who in the room could see her and met each of our eyes. Trey and I watched as she glided over until she stood at our table. The actor playing Captain Mays continued to tell his story, but my attention was fully on the woman in front of us.

The ghost glanced in his direction before turning back to us. "My name is Lottie, everything he's said is true. I was not happy about the prospect of being forced to marry a man my father had chosen. But I was willing to try. Something happened on the way to Sacramento. I'm not sure what it was. But when I woke up, I was no longer human, I was as you see me now."

"You were drowned?" I asked.

She nodded. "But I don't know how I ended up there, or why I never left."

Dane stood and walked over to our table and knelt down by me. "I know you can see spirits; I can tell something is near, that's why our marks are glowing. But I don't sense danger or darkness. What's happening?"

"The ghost of Lottie is right beside you. She says she's trapped here but she doesn't know why, and she doesn't remember how she died. Normally they remember, it's not a good sign when they don't," I explained to him.

He looked around, but I knew he didn't see her. He could absorb an evil spirit, but she wasn't evil, and he had no reason to want to hurt her. His next words proved to me that he wasn't cruel and had good intent. "We can help. I mean we don't know much about ghost hunting or communicating with them. But all of us are willing to help if we can."

"Thank you, Dane. We may need to take you up on that depending on what we find."

"Aren't we literally in a room surrounded by ghost hunters, and anyone else touched by the veil?" he asked.

"Not all of them are the real thing. Some are very good fakes, not like our groups."

"Sid said your guy Jimbo is powerful too." Dane glanced at Jimbo, who sat with his arms crossed looking around at everyone, and taking in every move they made.

"Believe me when I say you do not want him to use his power around here. There are too many spirits that would be a little too interested and may turn up." I glanced around again, making sure there was only one spirit in the room.

"What do you mean?" Dane asked.

I considered the best way to describe what Jimbo called his beacon. The part of him that called to all spirits on either side of the veil. A bright light they couldn't resist. I looked at Jimbo first, to make sure he was okay with me talking about it. For so many years he'd tried to hide it, but now he tried to use it to help, and had learned to control it to a point where if

needed, he could easily call all the spirits around us to him. Although we tried not to use it unless it was a last resort.

Jimbo stared at me long and hard before he glanced at Dane. I knew he didn't trust easily, and he and I were close enough we knew what the other was thinking without too many words. While Jason and Jimbo loved to give each other a hard time, Jimbo and I had bonded over the spirit world we were both plunged into and understood each other in ways that his husband Dean and my Jason couldn't.

Dean slid his hand over to Jimbo's arm that was still crossed over his chest. He relaxed minutely and nodded.

"Your powers work very differently to Jimbo's. The way I understand it, you're able to absorb spirits or entities you encounter. Basically, draining their powers and destroying them, or at least rendering them powerless. Then that spirit leaves a mark behind that protects you." I skimmed my finger across my own neck in the same area his mark was now visible and still glowing.

"Yes, that's right. But I can't control my marks, they activate with the possibility of a threat."

"Janis might be able to help you with that. I fought it for years, but now I'm able to use my powers as I want. Without my control over it, every spirit within a few miles would be here," Jimbo said. "I call it a beacon, because that's how they see it, and once they're near me it's hard as hell to get rid of them. And I'm not kidding when I say 'them.' Every spirit who can see it will be drawn to it."

Dane looked at Janis who, now back to her usual self, met his eyes with the same serene expression she always met us with. “What James said is true, you can learn control, and it might help to learn the meaning and strength of the sigils you are marked with.”

“Griff has spoken to Janis before, and she did help. He and I tried to figure them out, but we didn’t have much luck. I know some are parts of other symbols, but we haven’t been able to translate them. Sophia understands her markings and knows how to use them; she’s trying to help me.”

“Some things are not meant to be understood, maybe it’s better to just try to control them,” Janis murmured more to herself than to us.

“If you could help me in any way, I’d appreciate it,” Dane said, as Griff crouched next to him, and slipped his arm around him. “I want to be more informed about how this ability works, and it’s not like I can find much online. It’s all weirdness and lies.”

“Then we’ll meet,” Janis said.

“I think I need to talk to the ghost and see if I can find out more. You guys look online and see if you can find out more information about her. There has to be something more than what Captain Mays has said.” I glanced to where he stood, still telling the story of how she was trapped there and asking the audience if any of them had any ideas about finding her murderer.

It might have been a holiday party, but it felt like another investigation to me. The main course was brought out, and even though we'd been looking forward to this meal none of us ate much, too focused on the very real mystery that was playing out around us. Throughout the meal different actors walked amongst us and told their side of the story. A porter who'd helped Lottie to her room, a maid who'd brought her a snack, but neither of them had any information that told how Lottie had ended up on the deck of the boat.

We'd just finished eating when Captain Mays made another appearance. "I hope you're all enjoying your meal. As you know we've left the dock and we're taking a short cruise up the river. You're invited to wander around and see the rest of the paddle-wheeler. Maybe you'll get lucky and find a clue or two along the way."

Jason looked at each of us. "Guys, let's take a walk around the ship and see if we pick up anything on the EMF's. Wade, could you see if Lottie can remember anything else? Maybe if she's up on the deck it might help. And we might find Janis's other spirit."

"I'm not sure it will help, but I'm willing to try." Lottie had disappeared not long after she had appeared, only staying long enough to ask for help. She looked distressed and worried someone would find her, but she hadn't mentioned that when she'd spoken.

Dessert was served and we all ate the slice of cheesecake like children promised a prize for the first one finished. When

I looked around, I realized we weren't the only ones who were hurrying. Trey and James were just taking the last bites of their dessert, and Dean and Jimbo were done. The rest of the room was starting to come alive with excited conversation, and questions about the information we'd been given. But once again I noticed not everyone thought this was a game.



Jason

WE SPLIT INTO PAIRS while Deidra and Janis stayed at the table and chatted. After the ghost at the spa, Deidra had had enough of ghost hunting. A few other teams split off from the party and made their way in all different directions as soon as they were out of the main dining room. “Dean, you and Jimbo take the back of the ship, we’ll take the front. Trey why don’t you guys see if there’s anything down the hall from the dining room. I think we should all go into the sleeping area together.” All of them trusted me enough to let me lead, but I also realized that at times I wasn’t the right person for the job.

Wade and I walked along the hallway until we came to the door we’d entered earlier and stepped out onto the deck. It was cold. Even though it wasn’t raining, it was still very damp, and being right on the river the fog wrapped around us and chilled me to the bone.

“Anything on the EMF?” Wade asked as I waited for the familiar sounds or lights to indicate we were near something paranormal.

“Not yet. Any sign of Lottie?” I asked and glanced around, not like I’d see anything, but I could definitely sense if there was a ghost nearby.

“Nope, and the fog’s not making it easy to see much at all.” We continued along the side of the boat until we reached the front. There were several chairs and tables set up out here,

probably in anticipation of nice weather, and to give the smokers a place to relax that wasn't inside.

“Don't you think it's strange that whoever organized this dinner, invited every person in Sacramento that's involved with the paranormal?”

Wade thought about it for a moment before he answered. “None of this night seems normal to me. I'm a little disappointed. I was hoping that just this once we'd get to go to a nice dinner with our friends and not end up ghost hunting. I know we can't control the spirits and when they choose to make themselves known. But I was really hoping tonight would be different.”

I pulled him close and buried my nose in his neck making him shiver. “I'm sorry, baby. I know ghost hunting was my thing way before it was yours, and I can never say how thankful I am that you joined me all those times you hated it.”

“Jason, you know I love it. I want to help as many spirits as I can, but I also want to spend time with the man I love. Tonight seemed like it could be so romantic and fun, but I guess I never considered it would be closer to a ghost hunting convention than a dinner party.” He laughed, but I knew what he said was true.

“Wade, I love you, and I am so sorry we haven't been taking more time out for us. What do you think of going on a vacation after the holidays? Even if we just go to Tahoe for the weekend, it would be nice to get out of town and spend some time alone with you.” I brushed my thumb across his cheek

and was reminded like a million times before about how much he still looked like the boy I knew.

“Tahoe would be fun, but do you think we could sneak away without Dean and Jimbo?” Wade grinned at me as I pulled back and met his eyes.

“Well, we won’t know until we try.” I hoped he wanted to try, because I needed to know Wade was happy and loved our life together.

“Jason, don’t ever doubt the way I feel about you. You were my first love and you’ll be my forever love. If I didn’t love you, there is literally no fucking way I would have ever gone along with you to The Vineyard House. I still can’t believe I let you talk me into going.” He huffed out a laugh and I pulled him close again. Needing to feel the solid warmth of him.

“I’m so glad you went along with me. If you hadn’t, I never would have been brave enough to even bring up my feelings, and I still smile every time I think of you confessing yours.” It might not have been for everyone, but we fell in love in the middle of a haunted house. A very haunted house. And for me that was about as perfect as it could be.

“Maybe we can go stay at a haunted bed and breakfast and do a secret investigation while we’re there. There’s also that place in Placerville—”

I cut him off with a finger pressed to his lips. “Wade, don’t mention it. It still burns.” I’d wanted to investigate the old hotel for years, and when we finally got the chance, the hotel

owners were not amused at all. We were told not to come back, ever.

He laughed and took my hand. “Come on, let’s see what we can find.”

We walked through the fog until we were at the very front of the boat. There was a large viewing area there, and lucky for us no one else was around. Wade walked up to the railing, and I moved up behind him, wrapping my arms around him and kissing his neck. For a few moments the two of us swayed back and forth as the riverboat glided through the water and the lights of Sacramento illuminated the night sky. And the fog. It was still there, and when Wade shivered again, I knew we’d need to go inside soon or be miserable.

Wade stiffened against me, and slowly turned his head. I could feel it, the shift in the atmosphere that usually meant a ghost was nearby. A slight shimmer to my left confirmed it. I started to turn my head, but Wade squeezed my hand stopping me.

“Lottie how are we supposed to solve your murder if there’s no one who can tell us what happened. If you can’t remember anything, all we know is that you ended up on the deck. Maybe you did take your own life.” He whispered those last words softening their blow. Then he was quiet, but his attention was completely on the area I thought I’d seen the shimmer.

“Is there someplace we could find a clue to what happened?” I asked and waited while Wade listened to her

answer.

“She said they found blood on the side of the boat on the other side of the rail, but they found her body close to where we’re standing now.”

I moved away from Wade and walked along the side of the railing. This had happened so long ago. The boat had been painted and repainted, refurbished, and modernized. The railing I rested my hand on wasn’t the original, and I wondered if we’d have any clues to follow.

“How did she get back on the boat? It makes no sense. If she’d fallen off, she would have been left behind since the boat was moving. I don’t think it’s possible. Someone had to have pulled her out, but how could they do that from a moving boat in the middle of the night? Does she know how far away they were from the port of Sacramento?” I asked Wade, who waited for her to answer.

“Oh shit,” Wade said, and looked to the left and right.

“What is it?”

“Lottie isn’t the only ghost onboard, remember? The one that spoke through Janis has joined us.” Wade’s eyes met mine just as a group of partygoers walked out laughing and talking loudly, taking my attention away from him. When I looked back, his expression had changed to one of grief.

“What’s happened?” I asked.

“I know what happened to Lottie.”



Wade

“I KNOW WHAT HAPPENED.” Another ghost appeared across from Lottie. It was a young man dressed in work clothes that looked like they’d seen better days. One of his hands was mangled and bloodied, and he had smudges of something I’d guess to be grease on his face and arms.

Lottie looked at him in confusion before her eyes narrowed slightly then widened. “Robert?”

“It’s me. I’m sorry, Lottie,” he said. “That last night we spoke, after you returned from your room.”

“That’s right. When I woke up, I walked back out on the deck, and you were down below working on something on the side of the boat.”

“Yes, we’d had a branch entangled on the side, so I was using a rope to go down and untangle it. You were watching me, and I knew it.” He smiled at her, and I could see if they’d been given a chance there may have been a great love between them.

“I remember that. You were so handsome, even under all that grease.” She smiled at him while Jason stood patiently by as all this played out without his knowledge.

“You leaned over to get a better look and slipped. On the way down you hit your head on the side of the boat before you landed in the branches that were stuck near the waterline. I tried to get to you as fast as I could, but you landed face down

in the water. And since we were moving you were dragged along so the water—well the water took you. I couldn't get to you fast enough, I'm so sorry." His pain was written on his face, and I could hear it in his voice. But Lottie stepped closer to him and reached her hand out to cup his cheek.

"How did I get on the deck?"

"I put you there. I tried to get you to wake up, but you were already gone, and I knew if I told anyone they'd think I had something to do with it. Who would believe a night crewman wasn't guilty when a wealthy heiress is found dead on the deck?"

She was silent a moment and considered his words. "You could be right. But thank you for trying."

He smiled at her and covered her hand with his. Their eyes met and for a moment they didn't move. The fog swirled around them, and their forms faded in and out of it as it grew heavier and thicker. The holiday music drifted over to us, and Lottie and Robert began to slowly glide across the deck, both turning to look at Jason and I as they faded away.

"Looks like you solved the mystery," Trey said as he and the rest of the guys all walked out onto the deck.

"I guess we did," I said and reached for Jason.

"Do you think the organizer knew there really was a ghost here?" Dean asked.

"I'm not sure. I think it's more likely it was a good story to keep everyone busy and entertained." Jason pulled me close as

he leaned against the railing.

“What do you think of the urban explorers?” Trey asked as we all got comfortable.

“I think they need help. It sounds like there’s a lot they don’t understand, but the one guy with the marks, he’s powerful. You could feel it, but he needs to learn how to use it, or they could run into some trouble. Especially since they’re not only dealing with ghosts,” I said, and Jason squeezed me tighter.

“What’s with you and their friend Sid?” Jason asked Jimbo, who grumbled under his breath, shoved his hands in his suit pants pockets, and refused to look at any of us.

“Let’s just say we knew each other a long time ago,” Jimbo finally said.

“Oh yeah because that explains it all,” Jason said, and laughed under his breath.

“We can trust him. He’s a good guy, just not my kind of guy,” Jimbo said, with another cryptic answer.

Dean squeezed his arm and leaned against his husband. “Guys, he won’t tell me either, but I’ll keep working on him. For now, can we all go inside and enjoy the party?”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Trey said and reached for James’s hand.

After one more glance to the area Lottie and Robert had disappeared into, I squeezed Jason’s hand and followed everyone back inside.

“It’s so cold out there in the fog, I’m glad we solved that one pretty fast,” Jimbo said rubbing his hands together.

“Oh, did *we* solve that one?” Jason asked and gave Jimbo a shove.

“Watch it, Jason, we both know if I’d helped it wouldn’t have ended quite the same way.”

“Boys, did you solve the mystery?” Mom asked. She and Janis were both still sitting at the table. Everyone had settled into more casual seating around the room, and most were chatting in small groups.

“Wade did, Lottie told him what had happened to her,” Jason said.

“She actually didn’t remember; it was Robert, another ghost who knew exactly what had happened. The one that spoke through Janis, I think.”

“Did they cross over?” Mom asked.

“Yes, they danced off to the other side of the veil.” I smiled at the thought of them. Even after all these years they found each other, and it was amazing. I reached again for Jason. We’d spent too many years not being honest with each other, and I was thankful daily for the fact we were together now.

I noticed the music playing and Jason held his hand out to me. “Care to dance?” He grinned and pulled me onto the floor as soon as I took his hand. We’d danced together at different parties we’d attended, and many times at home, but something

about it being the holidays, and in a roomful of people, most of which we didn't know, made it more special.

“Did I tell you how handsome you look tonight?” he whispered in my ear.

“A few times, but I won't be too upset if you say it again.” He laughed at my words and pulled back enough to meet my eyes.

“I know this isn't the life you thought you'd have, but I'm so damn happy we're spending it together. You mean the world to me, and every day we're together you mean even more.” He was rambling, and he looked a little nervous as he glanced over at the table everyone else still sat at.

“Baby, I meant it when I said as long as we're together, that's all that matters. You've given me the craziest, most wonderful life I could have ever imagined, and more love than I would have ever dared to hope for. I love you.”

“I really hope you mean that.” Before I could react, he was digging in his jacket pocket as he knelt down on one knee.

“Jason?” I choked out. His smile calmed me more than any words could have, so I took a deep breath and waited for him to speak.



Jason

“BABE, I’VE BEEN WAITING for the perfect opportunity to give this to you. I love you. Now what do you say?” I hoped he’d say yes. We’d talked many times about getting married, but something always came up. Either a job that couldn’t wait, or some other emergency that needed to be taken care of immediately.

“When did you do this?” Wade asked and looked at the box I held in my hand.

“I bought the ring three months ago. Jimbo and Deidra helped me pick it out.”

“Is that why Mom kept putting that string around my finger? Oh my god! I couldn’t figure out what she was up to.” Wade laughed and knelt in front of me. “Jason, I love you. And I love you for doing this, but we’re going into marriage the way we’ve gone into every new adventure: together.” He rummaged around in his jacket and pulled out a box of his own.

My cheeks hurt with how hard I was smiling. We were meant to be, and we always had been. “Yes, I’ll marry you. God yes,” Wade said before he reached out and kissed me hard. I pulled him close, and the two of us only stopped when everyone in the room broke out in applause.

Deidra stood next to us clapping and bouncing on her toes. “Oh, my boys. I’m so happy for you two.”

Jimbo slapped me on the back as soon as we stood.
“Welcome to the family, asshole.”

“Are you kidding? I was in this family way before you were
—asshole.”

“Yeah, but we got married first, so you’re like the little
brother.” He smirked at me and Dean rolled his eyes but wove
their fingers together.

“Congratulations, guys,” Dean said.

Janis walked up and slowly put one of her hands on each of
us. Her eyes closed and for a moment she was silent. When
her eyes opened again, she smiled at us. “You two will be
blessed with a lifetime of happiness and laughter.”

“Thanks, Janis,” I said. She was odd, but she was also very
nice.

“Lottie and Robert send their love,” she whispered and
winked.

Our life was amazing. Every little discovery we made, and
every spirit we helped, shaped us into the people we now
were. Wade smiled at me and took the ring out of the box he
held. Without a word he slipped it on my finger and kissed it.
My heart melted. Never in a million years did I think this
moment would ever happen.

“Jason?” Jimbo said and bumped me with his foot.

“Oh, oh yeah.” I took the ring out of the box and slid it onto
Wade’s finger with a kiss. “I can’t wait to marry you,” I
whispered.

We stood and walked back to our table just in time for ponytail guy to walk over. “Congratulations. I just wanted to apologize if I came off a little pushy earlier. It was all part of the show, but I realized after you might have thought I was hitting on your guy, and I didn’t want you to think that.” His cheeks tinged a little pink, and he glanced away from us. “Anyway, congratulations.”

“Thanks, and no harm done. We had a nice time tonight,” Wade said and shook his hand.

“Did you solve the mystery?” he asked.

“Yes, but not the way you probably think we did. Anyway, we know what happened to Lottie,” Wade said, and smiled at me.

“But how? No one’s been able to solve the mystery of it. We used the story because of that. It’s an unsolved mystery so what we basically do is pick the one explanation that seems to fit best.” He pulled out a chair and sat at the table next to Wade who turned to face him.

“Lottie didn’t like that she was being forced to marry someone her parents chose for her. She was out on the deck when she met one of the workers. Robert. They spoke briefly before she went to her room. A while later she went back out on deck, and he was working on the side of the boat trying to free a branch that had gotten entangled on the side. Lottie slipped through the railing when she was looking over the edge to see what he was doing. Even though he was able to pull her out he couldn’t save her, and she drowned.”

“That can’t be right. They investigated it; wouldn’t the worker have simply told the authorities what happened?”

“Not if he was afraid they’d blame him. He was a laborer, and she was an aristocrat from a rich family, sent here to marry into another rich family. They’re happy now, that’s all that matters, and they’re no longer tied to this space,” Wade explained.

Ponytail guy looked around before leaning in close to Wade. “Are there more ghosts here?”

“A few, but mostly they’re just residuals. Nothing to worry about.” Trey and Wade’s eyes met for a split second before both of them looked away as though nothing had passed between them.

“What’s your name again?” I asked.

“My name is actually Dwayne, Dwayne Rodgers, sorry we got off to such a bad start. Jonas is just a part I play.” His eyes were wide as he looked around the dining room, before excusing himself and hurrying off to another table.

“So, you guys are engaged huh?” James asked, as Trey elbowed him.

“Sounds like,” Wade said around a big smile.

“Oh, we’re engaged, and soon to be married,” I said, and pulled Wade close. He laughed at me and buried his face in my chest.

“We’ve docked. Let’s get out of here, I want to go walk around Old Town,” Wade said.

“How about we go to the restaurant and have a few drinks?” Jimbo surprised us all by asking. “You guys too.” He waved his hand toward the urban explorers.

They looked at each other before answering. “Sounds good, let’s go,” Sid, the guy Jimbo didn’t like, said.

Deidra stood and looped her arm through Jimbo’s before Dean had a chance to grab his hand. “Let’s go, boys,” she said.



Wade

WE WALKED AS A group across the street to The Hitching Post. The streets were crowded with people shopping or waiting for the next showing of the Christmas lights show that played a few times a night until Christmas. Jason held my hand, and I couldn't help focusing on the way his ring felt on my finger.

“Jimbo, we don't have to go to your place, we can all go to one of the bars,” I offered, not sure he really wanted to deal with us all.

“Wade, this is probably the one time, well one of the times, that I don't mind. You guys are two of my best friends. Well, you are anyway.” He looked at Jason and smirked. Jason answered with an eyeroll.

“I always knew you secretly loved doing things with us.” I rested my head on his shoulder and he tried to hold back a smile. When Mom patted my cheek, he gave up and grinned. Janis had come with us, along with the five urban explorers, and even though we were a big group everyone chatted on the walk.

Jimbo stepped up to the door and unlocked it with the same pride he had when he'd first invited us here to sample his new menu. “Come on in, everyone, let's see what we can find to snack on.” Jimbo and Dean walked into the kitchen while the rest of us found a place to sit.

“It’s so cold out there, I’m glad we could come in and warm up,” Mom said, pulling her coat tighter.

“So, James and I wanted to talk to you guys,” Trey said to both Jason and me.

“Sure, what’s going on?” Jason asked.

“Well, I know we’d talked about going out of state to some of the different haunts. We’d love to be involved. James and I hadn’t wanted to commit because of his job, but now he’s able to have a more flexible schedule. And we’d both love to see what else is out there.”

“You know, I was just looking at an email I got this morning for a convention in Albuquerque. I thought maybe if we went, then we could check out the area and see if there’s anyone who could use our help,” Jason said, and squeezed my leg.

“Isn’t Billie the Kid’s grave somewhere around there?” James asked.

“One of them. Apparently, there’s two, no one seems to be able to prove which one is the real one. Maybe neither of them are. Plus, Roswell is close, we could always take a drive out that way.”

“I would love to go to Roswell. Do you think it’s possible to go to the crash site?” I asked Jason, knowing he’d know.

“Yeah, but it’s a drive out there, and there’s not much to see. They do have a museum though.”

“When is the convention, and what kind is it?” James asked.

“It’s not until February, and it’s a paranormal convention. More for researchers and ghost hunters. But there will be some authors, and people selling various items too. I haven’t been but I’ve always wanted to attend. This seems like a perfect opportunity if we can all swing it,” Jason said.

“Well, you know I’m in,” I told him.

“They have a ghost tour in Albuquerque that’s supposed to be one of the oldest in the country. But you know how that goes, they all say something like that. I’d just like to check it out to see what lore there is in the older areas.”

“Where are we going?” Dean asked as he and Jimbo walked back into the dining room. Each carried trays; Dean’s held mugs of hot chocolate while Jimbo carried two trays of appetizers.

“There’s coffee too if you’d rather,” Jimbo said as he put the trays down and helped Dean pass out the mugs of chocolate.

“This is great, thanks,” one of the urban explorers, Griff, said. “So, we were all thinking, we might like to go to that convention too. Would you mind some company?”

I looked between our group, The Running Scared Paranormal Research guys, and everyone nodded with a smile. Well except Jimbo, he sneered, but I took that as a fairly positive response. “We’d love to have you go. We can plan out the details after we find out more about the convention, but it sounds like it would be a lot of fun. And if I know Jason, we’ll be exploring whatever haunted place he can find while we’re there.” I kissed his hand and he smiled.

A knock at the door interrupted us, and Dean stood. “I’ll get it, they probably just want to know if we’re open.”

He swung the door open with a smile. “Hi, sorry, we’re closed for the evening.”

“We’re not here for that, we were on the boat. They never did tell us what happened to the woman, Lottie. We were hoping your friend could tell us.” From where I sat, I could see a small group, and I recognized most of them from other ghost hunting teams in the area. I walked over to where Dean stood still holding the door.

“Come on in, looks like we’re having a real Christmas party for the ghost hunters now,” I said with a laugh and slapped Dean on the back.

The next few hours were spent talking with the various groups: some we’d spoken to briefly before, some were new, and others were old friends. But we’d all been touched by the other side of the veil in one way or another. Even Janis talked to each and every person that spoke to her, offering information that was unique to her and her alone.

“Since most of the authentic ghost hunters are in this room, what do you guys think about maybe teaming up on some of the bigger haunts. There’re a lot of them around, and we can’t handle them all alone,” Jason said to everyone in the room. “That includes you guys”—he turned to the urban explorers—“we don’t understand how your marks work, but it sounds like you guys have a lot of good techniques to get rid of the spirits that insist on staying.”

Their group had stayed together, and since none of them knew any of us, I understood. There seemed to be two separate groups. Sid, Dane, and Griff were all close. But they were still connected to the other guys too. Sid looked around the group before nodding. “We’re in.”

“Great. Then let’s get started.”



Jason

WHEN WE FINALLY GOT home it was close to midnight. Wade hurried inside and went straight to the kitchen. After some rummaging around he popped a bottle of champagne open and poured us each a glass. “What’s this?” I asked.

He handed me a glass and we took a seat on the couch not even taking the time to turn on the TV. “I want to make a toast. We’re getting married. I’m marrying my best friend.” Wade smiled and it made my heart stutter to a rhythm only he could. “In a million years, I never thought you could make me any happier but once again you surprise me.” He clinked his glass with mine before speaking again. “To love. Our love that just keeps growing and growing; no matter what the veil throws at us, because we keep kicking it back. To us.”

He leaned forward and kissed my lips before we both took a drink. I tried not to cringe at the taste, but only with a herculean amount of effort was it accomplished. “It’s good,” I managed to croak out.

“Sure it is.” He laughed and set his glass down on the coffee table. “We’re more beer people than champagne, but I wanted to make sure we toasted as soon as we got home. Just to seal the deal.”

I lifted his hand and kissed the ring he now wore. My ring. “I can’t begin to tell you how happy you make me. You’re my everything.” Neither of us were big on romance or talking about our feelings. But we both knew. Just like we’d known

when we were kids, but I was too scared to admit it then. Not anymore, and not ever again.

“You do know my mom is going to be even worse with us than she was with Jimbo and Dean. They were able to talk her out of wearing a wedding dress; we might need them to help us keep her under control.”

“I am going to enjoy every little second of it.”

“I’m going to hold you to that when she’s demanding we invite every person we’ve ever known and wants us to rent out the arena downtown because no other place will hold everyone.” Wade turned to me, his eyes wide, before a laugh burst out of him. “Jason, we should really just elope.” A wide smile spread on his kissable lips. “We could always just take a drive up to Tahoe. No one needs to know except us.” He waggled his eyebrows making me laugh back at him.

“Like we could get away with that. As soon as your mom, or even Jimbo, got wind of that they’d be watching us all the time.”

“Let’s go now. Like right now. We can find a place that can do it tonight, then tomorrow we can drive back. Jason”—Wade turned to face me, grabbed my hands, and bounced in his excitement—

“We never do anything crazy anymore. Let’s do this.”

“Are you serious?” I waited for his answer. But I was happy to do exactly what he’d suggested.

“It’s snowing, it’ll be an adventure, and hell yes I’m serious. Let’s do this.” We both hurried to the bedroom and packed a bag, and then thought better of it and changed out of our tuxes before hanging them and wrapping them in a garment bag.

“These tuxes are going to come in handy.” I laid the bag they were in over the back of the couch and went to the kitchen to pack some snacks in case we got stuck going over the pass. This time of year, anything could happen, including, but not unlimited to rockslides, heavy snow, and ice.

We packed a few extra things just in case. Blankets, a snow shovel, and two raincoats. “I’m so glad we have all-wheel drive now. I hate putting on chains,” I said, and the two of us hurried out to the car, loaded down with everything we could think to take. Then it hit me. “Wade? You really want to do this?”

“Do you?” he asked. His eyes were bright with excitement, and even though he’d changed out of his tuxedo, he was still the sexiest man I’d ever known in his track pants and snow boots.

I shoved everything into the back of the car and rushed around to his side. Taking his face in my hands I looked him right in eyes. “I don’t feel like we have to get married to prove our love, but I want to make it clear to every person in this whole wide world that you’re mine, and I’m yours. There’s no room between us for anyone or anything else.”

He pulled his head back and looked at me. “Oh, possessive Jason. I haven’t seen you in a while. Come on then, let’s get

this show on the road before someone shows up and we have to invite them too.”

It was late, but I still scanned the street just waiting for Jimbo or Deidra to come driving up or in Deidra’s case, walking right up to the door. But for now the street was clear, and I hoped the traffic would hold all the way up the mountain. I kissed Wade before running around and sliding into the driver’s seat. “Hurry up, Wade, you know the longer we’re out here the more chance there is of one of them catching us before we can leave.” He laughed and slid into his seat.

“Let’s go then,” he said, and clicked his seatbelt in.

I backed out of the driveway and just as I got the car straightened out and ready to leave, Jimbo came driving up. I could see Dean in the passenger seat, and I knew Deidra would be in the back. Jimbo’s eyes narrowed as he no doubt tried to figure out where we were going, Wade and I both held our left hands up and pointed at our new rings. Dean grinned and mimicked a silent cheer, while Jimbo’s eyes got so wide I worried they might pop out of his head. And I’d seen those eyes wide with fright many times, so this was saying something.

Deidra pulled herself up between the two seats and her head bounced from Jimbo and Dean to us. When she realized what we were doing, her mouth dropped open and she immediately slapped both hands over it. Probably trying to keep Dean and Jimbo safe from the unhealthy pitch of her excited scream.

I put it in Drive and with a wave we drove away. “Oh, we are never going to hear the end of this,” I said, and kept checking the rearview mirror for a speeding car suddenly following us.

“We’ll take lots of pictures, and they’ll get over it. There won’t be much they can do once we’re married.” Wade glanced back before meeting my eyes. “Maybe don’t slow down until we have to.”

“Got it, get the hell out of town.”



Wade

WE MADE IT TO Placerville before the snow was so heavy it was covering the road. Chains were required, and once again we were both thrilled to not have to get out and put them on.

“What are you looking for?” Jason asked me as I scrolled on my phone.

“Trying to book a room. There’s a lot of places in Tahoe, but if the snow is too heavy, we might need to pull off before we get there.”

“As long as we cross the State line and can get married, I don’t care where we stay.”

“Me either, babe. There’re a few small chapels that say they’re open all night. What do you think of going to one of them, getting hitched, then finding a room?”

“Sounds like you’re in a hurry,” Jason said with a smirk.

“Oh, I’m in a hurry, but more for the after party. Picture it, Jason: you and me, a king-sized bed, and a room where no one is going to be bursting in first thing in the morning. We can sleep in, have a nice hot shower together, then go out to breakfast.”

“And no interruptions,” Jason breathed out with a grin. “Figure out where we’re staying.”

“There’s a little chapel just over the State line and a hotel about three miles from it. What do you think?” The chapel

looked like a small log cabin, but the interior was nice. It was nothing special, but it was perfect to get the job done.

“Does the hotel have a honeymoon suite?” Jason asked.

My eyes shot to him. *Why hadn't I thought of that?* I tapped it out on my phone and found another place that was a little more of a drive but was definitely better. “This one does, and you're going to love it.”

“Babe, as long as you're there with me I'll love wherever we stay.” He took my hand and held it for a moment before the road got a little too slick and he had to get back to driving with two hands.

“We should spend more time in this area, it really is pretty. And you know there's got to be lots of ghosts around here. There's that ghost town over by Reno, and Virginia City. I'm sure there's plenty of places that are haunted around here.”

“I didn't even think of that. You're totally right. We could even rent a house on the lake and find some places nearby. I'd love to go to the ghost town. I think the name of it is Bodie. They basically deserted it so there's still a lot there.”

“What about Virginia City?” I asked.

“Oh, it has so much there to see. There're several buildings that have been investigated already and are proven to be haunted. The cemetery there is a hot spot too. I bet there's some other businesses that would love us to go in and see what we can find out,” Jason said, his voice brimming with excitement just like it did every time we found a new place to

explore. He'd never get tired of it, and I'd never get tired of seeing him so excited and happy.

“We could do that. Why don't we see if the guys want to go stay a weekend in Virginia City? I think it's a bit of a drive from Tahoe to there. And if I remember right the road isn't the best.”

“Oh, that would be great. We might need more than a weekend. Especially if we want to go to the ghost town. I know someone who went and said there're a lot of buildings still there. I mean it is a whole town, and it's a state park so they've preserved what they could.”

“That almost seems like too much to explore. I guess we could go and focus on a few buildings—that is if they'll let us. I'm not sure how that works in a state park.”

“Look at you, planning out a visit complete with an exploration. You know I'm on board for that. I'm not sure how it works either, but we could look into it. If they won't let us, I'd still love to go,” Jason said.

“Let's see what else there is around here. We wanted to start going out of state. I know Nevada isn't that far but there has to be a lot of places to choose from.” Same as California, Nevada had seen its share of history in the 1800s. Including lots of death from the many things that were common to that era. “Oh, what about Carson City? Isn't the jail there supposed to be haunted?”

“I forgot about that. Wade, we need to stay here for longer than a weekend. First, we'll need to contact some people and

see who wants us to investigate. There's got to be a few."

"Oh, more than a few. We've had calls from some of them more than once. There's definitely a need for us in this area. There's a few ghost hunting crews but some are more there for the fear of it all, and the good ones are booked out for months."

Jason chanced a look in my direction as the snow kept falling heavier and heavier. "Why didn't you say something?"

I shrugged. "Mostly because we've been swamped with just the Sacramento area. I didn't want to stress you out."

"Stress me out all you want. This is the perfect opportunity for us to see how we do in areas we're not as familiar with."

I could see it in the way he gripped the wheel and the way his eyes darted around that he was excited at the prospect of investigating this area. "You realize we can write off our stay as a business expense."

"Wade, you're killing me. Let's make it happen. Now I'm going to be obsessed with the local ghost stories until we actually go to Virginia City. I've been there but it was when I was younger. I just remember it looking like what I thought the wild west looked like. And don't forget about Albuquerque."

"Same. I think we even went to the cemetery, but mostly just to look at old gravestones. I'm excited about the convention, and I love the idea of the other teams going too."

“See, there was no way we weren’t going to end up ghost hunters. It’s like it’s in our blood,” Jason joked. But I wasn’t so sure.

I’d thought about this very thing many times. And it really did seem that fate had played a huge hand in making sure we ended up connected to the other side. I also wondered if the fact Jason and I had been friends had been predetermined or if it was chance. My views on fate and chance had changed so much as my abilities had grown, and my love for Jason had also grown. He was a part of me the same way my ability to communicate with spirits was, and together we were a force to be reckoned with.

“I think you’re right. It was fate.”



Jason

THE WEATHER SUCKED. WHO thought it was a good idea to drive to Tahoe in the middle of the night during a fucking snowstorm? Oh yeah, that idiot was me. But seeing how happy Wade was made every little raw nerve worth it. Plus making it official just felt more right than I could ever say. “How much farther is the chapel?” I asked, and hoped it was near. It had taken us way longer than it should have to get here.

“Google Maps says it’s close. Within two miles,” Wade said and wiped the condensation off the window in an attempt to spot the turn.

A large sign was lit up just ahead. Lucky for us the lights were bright and there were plenty of them. “Heavenly Chapel,” Wade read. “That’s it.”

I turned as soon as I saw the road, but the car slid in the snow. Once again, I was thankful for the SUV as the tires gripped and we were under control almost as soon as we’d slid out. The road led back to a clearing that was also very well lit. There was a big parking lot, and an even bigger log home. “I thought it said it was a small log cabin?” I asked as I looked up at the building that would easily be classified as an event center.

“Whoa,” Wade said as he ducked to see it all clearly through the windshield. “It’s a lot bigger than I expected.”

“Me too, I was thinking it was going to be a one-room cabin. Like an old timey thing.”

Wade turned to face me and laughed. “Okay, old man, let’s get our suits and go in.”

We twisted around and got everything within reach. Once we went out in the storm we’d be soaked, so it was a good move to minimize that as much as possible. The tuxes would stay dry in the plastic garment bag, and I was once again glad for his need to plan and not be caught off guard.

“Should we go in?” I asked. My stomach rolled with nerves, but then I remembered why we were here, and it was all I could do not to drag Wade inside. There were a few other cars in the parking lot, and I wondered if they were getting married too. I mean we couldn’t be the only ones crazy enough to get married on a whim.

“Let’s go,” Wade said and pulled the hood of his jacket over his head.

The two of us ran for the front door and stomped what snow we could off our boots as we stood just outside. Neither of us hesitated to go in. The heat was almost as painful as the blowing snow had been, but after unzipping my coat it felt nice.

“Evening, can I help you two?” an older man with a very big moustache and a fluffy white beard, asked, as we stood there trying to recover from the run across the parking lot.

“Yes, sir, we’d like to get married,” Wade said, and smiled at me.

“Oh, sorry we’re not doing any more weddings tonight,” he said with complete sincerity.

“I—” Wade stuttered.

“I’m just kidding you. Who could say no to someone who would drive through this mess to get hitched? This way.” We recovered as much as we could from the shock and blindly followed him to a small office just off the front area. “You’ll need to fill this out.” He shuffled some papers around before handing us one.

Marriage License was written in script across the top, and when we read it, we grinned at each other before our hands bumped in the rush to sign.

“Slow down, guys, don’t worry. I won’t leave until you’re married. I don’t believe I introduced myself. I’m Jacob Jackson, the justice of the peace, and the person who will be marrying you two. You can call me JJ,” he said and held his hand out to shake. After telling us what information we needed to fill out, he stood and watched as we did as he had instructed. “You drove up from Sacramento?”

“Yeah, we just got engaged earlier, and decided not to wait,” Wade explained while filling in his portion of the form.

“Less trouble this way,” JJ said with a knowing smile.

“Oh, you have no idea.” I reached for the pen and filled out my portion before sliding it back to JJ.

“The reason I got into this business is because me and my partner wanted to get married but after fighting with our families for more than three years, we both said fuck it, and went to Tahoe.”

“How long ago was that?” Wade asked.

“Going on twenty years now. His family was very traditional and wanted a big wedding, my family mostly wanted a good party. We had a nice reception that summer to make everyone happy.” He smiled and it was easy to see how happy he was. I wanted the same with Wade. A marriage we could both look back on with fond memories and lots of love. “Have you two been together long?” His question caught me off guard and took me a moment to answer.

“We’ve known each other for as long as I can remember. Wade and I were friends when we were little kids and fell in love as adults.” At my words, Wade smiled at me, and the warmth and love I could see in his eyes nearly brought me to my knees.

“So, is your family gonna be pissed you snuck off to get married? Be honest.”

“Oh, Wade’s mom is going to lose her mind. I’m kinda surprised she hasn’t busted through the door yet. Hopefully Janis hasn’t given her any clues as to where we are or what we’re doing.” My phone beeped with a text just as I finished talking.

“Don’t.” Wade covered my phone with his hand. “It can wait.” The look on his face told me it was now or never. If I

looked at my phone we wouldn't be getting married right now, and the pain in my chest told me that wasn't acceptable. Not now, or not ever.

I slid my phone into my pocket and realized we still needed to change. "Babe, we need to put our tuxes on." I turned to JJ. "Is there somewhere we can—"

"Right through there," JJ said, and indicated another door.

Wade and I picked up our things and went through to find two dressing rooms. A short discussion later, we decided to each take one. After the door closed, I hurried to strip off my wet clothes and freshen up. Luckily there was a small sink and mirror. I splashed water on my face, and when my eyes met my reflection in the mirror, I barely recognized myself. My eyes were so bright, and even to myself I looked happy. Happier than I'd ever been.

More proof that this was right, we were right. And why the hell was I wasting time staring at myself when my future husband was across the hall waiting for me to get my ass in gear. I hurried to dress, ignoring the fact the heater in the bathroom was barely cutting through the cold. But that didn't matter, all that mattered was getting dressed and meeting Wade to stand before JJ so he could marry us.

My hands shook as I tried to button the last buttons of my shirt. A knock startled me, and I hurried to open the door.

"Everything okay? Emma told me you might need some help," Wade said as his eyes bounced between mine, and he gripped the top of my arms.

“Yeah, just can’t get these last buttons,” I admitted. He immediately took my hand and kissed his ring before helping me with the buttons. His hands as steady as ever, and his eyes filled with love. “Is she here?” I looked around the small room even though I wouldn’t be able to see the little ghost who’d helped us on many occasions.

“Yes, she said she couldn’t stay away when she heard we’d be getting married. Apparently, we’re big news with the ghosts in the area.” He laughed at that and smoothed my shirt down after the buttons were all done up.

“Really?” I asked.

“Are you nervous?” he whispered, changing the subject.

I took stock of my feelings, the rush of excitement, and the complete warmth of his love. My nerves were gone, replaced by the want I always felt when Wade was near. “No, I want to make it official.”

“Me too,” he said with a soft smile and a kiss to the tip of my nose. He deftly tied my bowtie like it was something he did every day and nodded his approval. “Marry me.” He held his hand out and I took it and followed him back to where JJ was waiting. He’d changed into a suit jacket and looked like he was ready to go.

“Gentlemen, I need you to stand right here and hold both of your partner’s hands while you face them. I’m not going to bother asking about witnesses, but did you have rings?” We both slid them off and set them in his outstretched hand, and

he immediately set them in the center of the book he held in front of him.

We did as he said, and I found it impossible to look away; JJ started talking but all I could focus on was Wade. When he asked me if I took Wade to be my lawful wedded husband I said yes with no hesitation and without looking away from him. He was beautiful, and he was brave and kind. He was everything to me, and I'd do all I could to make sure he knew it every minute of every day.

When it came time for us to say our vows both of us spoke from the heart and said exactly how much we meant to each other. He loved me just as much as I loved him, and nothing would have made me more sure of it. When JJ wiped a tear from his eye, I had to fight back my own emotions, and the shine in Wade's eyes told me he felt the same.

It was beautiful, it was perfect, and everything we needed it to be.



Wade

“YOU CAN KISS YOUR new husband,” JJ said, and Jason pulled me close for a deep kiss. Our first kiss as husbands. When we broke apart, I couldn’t let him go and pressed my forehead against his.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“For what?” Jason whispered.

“For trusting me with your heart.”

“We’re married,” Jason whispered, and met my eyes with a smile.

JJ cleared his throat. “I now pronounce you husband and husband. Congratulations, guys.”

We hugged again and after taking a few pictures, maybe a few too many pictures, we were ready to change into our storm gear and go to the hotel. I looked over to the side of the room, and Emma stood watching us. A bright smile on her face framed in her blonde braids. I wasn’t sure how she knew we were here, but the story I told Jason sounded good. And I was glad she’d made it—we really did have a witness after all.

“Where are you guys staying?” JJ asked.

“We’re booked in the honeymoon suite at The Ridge Hotel,” I said, and adjusted the garment bag I had draped over my arm.

“Oh that place is nice, we’ve stayed there a few times when we’ve wanted a staycation. It’s not easy to get away when you’re the one doing the weddings.” He smiled and after a few more pictures, and a discreet wave to Emma, we were running back out to the car. The snow was falling steady, with big flakes and no wind, and seeing how much was now on the car I was a little worried we’d made the wrong choice to drive here. But a squeeze of Jason’s hand brought me back to the fact we’d just gotten married. That alone made everything worth it.

We jumped inside and threw the garment bag and everything else in the back seat. “Okay then, tell me where we’re going, husband,” Jason said with a big smile.

I had to kiss him, there was no other option and when we were both breathless, we broke apart. “Let’s send a picture to everyone. I want them to know we did it,” I said and opened my messenger app. I attached most of the pictures and sent them with no explanation, thinking they’d all see them first thing in the morning.

As I was entering the information for the hotel to map it out, my phone started blowing up with notifications. “Oh god, they’re still awake!” I held my phone out for Jason to see the messages, one right after another: where are you, what are you doing, are you kidding me, your mom’s gonna kick your ass, yes I am!

Jason laughed. “Do not answer anyone, wait until tomorrow. Tonight is still ours.”

I opened my phone to the map app and guided Jason to the hotel. It was after three in the morning when we pulled up, but the lodge was lit up with both Christmas and outdoor lights, making it feel like a literal beacon in the storm. The massive pine beams that made up the entrance were dwarfed by the size of the overall building. “Wow,” Jason said as he wiped off the windshield to get a better look.

“Come on, I can’t wait to see how it looks inside.” We’d had a full day already, but even though it was early morning, I didn’t feel the weight of the day at all. I wanted to get to our room and enjoy the time with Jason. We had yet to actually go on a vacation outside of the Sacramento area, so in a way this was not only a night away. It was also a little mini vacation.

This time we grabbed our bags and hurried in to get out of the heavy snow. We walked in and expected the place to be quiet with the late hour and the heavy snow but there were people scattered around the lobby on laptops or playing cards. Apparently the late night didn’t bother them.

“Hello, gentlemen, can I help you?” the man at the front desk asked.

“Yes, we have a reservation for Wade Rivers,” Jason said.

“That’s Mr and Mr Rivers-Thomas,” Wade corrected with a grin and a slight blush.

“We’re still working on that,” I explained to the man who was looking between us with a weary look that said he was too tired, and it was too late for this bullshit. “It’s under Wade Rivers.”

He tapped on the computer and without any fanfare he handed us the keys. “You’re in the honeymoon suite. You’ll want to take that elevator all the way to the top. You’ll see signs when you get off the elevator.”

We followed his directions and as the elevator rode up to the third floor the exhaustion hit me and I leaned against Jason, who slipped his arm around my waist. When the door opened there was a sign just like the guy had said. We walked down the hall and Jason slid his card in. The door opened to a large room with a big king-sized bed on one wall, and a small seating area on the opposite side of the room. Jason walked across the room to the floor to ceiling windows and opened the blinds. Outside was a private deck with a hot tub. He turned back to me and wagged his eyebrows.

“Want to—” A knock at the door interrupted Jason. I walked over and opened it.

“Sorry to disturb you, compliments of The Ridge Hotel.” The same man who had been at the front desk stood with a tray full of different meats and cheeses and a small bottle of wine. “It’s included with the honeymoon suite,” he explained, and set it down on the small table in the sitting area.

“Wow, thank you,” I said, taken by surprise.

“Sure, and you’re welcome to use the hot tub, just make sure you cover it up when you finish.” He smiled, excused himself, and was gone before either of us had a chance to say much more.

Jason rubbed his hands together as he walked over to look at the tray that had been left. “What do you think of trying the hot tub?”

“That sounds so good.” My body was tired, and I worried as soon as I stopped moving, I’d fall asleep. But we were married, and there was no way I wasn’t going to spend every second I could with my new husband.

We wasted no time stripping out of our clothes and slipping into plush robes we found in the closet. Jason grabbed a couple of towels and the two of us hurried out to the hot tub. There was a canopy covering it, so we didn’t have to worry about snow building up on us while we were in it. Working together we removed the cover and slipped into the warm, steamy water.

“If I had known we’d have access to a hot tub I’d have packed supplies,” Jason said, and slid closer to me.

“Well, I did pack them, because I know you’re usually the boy scout, but this time I wanted to be sure.” I leaned over the edge of the hot tub and took out the waterproof lube and a condom. Sex in a hot tub was fun, but it did take a little planning. And lucky for us I did plan.

Jason took my face in his hands and kissed me as I melted into him.



Jason

“WE HAVEN’T MADE LOVE in a hot tub before,” Wade said, as I kissed along his neck. Steam rose around us, and snow fell just on the other side of the canopy that protected us. The cold was biting at our exposed skin, but the warmth between us was enough to keep us both comfortable.

Wade slid over and straddled me as we kissed, and the love swirled around us as heavy as the steam. “I love you. I’ll always love you,” I whispered against his neck.

“Which name will we take?” he asked and scooted back to meet my eyes.

My lips sought his out, but when I realized what he’d said I stopped. “I wanted to ask you about that, I’d like to take your name if you don’t mind. I like the sound of Jason Rivers.” I waited for his response, not sure how he’d take it, and brushed the hair back from his forehead.

“I’d like that. Mom will love it. She’ll *really* love it. Are you ready for that?” he asked, completely serious. Deidra was a lot at times, but she was also an awesome mom. She’d helped us with our business anywhere she could, even if she didn’t really enjoy going out on location, she always helped. “But right now, I want to make love to my husband and show him exactly how happy I am to be married to him.” Wade’s eyes met mine as he reached down and took us both in hand.

My eyes slid shut at his touch. If we only had this it would be enough. Just being close to Wade made my heart flutter in ways no one else did. “I will never get tired of you touching me, not ever,” I whispered against his lips.

“Good thing, because I plan on sticking around for a long time.” He stroked us both, as he kissed me deeply. His tongue glided against mine, and his hips rocked sensuously against me. He leaned in closer and took me right to the edge. Being in the hot tub felt great, but I didn’t want to make love to my husband for the first time here.

“Baby, let’s go inside. If you keep that up much longer this will be over way too soon.” Wade huffed out a laugh into my neck.

“Come on then, let’s go see if married sex feels any different than boyfriend sex.” He climbed out of the hot tub in all his nakedness in the freezing night. Steam rose off his skin giving him an eerie, but sexy look. He winked at me before grabbing his robe and towel and walking back into the room.

“Okay then,” I said to myself since he’d left me out here, and what a way to leave. I got out, braced for the cold because he made it look good. It was cold as a—well I didn’t want to speculate about that. We could put the cover back on later. I pulled my robe on and my teeth chattered as I walked in the room and slid the door shut.

Wade was in the middle of the bed, his cheeks pink and wet hair slicked back off his face. *My husband*. I still couldn’t believe it. He smiled at me and held his hand out. I didn’t need

more of an invitation—being in his arms was my favorite place to be.



We woke a few hours later, the sun peeking in through the blinds we'd neglected to close, and both our phones vibrating with messages we had yet to answer. Wade cracked an eye open and grinned at me. "Good morning, Mr Rivers."

"Good morning, Mr Rivers. Did you sleep well?" He wiggled around a moment before answering.

"I slept better than I have in a long time. Must have been the company, or the lack of company." He laughed at his own words, and I snuggled up a little closer to him.

“We could stay here another night if you want. It’s not like we’ll be in any more trouble than we’re already in.” I kissed his shoulder, hoping he’d agree, but knowing real life would more than likely be calling us back—literally.

“While that’s extremely tempting, I have a better idea. I think we should come up here after Christmas, just you and me. It’ll still be snowing, and we can plan to stay for a few days. Make a long weekend of it. What do you think?” His eyes were bright with excitement, and there was nothing I wouldn’t do for him if I was able.

“That sounds great, but only if you promise me we’ll come alone, and we won’t leave the room for at least a full day.”

He smiled and gently traced his finger down my face. “Anything for my husband.”

“Did I tell you how much I love hearing you say that?”

“Only a few times, but it’s fine if you want to say it a few more times,” Wade said around that smile that seemed even brighter and happier than before. Before I could say a word, he clapped his hands together and jumped out of bed. “Time to call everyone and tell them the good news.”

“Baby, we already told them, that’s why they keep harassing us.” I tossed a pillow at him which he ducked.

“I know, but I want to tell the world. I want all our friends to know that we’re married and we’re the happiest we’ve ever been,” he said as he unplugged his phone before jumping on the bed next to me.

“Wait until we get dressed,” I said, knowing Jimbo would never let us forget.

“Nope, not this time. Jimbo can deal with the eye-full he’s about to get.”

I pulled the blankets up as he dialed. “Wade, what the hell were you thinking running off and getting married without your mama?” Deidra asked as soon as she was visible on the screen.

“Hi, Mom, don’t you want to say hi to your new son-in-law?” Wade asked, deflecting the rest of the rant we knew was coming.

“You assholes,” Jimbo said, but the big smile on his face let us know he was as happy as we were about us getting married. “Congratulations, I can’t believe you guys snuck off like that.”

“Well, they didn’t really sneak off, I mean, we caught them,” Dean said from beside Jimbo. “Congratulations, guys, we’re so happy for you.”

“Jason, I’m so sorry I was a little pissy. I just really wanted to see you both get married, but your pictures are beautiful, and who was the guy that looked like Santa?”

“Santa? Oh, it was JJ, the justice of the peace at the chapel. I didn’t think about him looking like Santa, but you’re right,” Wade snuggled in close to me and we pulled the blankets up higher. “Sorry, Deidra, but we got the idea and kinda ran with it. It was beautiful.” My voice broke a little with emotion, and I didn’t even care, it *was* beautiful.

“Oh my boys. I’m so happy for you.” She clutched her heart and smiled at us with tears in her eyes. “I just love you both so much, and, James, you better tell Janis I’m going to be having a little talk with her. I asked her last night if she saw you getting married soon and she didn’t answer. I’m pretty sure she knew all along.”

That explained the blessing she gave us after we got engaged. She knew, like every other time, Janis knew.

“We’re going to stay here a little longer and have some breakfast. It’s snowing pretty hard still so it’ll take us a while to get home, but when we do, we can go out to dinner if you want to celebrate,” Wade said.

“Oh, baby, that can wait. We can plan a little get together with a few close friends. I’m really so happy you’re married. Whose name are you taking?” Deidra asked.

Wade and I locked eyes before turning to face the phone again. “Jason’s decided to take my name. Lady and gentlemen, introducing my husband, Jason Rivers.” Wade did a controlled version of a sweeping arm reveal.

Jimbo and Dean laughed, but Deidra looked between the two of us with tears streaming slowly down her cheeks. “Welcome to the family, Jason,” she said, and in that moment, everything shifted, and she was no longer Wade’s mom, she was mine too.



EPILOGUE

Wade

“WHAT ARE YOU THINKING about?” I asked Jason. We’d been home about a week, and things were pretty much the same as they’d been before we got married. Jimbo still walked in whenever he wanted, and my mom did the same except she usually brought us something for dinner.

“Just thinking that it’ll be one week tomorrow that we’ve been married.”

“Yeah, it’s been a rough week,” I said pushing my tongue into my cheek to stop myself laughing.

“Oh has it now?” He dug his fingers into my ribs making me jump like I’d been electrocuted, and I immediately dissolved into laughter. “Oh my god, Jason, stop.” I jumped around and tried to do anything I could to avoid being tickled but he was relentless.

“Jason, you’re going to make Wade pee his pants,” Mom said as she walked in.

“Oh hi, Mom,” Jason said as he continued his assault.

“Did you two decide where you want to go have your wedding dinner?” she asked, completely ignoring us acting like we were twelve years old.

Jason finally blew a raspberry on my cheek before letting me go. “I thought we could have it at The Hitching Post. Unless you think the guys are too busy?”

“Oh I’m so happy to hear you say that. I’ve been—”

“Morning, guys,” Jimbo said as he walked in, cutting off Mom’s words.

“Morning, James, I was just going to tell the boys what we’d talked about.”

“Oh, go ahead, Deidra,” he said, and smiled when she looped her arm through his.

“No, I want you to tell them.”

“Dean and I want to throw you a private dinner this Sunday at the restaurant. What do you think?” Right to the point just like always, Jimbo cut through the crap.

“That sounds great. But nothing big, okay? We’d like it if it’s just family,” I said, and looked right at Jimbo.

“Oh, well I can make sure Dean and I stay in the back. You guys can invite whoever you want. We’ll make it special.” He looked nervous, and I didn’t miss the flash of hurt that shone in his eyes.

“Jimbo, you’re our family too. We’re all family. Don’t you realize that yet? You and Dean both.”

His cheeks tinted with pink, as he smiled. “Thanks, Wade, we feel the same way.”

“I’d love to invite my parents if you don’t mind. They don’t get out with us very often, and I think they’d love it that the restaurant is closed and it’s just us,” Jason said.

“Your parents will go?” Jimbo asked. “I mean, I’ve never met your parents.”

“I know, they’ve always busy doing who knows what. They both have a lot of hobbies, and neither one of them were ever very comfortable with the whole ghost thing. They mostly tolerated it when I was a kid,” Jason explained.

“Imagine that, the great ghost hunter has parents who don’t like ghosts,” Jimbo said and crossed his arms.

“Imagine that,” Jason said back with a smile. “But yeah, they’ll be there.”

“Dean said I should ask if there’s anything special you’d like us to make. Fuck,” Jimbo said under his breath and stretched his hands over his head to cover it even more.

“James, that’s my son you’re talking to,” Deidra said, and smiled at Jason.

Jimbo looked between the two of them, shocked that for once he wasn’t the favorite. “Sorry, Deidra,” he said, but shot Jason a look that said this wasn’t over. Jason smirked back at him. Yep we were family alright. One big, weird family.

“Did you talk to Janis yet?” I asked Mom.

“Oh yes, and she totally knew you’d be getting married. She actually said she had a vision of you getting married by Santa at the North Pole with a ghost for a witness.”

“No she did not,” Jason said.

“She did. Kinda funny after seeing what the justice of the peace looked like. But a ghost?”

“Funny thing,” Jason said and ignored the ghost question. “Speaking of the North Pole. I promised Wade that we could decorate the house this year, and since Christmas is coming up fast, I was hoping everyone could help us put up lights and a tree later today.”

I could feel the shock I knew was visible on my face. “Really? I thought you’d forgotten.”

“Babe, I know you want to make the place all festive this year. It seems like a perfect time to me. So, Jimbo, could you and Dean give us a hand?” Jason rubbed his hands together like he had a big plan for everyone. He probably did, and most of it involved him telling everyone what to do.

“Let me call Dean, but he’s as bad as your husband there. He’s always up for Christmas.” He walked into the kitchen to call, and Mom came over to me.

“Wade, I think it’s time to pull out the Christmas stash. He’s married to you now, he’s got to accept the fact you’re a secret Christmas fanatic,” Mom said, and looked right at Jason while she said it.

“I know he loves Christmas. We go to the Old Town Christmas show every year, and last year we bought the artificial tree.”

I looked between the two of them, and I swear to god Jimbo had some kind of fucking radar for drama. He walked into the

room, looked between us all, and didn't say a word as he folded his arms and a big smile spread on his lips. He'd been to my parents' house and was fully aware of all the Christmas shit I'd collected over the years, but he'd kept his mouth shut about it knowing Jason wasn't that into the holiday.

“Wade, we can decorate as much as you want to, I really don't mind. And I've known about your secret Christmas stash for years. I never knew why you didn't just own up to it. I thought it was so odd that you always say it's your parents', but they never put any of it out.”

“That's because he wouldn't let us. He's very picky about his things.” Mom looked straight at me and dared me to deny it.

“You do realize he has a full-size Santa, a sleigh, and all nine reindeer? Because he had to have Rudolf too. And his nose lights up,” Jimbo added.

After giving Jimbo a dirty look, I stood between him and Jason and turned my back to him, which made him snicker. “Sorry, Jason, I wasn't sure how you'd feel about it, but I love collecting it even if we never put it out. It's still fun.” I was waiting for him to laugh, or possibly go running out the door worried he'd married a Christmas fanatic when he was fine with no decorations at all. But he didn't.

“Wade, you went ghost hunting with me when you were terrified just so you could spend time with me. I think I can handle a little bit of Christmas decorations.”

“It's more than a little, way more,” Jimbo said, and grinned.

“Then I hope Dean’s on the way, because it sounds like all of you are going to be busy all afternoon helping us decorate our house to within an inch of its life. As long as it makes Wade happy, I’m more than willing to do whatever it takes.” He kissed me on the nose and smiled at me.

“You might regret that,” I said, and Jimbo laughed.

“Oh he’ll regret it.”

Six hours later, the house was practically wrapped in lights. Jason had figured out the sound system I’d bought that would coordinate the lights to music. Santa and his reindeer were on top of the roof, and the Grinch was out front in his sled, along with several other characters that we managed to squeeze into our small yard.

“It looks like Christmas threw up all over your house,” Jimbo said with a proud look on his face.

“It’s beautiful,” Dean said, and leaned against Jimbo.

“Boys, come and look inside,” Mom said, and we all walked in to see what she’d done. In the corner of the living room was the big artificial tree we’d bought last year. She’d decorated it with *so many* ornaments, but it looked wonderful. The rest of the room was adorned with all sorts of little touches that brought the holiday inside.

“Looks like the Christmas party’s here this year,” Jimbo said.

“Fine by me,” Jason said. “It’ll give us time to talk about some of the jobs we’ve been called about outside the area. Oh,

and Wade and I talked about a few places around Reno. There's so many haunted places." Jason was giddy just thinking about it, while I was thrilled to see our house looking so full of spirit. But mostly I was happy that this would be the first Christmas we'd spend as husbands.

And if I had anything to do with it, it'd be the first of many. Plus I'd need him around to help decorate next year. "I love you, baby," I said as he gave me an odd look.

"You're planning how you'll decorate next year aren't you," he accused.

"We'll see," I said, and I knew for a fact this was the beginning of a wonderful life full of love and lots of fun, and just a few ghosts.

Merry Christmas!

The End

ABOUT AUTHOR

BL Maxwell grew up in a small town listening to her grandfather spin tales about his childhood. Later she became an avid reader and after a certain vampire series she became obsessed with fanfiction. She soon discovered Slash fanfiction and later discovered the MM genre and was hooked. Many years later, she decided to take the plunge and write down some of the stories that seem to run through her head late at night when she's trying to sleep.

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Some things are better left alone

Dane Jones works from home with only his three dogs for company. When he stumbles onto a social media page about urban exploring, he's curious about different sites around Sacramento that seem like they'd be interesting to investigate.

He starts chatting with Griff Warren, and after a few conversations he's even more excited to go.

Griff Warren is also curious about urban exploring, but he has very little interest in experiencing something paranormal. When the guy he's been chatting with in the online group is so enthusiastic to go, it's contagious. They plan to go to a warehouse and while there, experience something they can't explain.

Dane and Griff were looking for an adventure, but they find more than they bargained for at a deserted farmhouse on the river. When Dane finds an old toy discarded in one of the rooms, both of them are thrown into a world neither understands. Full of cursed objects, strange markings, and powers, neither knows how to handle. Lucky for them, Griff's Friend knows exactly who can help. #MMParanormal, #UrbanFantasy #Friendstolovers #ManInPeril #ForcedProximity #Protector

Coming Soon!

Try To Forget (Preorder now for January 11 Release)

BL Maxwell

<https://mybook.to/TryToForget>

Book One, Remember When:

mybook.to/RememberWhenHoliday

After being dumped by his boyfriend, spending the weekend alone wasn't something Sam Braun was looking forward to.

So, when the hairstylist that works next to his bookstore invites him to his hometown for the weekend, Sam jumps at the chance. Visiting the small town of Occident could be just what he needs to forget, at least for a few days.

Erik Thorne has lived his whole life in the same town where nothing new ever happens, and any stranger who comes to town is always a big deal. When his old friend Andy brings a friend home for the weekend, Erik is drawn to the man in a way that confuses him at first. But his curiosity about the

gorgeous blond from the city gets the better of him, and he can't resist spending more time with him.

Sam was hoping to forget his troubles when he meets Erik. While Erik can't seem to think of anything besides the city boy with the bookstore he can't wait to visit. Distance might not be the only thing that stands between them, as they find out admitting what you want isn't always easy. Each book can be read as a standalone. #AgeGap, #MMRomance, #FriendsToLovers #OppositesAttract #SmallTownRomance #City/Country