



JORDAN L. HAWK

RATTLING
BONE

OUTFOXING THE PARANORMAL BOOK 2

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Edited by Annetta Ribken Graney

CONTENT ADVISORY:

Ghosts, death, alcohol use, hypothermia, danger of drowning, mentions of mental illness and institutionalization, and mentions of death by drowning, electrocution, crushing, and falling.

CHAPTER ONE

NIGEL STARED out the van window as they rounded yet another hairpin curve, his knuckles white on the armrest. His ears popped from the altitude change as the road kept climbing toward the ridge above, hidden in a shroud of trees. The branches were winter-bare, the forest floor beneath covered with only a dusting of snow even though it was deep December, the day after Christmas.

Thank heavens he didn't get carsick. His stomach was already unsettled enough at the prospect of meeting his boyfriend's parents.

He glanced at Oscar, who sat in the driver's seat, attention thankfully on the narrow road. A big guy, in both height and girth, Oscar's hair and dark eyes contrasted against his pale skin. Right now, his cute face was scrunched in a look of concentration as he steered the lumbering van around yet another blind, hairpin curve, the wheels only inches away from a drop down the mountainside.

According to Oscar, he hadn't brought any of his other boyfriends all the way out to Marrow, West Virginia, to meet the family. Which was amazing—they'd only been together since early October, not even three months. Nigel hadn't wanted to come off as clingy, had told himself to take things slow, but maybe this was a sign that Oscar also felt their relationship was serious.

It also made him nervous as hell. What if Oscar's parents didn't like him? Things were so new between them; parental disapproval might make Oscar think twice about taking it any further.

Chris leaned forward from the backseat, where they sat beside Tina. Their hair was currently dyed a vivid shade of neon blue. “Your folks really live out in the boonies, huh?”

They’d been driving for over five hours, up from Durham, North Carolina, across into Virginia. As they headed northwest, the interstate failed them, and they’d spent the last few hours on narrow state roads, climbing over the ancient spine of the Appalachians to get into West Virginia.

“You can say that again.” Oscar didn’t glance into the rearview mirror, eyes remaining firmly on the road. “Once we get over this last ridge, we’ll almost be there.”

“Thank God, because I have to pee,” Tina said. “I thought there would at least be a gas station or somewhere to stop out here.”

Chris sat back. “Too bad we didn’t pack the camping toilet.”

The back of the van was stuffed with almost all of their ghost-hunting equipment, but none of the camping things they’d used during the investigation of the Matthews house back in October.

“Do you have any ideas about the ghost in your parents’ house?” Nigel asked, grateful for something to distract him from his nerves. “Who it might be, that is?”

That was the reason they were all going to meet Oscar’s parents, instead of just Nigel. Oscar had been working on his mediumship, at least as much as he could, but with the holidays, jobs, and family commitments, *OutFoxing the Paranormal* hadn’t had time to do another investigation since the Matthews house.

The intermittent haunting Oscar had grown up with—and over the years trained himself to ignore—seemed like the perfect opportunity for him to get his feet wet as a medium. The spirit, whoever it was, wasn’t violent, and had seemed content merely to show itself now and again. Neither of his parents had ever even noticed it was there, so presumably it wasn’t very strong.

Still, from Nigel's point of view, data was data. And it would be good for the *OutFoxing the Paranormal* show to put out something new after their Halloween spectacular. According to Oscar, they had some good sponsors lined up already.

"I don't have any idea who she was, and it wasn't like I could ask my parents." Oscar grimaced, and Nigel reached out to touch his shoulder,.

"I'm sorry."

Oscar sighed. "It's okay."

The road finally crested the ridge and began to angle steeply down. A gap in the trees revealed a river valley running roughly north-south below them, a small town nestled in the widest part of the flats, before the view was swallowed up again by the trees.

"Was that Marrow?" Tina asked.

"Yeah, and my folks live on this side of town, so you'll have somewhere to pee in a few minutes." Oscar hesitated. "Look...Mom and Dad don't know about the whole ghost-hunting thing."

Nigel dropped his hand and half-turned in his seat. "What?" Chris asked from the back, at the same time Tina said, "You haven't told them about OtP?"

"How could I? You know how my dad is. Was," he corrected hurriedly. "They know I'm bringing friends, but not that we explore abandoned buildings together looking for ghosts. But once they see some of our videos, they'll be really proud of what we've accomplished."

"What do they think I teach?" Nigel asked.

Oscar winced. "Psychology. Which is close!"

"It really isn't." Nigel pushed his glasses up and rubbed his eyes. "So you're introducing your friends the ghost hunters, and your new boyfriend the *parapsychologist*, to your father who historically hasn't reacted well to the concept of seeing ghosts."

“It’ll be fine,” Oscar insisted.

Chris flopped back in their seat. “Or a complete disaster. One of the two.”

As he pulled into the familiar driveway, Oscar told himself yet again that there was no reason to be nervous.

Everything was going to be fine. He’d lay everything out, Nigel would say something smart, Tina something technical, and Dad would realize they were professionals. This was science.

Oscar wasn’t crazy.

This was going to be a new start for them, a chance to work on their relationship without any lies or tension between them. Maybe he could even get Dad to talk about his own mother, Oscar’s mamaw, who might have been a medium too.

The house, built around the turn of the previous century, nestled on the uphill side of the road. A convex mirror, mounted on a tree on the opposite side of the driveway, offered as much view around the curve as possible for anyone pulling out. The driveway itself was fairly short and quite steep, leading up to a two-story house set partly into the hillside. The siding was white wood, set atop a foundation of local rock mortared in place.

The front door swung open before the engine was even off. Mom and Dad both came out, Mom bundled against the cold as if she was going on an expedition to Antarctica, and Dad wearing a Christmas sweater depicting kittens in Santa hats.

“You get out first,” Nigel said with a glance.

Oscar winced. Okay, yes, he probably should have told his parents about the whole ghost-hunting thing before they got here. And he should have warned everyone else that he hadn’t, especially Nigel. But he’d been...

Scared. That was all. Worried about Dad's reaction if he heard the news over the phone.

It was going to be different now, though. He climbed out of the van and walked to his parents, who immediately engulfed him in a hug. He took after his father in coloring, and his mother, who was the taller of the pair, in build.

"It's so good to see you!" Mom said. "We missed you at Thanksgiving."

They'd spent the holiday with Nigel's mother, a cheerful woman who lived in Myrtle Beach. Before Oscar could apologize, Dad slapped him on the arm. "I guess we'll have to get used to sharing, now that you've got someone special," he said with a wink.

Oscar grinned and turned to the van. Everyone else had climbed out, Nigel hovering warily and Tina shooting desperate looks at the house. "Tina, the bathroom is through the front door, first door on the left."

"I'm sorry, I don't want to be rude," she called as she power-walked to the front door.

Mom laughed. "Don't worry about it, I've made that long drive myself plenty of times."

"And this is my friend Chris Saito," Oscar went on. "They/them."

"It's lovely to meet you," Mom said warmly, and went straight in for a hug, followed by Dad who did the same.

"Thanks for having us, Mrs. Fox, Mr. Fox," Chris said.

"Oh goodness, call us Lisa and Scott, we're too young for that nonsense." Mom laughed again and turned expectantly to Nigel.

Nigel looked slightly alarmed. "I'm, uh, Nigel. He/him."

"*Doctor* Nigel Taylor," Oscar added, as Mom went in for a hug.

"It's so good to finally meet you," Dad said, shaking Nigel's hand, then pulling him in for a hug. "Oscar can't stop

talking about you!”

A light blush spread across Nigel’s face. “Oh?”

“I love your name,” Mom went on. “Nigel; it’s so old-fashioned!”

Nigel blinked, nonplussed. “Thanks? I picked it myself.”

“We should get in out of the cold,” Oscar put in quickly.

“Of course, of course; I’ll help with the bags.” Dad took a step toward the van.

The van packed with their equipment. It was now or never.

“Um, so, something I haven’t mentioned.” He could hear himself speaking too fast but couldn’t seem to slow down. “Tina, Chris, and I have a hobby—well, it might be more than a hobby, we do get money from the videos and selling Chris’s pictures.”

Both Mom and Dad looked at him expectantly. Oscar took a deep breath to steel himself. “We’re ghost hunters.”

There was a seemingly endless moment of shocked stillness. Then Dad turned and walked back to the house without saying a word.



An hour or so later, Nigel found himself sitting at the dinner table, Oscar on one side and Mr. Fox—Scott—on the other, at the table’s end. Lisa sat beside her husband, and Chris and Tina filled out the rest of the table.

“I hope we made enough,” Lisa fretted, though the food on the table could have fed an army. “How are the potatoes?”

“Delicious,” Nigel said truthfully.

Oscar didn’t say anything, and neither did his father. Their tension toward one another radiated through Nigel’s space.

“Oh good, it’s my mamaw’s recipe,” Lisa went on, apparently determined to fill the uncomfortable silence. “The

secret is to use buttermilk.”

“It’s all wonderful.” Chris reached for second helpings of turkey. “Two Christmas dinners in one year—score!”

“Well, it didn’t make sense to have it just for ourselves, since y’all were coming the next day.”

The Fox household didn’t go all-out on holiday decorations, but there was a tree in what would have been called the parlor when the house had originally been built, and now was referred to as the den. The sight of the wrapped presents underneath sent a current of panic through Nigel—was he supposed to have brought something?

He and Oscar had already exchanged presents; a book on the history of ghost hunting from him, and an incredibly warm woolen sweater, hat, and socks from Oscar. He hadn’t really thought about what meeting Oscar’s parents the day after Christmas might entail.

“Sorry we kept Oscar away for the actual day,” Tina said, “but if I’d missed the family dinner, my abuela would’ve turned *me* into a ghost.”

As soon as the last word was out of her mouth, she realized her mistake. She held up one hand, as if to catch it, but of course it was already gone. The tension around the table went up a notch.

Whatever Nigel had thought meeting Oscar’s parents would be like, this wasn’t it. Coming here had clearly been a mistake. Certainly they weren’t going to be able to try and contact any spirit lingering in the house.

Lisa glanced at her husband, then fixed on Nigel. “So, Nigel, Oscar tells us you teach at Duke University!”

With the sinking feeling things were about to get worse, Nigel nodded. “That’s right.”

“You’re a psychologist, is that right?” she prompted, when it became clear he wasn’t going to elaborate.

Scott murmured something under his breath. His mother had died in an overcrowded state hospital; probably he had

just as bad an opinion of psychology as he would of Nigel's actual job.

"I work in the Institute of Parapsychology," Nigel clarified. "We study phenomena outside of known biological mechanisms. My specialty is the survival of personality beyond death."

There was a long moment of silence, before Scott spoke up. "Ghosts?"

He was going to be thrown out of the house and forbidden to ever speak to their son again. "The technical term is incorporeal personal agencies, but yes. Ghosts."

"Excuse me," Scott said, and pushed away from the table. He stalked out of the room.

Oscar shoved his chair back, shot an "excuse me" at his mother, and followed.

The rest of them sat in excruciatingly awkward silence for a moment. Then Lisa picked up a serving spoon. "So...who wants more potatoes?"

CHAPTER TWO

OSCAR FOLLOWED his dad out of the dining room, through the living room, down the stairs, and into the basement.

The basement was half-sunk into the hill, allowing for windows at the end facing the road. But night fell fast in these mountains, especially at this time of year, and Dad had switched on the lights mounted above his workbench.

The basement was mostly a place to store tools and work on small projects. Its stone walls were unfinished, and some of them bore long ago marks, as if shelves or the like had been secured to them by previous inhabitants of the house. Its wooden ceiling creaked loudly whenever someone walked across the floor above.

Once, when he was home alone, Oscar had heard the clear sound of footsteps right above his head. When he hurried upstairs to see who was visiting, no one was there. But by that age, he'd learned not to mention any weird occurrences to Dad or anyone else.

“We need to talk,” he said.

Dad didn't look around, instead picking up screwdrivers and putting them down again. There was no heat down here, and the cold had seeped in, chilling the air. “Nothing to talk about.”

“Like hell there isn't!”

Dad looked up, finally. “If you and your friends want to play pretend on the weekends, trick other gullible folk into

believing this nonsense is real, that's your business."

Oscar ground his teeth together. "It *is* real! The things I saw as a kid were real, even if you didn't see them too. Pretending they weren't didn't fix anything, it just made me afraid to speak up!"

Dad's nostrils flared. "You listen here, son. You know how gossip is in a town like this, where everyone knows everyone else. If you'd kept on talking about hearing voices and seeing things, you'd never have gotten on the football team, never gone to college, never landed a good job somewhere else. Instead, you'd have been the town's weird kid, the liar who couldn't be trusted, the one littler kids threw rocks at when you walked past. I protected you from all of that, even if you couldn't understand at the time."

Oscar took a deep breath. His dad was deadly serious, meant every word. And maybe he was even right.

"Is that what happened to Mamaw Fox?"

Dad's expression tightened. "No, it isn't. People came to my mama—your mamaw—for help. They believed, just like her. But none if it was real."

Okay. Maybe they were making progress. "What if it was, though?"

"It wasn't!" Dad snapped, and the fury in his tone made Oscar take a step back, even though he was by far the bigger of the two. "Do you know what it was like, to wake up one morning and find my mama acting like an entirely different person? Laughing and talking to things that weren't there, scratching herself until she bled, attacking my daddy when he tried to stop her?"

Oscar's heart fell. He hadn't realized it had been that bad. "Of course, I don't. You never told me."

"What was I supposed to tell you, that you would have understood at that age?" Dad shook his head angrily. "After they took your mamaw away, I saw her twelve times a year. Your papaw and I drove all the way to the asylum and back on the last weekend of every month, from the time I was eleven

until I was eighteen and she died. It might've been called the state hospital, but it was mostly a warehouse, with too many patients and not enough space. I still remember how it smelled."

He turned away, bracing himself on the workbench. "I don't know what kind of medication she was on, but she'd just sit there, trembling and shaking. Not even looking at us. Your papaw would talk and talk, catching her up on things, but I don't think she ever heard a word." His head bowed. "I hate to say it, but it was a mercy when she died."

Silence fell between them, broken by the hiss of the water heater in the corner kicking on. Oscar wasn't sure what to say, except, "I'm sorry, Dad."

Dad raised his head but didn't turn around. "I couldn't let the same thing happen to you. I *wouldn't*. So I did the best I knew, and maybe you want to throw all that away now. That's your choice. But I don't want to hear about it, understand?"

Oscar's heart sank, but what could he do? "I understand."

"Are y'all still awake?" Lisa called softly.

Scott had stayed down in the basement, but Oscar had returned. He hadn't said much, only that his father had requested they not say anything else about ghosts during their stay.

Nigel had hoped to get him alone to talk, but there hadn't been a chance. Lisa took out some old photo albums and treated them to pictures of Oscar from infancy to college graduation, thoroughly embarrassing Oscar in the process. After, she'd cajoled Oscar into opening presents, even without Scott. Oscar got a sweater in Clemson's orange and white colors. Nigel received one in Duke's blue and white, presumably as a nod to his place of employment. Tina and Chris both got Christmas scented candles, since "I didn't know what y'all might like."

Deeply embarrassed, Nigel apologized for not having brought a gift, but Lisa just laughed it off. “You’re our guest, honey; don’t worry about it.”

Then it was time for bed. Oscar’s old room had a single bed, which he offered to Tina, since she’d been having back problems lately. Nigel, Oscar, and Chris decamped to the den, which had a fold-out couch and an air mattress already prepared for them. Chris took the air mattress, leaving the fold-out for Nigel and Oscar.

They’d only had time to put on their pajamas and brush their teeth, when Lisa appeared at the door. She wore a thick woolen robe over her pajamas and a pair of fluffy slippers, and held something in one hand.

“Yes.” It was incredibly awkward to talk to the woman while tucked into bed beside her son, so Nigel quickly got up. He’d forgotten to bring any slippers, but the thick woolen socks Oscar had given him kept his toes warm.

Oscar lowered his phone, where he’d been checking *OutFoxing the Paranormal’s* social media channels. “What’s up, Mom?”

“Listen, I know things haven’t been easy with your dad.” She glanced up at the second floor, presumably in the direction of the master bedroom. “I had a word with him about being so rude to our guests.”

“It’s all right,” Chris said, but she shook her head.

“It’s not how he was raised—how either of us were—and he knows it. He ought to be down here right now, hanging his head in shame. But he’s a stubborn man sometimes.” She looked at Oscar. “We argued a lot when you were growing up. What happened to your mamaw scared him, but...well, it doesn’t matter now. You’re grown up, and I think you have a right to know about her, if that’s what you want.”

Oscar’s lips parted in surprise. “Yes, please. Anything you can tell me—I know she died before you ever met Dad, but anything you know about her would help.”

“I honestly don’t know any more than you do.” Lisa crossed the room and held something out to Oscar. “But maybe this can help you find out more.”

The light from the single lamp gleamed off something silver in her palm. A key.

Nigel’s heartbeat quickened, and he glanced at Oscar. Oscar stared at the key as if mesmerized. “What does it open?”

“When your papaw died, Scott moved a bunch of his stuff into a self-storage unit here in Marrow. He kept saying he would go through it when he had the time, but he never did.” She snorted. “That’s what keeps those places in business, you know—everyone thinks they’re going to have more time to do things in the future, but the future keeps turning into the present.”

“True enough,” Nigel said. “Do you think some of...I don’t know her name, actually.”

“Her name was Barbara,” Lisa said. “And I don’t know if anything she owned is in there, but Richard, Oscar’s papaw, wasn’t the sort of man to throw things away willy-nilly. There are probably things in there that he meant to deal with one day and never got around to.”

“Right.” Oscar reached out and took the key from her. “Thanks, Mom.”

She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “Just don’t tell your daddy.”

Oscar woke up all at once, a sudden, sharp transition between sleep and awareness. The den was in shadow, the only light leaking in through the blinds from the streetlight in the yard. Nigel curled beside him on the lumpy mattress of the fold-out, his breathing deep and regular. A turn of his head showed Chris unmoving in a pile of blankets on the air mattress.

So what had woke him up?

He turned his head the other way, looking past Nigel and toward the door. He sensed a presence there, and for a moment, he thought Mom might have come back.

Whoever was there took a step into the room. But the old floor didn't creak under their weight, and there was no accompanying rustle of cloth.

A sudden memory gripped him of opening his eyes in his bedroom as a kid and seeing a woman standing near the foot of the bed, looking at him. That same presence was here, now.

He sat up slowly. "Who are you?" he asked in a low voice. "Do you need my help?"

Even though no light touched the figure, it seemed to briefly solidify into the woman. Her features were indistinct, but he could make out dark hair hanging over a pale gown. The cold air grew even colder, as though the room had turned into a freezer. Her lips parted, moved, but he could hear no words.

Then she turned back to the door, took a step, and vanished.

CHAPTER THREE

“AND SHE WAS JUST STARING at you while everyone was asleep?” Tina asked, as Oscar drove them down the mountain and into Marrow proper. “Do you think she came in and looked at me, too?” She shuddered.

“You could have woken us up, boss,” Chris added.

“There wasn’t time to wake anyone up,” Oscar said. “Besides, I didn’t want to scare her away.”

“Did you sense anything from her?” Nigel asked.

Oscar considered for a moment. “Not really? It almost felt like she was just checking in on us.”

“That makes sense, if she realized you’d come back after a long absence. Especially since you weren’t in your normal bed.”

“I wish we’d been able to put up some of our instruments,” Tina said. “Maybe we would have caught more on a thermal cam.”

“Yeah, well.” Oscar grimaced. “Doesn’t look like that’s going to happen.”

Nigel didn’t say anything, but his skin crawled at the thought of a spirit wandering into the room while they slept. Would she repeat the performance tonight? If they tried to put a line of salt across the doorway to keep her out, Scott would probably throw them out of the house.

It was going almost noon the next day. Lisa had cooked them a hearty breakfast, and things around the table seemed almost normal. All conversation had steered well away from

the topic of ghosts, and when Scott asked what their plans were, Oscar perked up and said he was going to show them his old stomping grounds.

It didn't take long to see that time had left Marrow behind. The newest houses were from the 1950s, judging by the architecture, and for every open storefront there were two closed ones. The whole town seemed to cluster around just a few streets, hemmed in between the mountain on one side and the river on the other. According to the internet search Nigel had done before they came, only about 800 people lived here, and the population was dwindling with every passing year.

Oscar slowed the van. "Okay, there's the diner."

"We're actually stopping?" Nigel said, surprised. "I thought showing us the 'old-stomping grounds' was just an excuse to go to the storage facility."

Oscar's face fell. "I mean, we'll do that, but...I don't know, I thought you'd be interested. We don't have to."

Nigel cursed himself. Oscar was his boyfriend, of course he wanted to share his history with Nigel. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to sound that way."

"Smooth, doc," Chris said, leaning forward. "Real smooth."

Tina smacked them on the arm. "Oh, hush. Show us the great metropolis of Marrow, Oscar."

Oscar finished parking the van. "We'll pass the high school on the way out to the storage place. Downtown here is where I'd hang out with my friends, when I could get a ride, anyway."

"Downtown" was a bit of an overstatement for three or four blocks of old brick buildings from the Victorian era. At least half of them were empty, the rest occupied by antique stores, a hardware store, the diner, and a number of small offices. There were only a few other people on the street, most of them heading for either the diner or the antiques.

Even so, they'd only made it a few steps before someone called "Oscar? Oscar Fox?"

Oscar turned, a grin already on his face. “That’s me!”

The middle-aged man who’d approached looked delighted. “I watched all your games! You could’ve gone pro!”

“Thanks; I appreciate that.”

The man rooted around in his pocket for a minute before digging out a crumpled receipt. “Could you sign this for me?”

Nigel watched, feeling vaguely startled, as Oscar took out a pen and graciously signed, while the man rambled on about games and sacks. Yes, college football was big in the south—hell, depending on where you were, high school games were followed just as closely—but he’d never really had an interest. Somehow it hadn’t occurred to him that other people wouldn’t be as indifferent.

Once the man had gone on his way, Chris said, “So, are we your entourage, or...?”

“I didn’t realize I was dating the hometown hero,” Nigel added.

Oscar actually blushed. “No,” he told Chris, and “I’m not the hometown hero.”

The diner put a lie to his words. As soon as they stepped in, Nigel spotted an orange Clemson jersey with FOX on the back, hanging on the wall alongside a signed photograph of a man—presumably Oscar, though it was impossible to tell under the helmet—crashing into another player on a field.

The young woman behind the counter perked up when they came in. “Good afternoon, y’all! Have you been in before?”

“I have, but not for a long time,” Oscar answered with a smile. “Are the pepperoni rolls still as good as they used to be?”

A man stuck his head out from the kitchen behind the counter. “Too good for the likes of you, Mr. Big City!”

Oscar’s entire face lit up. “Josh!”

The man looked to be around their age, with short blond hair and a husky build. He came around the counter and swept Oscar into a bear hug, pounding him enthusiastically on the back. “Your dad mentioned you’d be coming into town. It’s good to see you.”

“Good to see you, too, Josh.” Oscar pulled back and grinned, but didn’t entirely let go.

A little flame of jealousy flickered in Nigel’s chest, and he cleared his throat loudly.

Josh jumped back a bit, as if he’d forgotten they had an audience. “Oscar, you remember my niece, Kayla?” he asked, gesturing to the counter.

“Not little Kayla!” Oscar exclaimed. “You were in braces the last time I saw you.”

Kayla offered him the smile of someone trying to be polite, but not really interested in her uncle’s old friends.

Oscar turned back to Josh. “These are my friends,” he said, and went on to introduce them. Nigel felt a further flash of irritation that Oscar hadn’t singled him out as a boyfriend. “And this is Josh Rizzo. We went to school together from kindergarten on.”

“And played football together, even though I was never meant for the big leagues. Not like this guy here,” Josh added with a trace of pride on Oscar’s behalf. “Your lunch is on the house, by the way.”

“No, it’s all right,” Oscar started, but was interrupted by Josh shaking his head.

“Your money’s no good here. Y’all want pepperoni rolls? Fries? Look at the menu and take your time. I’ll head to the kitchen, but I’ll be back out to catch up, don’t you worry.”

Josh herded them to the counter, then went back to the kitchen. Apparently, despite their huge breakfast, they were now eating lunch.

Staring up at the chalkboard menu on the back wall, Chris said, “Pepperoni rolls?”

“Bread stuffed with pepperoni,” Oscar explained. “It was popular with coal miners back in the day—no refrigeration needed, tasty even when at room temperature, and hand-held.”

“I see,” Nigel said. “And Josh...?”

“His family owns this place,” Oscar said with a sweep of the arm, indicating the old brick walls, the squeaky wooden floor. “Best pepperoni rolls in town.”

Nigel suspected they were the only pepperoni rolls in town but kept the remark to himself. They all ended up ordering the rolls, along with a pitcher of sweet tea and a basket of fries, then retreated to a table. A few other people came in, but it was clear the diner wasn't going to do a lot of business today. Because everyone was still at home, eating leftovers from Christmas dinner, or because the town was slowly dying?

Kayla brought their orders. Chris picked up a fry and popped it in their mouth. “Your friend seems nice.”

“Josh? Oh yeah.” A goofy grin touched Oscar's lips. “We used to be inseparable. The trouble we got into as kids...”

“Ooh, spill,” Tina said with a wicked grin.

Nigel took a cautious bite of his pepperoni roll. The oils from the sausage had soaked into the bread, flavoring it perfectly.

To his surprise, Oscar blushed lightly at Tina's prodding. “Oh, well, not much, you know. Driving too fast on the mountain roads, underage drinking, skinny dipping at the old quarry...”

Tina gasped and grabbed at non-existent pearls. Oscar threw a fry at her.

About halfway through the meal, Josh came back out and joined them at the table, sitting between Oscar and Nigel. “Not many folks out and about today, I guess,” he said lightly. “But the diner's loss is my gain.”

They immediately became absorbed in conversation about places Nigel didn't know and people he'd never heard of.

Which was to be expected. They'd been friends. Friends who skinny dipped together.

Friends who were looking at each other as if there had been something more between them.

No, no, he was projecting. Nigel wasn't exactly the best when it came to social situations; probably his perceptions were off.

The bell above the door jingled as another group came in. "We should be going," Nigel said. "You probably have to get back to work."

"Yeah." Josh sighed. "It was good to meet y'all." He stood up, then turned back to Oscar. "Is there an evening you'll be free? Maybe we can meet up somewhere, talk about old times?"

"I'm not sure," Oscar replied. "We're sort of playing it by ear."

"Let me give you my number, just so you have it."

Once they were back in the van, Nigel said, "Old flame?"

"No," Oscar started, then caught himself. "Not exactly? We fooled around some in high school, you know how it is."

"Not having been a popular football star, I don't know how it is," Nigel said, managing to keep most of the sharpness from his tone.

Annoyingly, Oscar laughed. "It was *high school*, you dork." He leaned across the console and kissed Nigel on the side of the head.

Nigel knew he was being unreasonable. Still. "We should go to the storage unit, before your parents start wondering what's taking us so long."

That sobered Oscar up fast. His laughter faded, and he cranked the ignition. "Right. Let's go see if there's anything left of Mamaw Fox for us to find."

The self-storage business lay on the outskirts of Marrow and was among the few examples of new construction to have happened since Oscar had left for college. The lot had been a farmer's field back then, already abandoned and going back to nature. Now rows of gleaming units sat atop black asphalt, holding whatever excess stuff the residents of Marrow couldn't—or didn't want—to keep at home.

"I'm surprised to see a place like this in such a...small town," Nigel remarked as he turned in.

Oscar cast him a glance. It had been good to see Josh again—and borderline hilarious to discover Nigel seemed to be jealous of him.

"You can say 'dying.'" Oscar slowed, scanning the numbers on the buildings. "Kids move away, leave all their junk behind with the promise of coming back someday to get it, and it ends up in storage. Businesses go under, and the furniture gets put away and never taken back out. The old folks die, and no one wants to just throw everything out, so here it ends."

Like with Papaw Fox. If he'd realized Dad was renting a unit to store things, he'd have offered to come home and help sort through it. Though, depending on what was in there, Dad might have refused the offer.

He pulled up in front of the unit: number 306. Instead of getting out of the van, though, he found himself staring at the blank metal door.

Should he be doing this? Mom had given him the key, but that didn't mean he had to use it.

What had happened to his mamaw had obviously hurt Dad—well, of course it had, he'd been a kid whose mother was taken away to the state mental hospital. Their family had been permanently broken, even before she'd died in overcrowded conditions while in the state's care.

“Is everything all right, boss?” Chris asked from the back.

“Yeah, it’s just...” he trailed off uncertainly. “There might be things in there Dad wanted to keep private, memories he wanted to die. Do I have any right to go digging around?”

Nigel’s hand came to rest on his, thin fingers curling gently. “What happened to your grandmother caused your father to demand you suppress your mediumistic gift,” he said softly. “If she had the same talent, I think you have the right to know. But it’s your choice.”

A wave of warmth flowed through Oscar. He turned his hand over and tangled his fingers with Nigel’s. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

The parking lot was otherwise deserted as they climbed out of the van. Though the lot had been salted and plowed, a jumble of snow piled against the lower part of the door, where the lock was. He kicked it loose, then slid the key in, hoping the whole lock wasn’t frozen.

It clicked open on the first try.

The metal door groaned and squealed as it rolled up; clearly no one had opened it in a long time. The watery gray sunlight gave only glimpses of boxes and furniture in the dark interior. “Everyone grab a flashlight,” Oscar said, going to the back of the van where the equipment was stored.

“What are we looking for?” Tina asked. “That is, I assume anything with your grandmother’s name on it, but anything else?”

“Anything personal,” Oscar said. “Letters, journals, post cards, anything that might tell us something about her. Or hell, anything that catches your attention, I don’t know.”

They entered the unit, flashlight beams alighting on boxes, plastic tubs, and old oak furniture. There wasn’t enough to be packed in too tightly, so at least they would be able to reach most of it with a minimum of shifting boxes.

He paused, running his fingers along the side of an old, glass-fronted cupboard. It had once held the family china, brought out only at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. And

the side table beside it—that had been in his papaw’s dining room, shining warm and polished in the light of many a family gathering. To see it here, abandoned in the dark, made him sad in a way he couldn’t quite articulate.

There was no room for it in his parents’ house, no room for any of this, but it seemed wrong to just leave it here. On the other hand, he doubted it had much value to anyone outside the family, so selling it wasn’t a realistic option. Dad probably meant to donate it somewhere, but loading it all up and taking it over the mountain to Goodwill was a daunting task.

Maybe he’d try to find space for it in his place. Or maybe, if things kept on going the way they seemed to be, he and Nigel would get a bigger place together. Somewhere there would be room for a few family heirlooms.

“What’s this?” Tina asked. She held up what looked like an antique bottle.

Oscar took it; the worn label still bore the faded words *Cloven Oak Distillery, est. 1872. Fine Whiskey*. The bottle was stoppered, but the liquid inside was clear rather than amber. “I have no idea,” he said. “It looks old, though.”

“Oh wow!” Chris exclaimed from somewhere near the back. “Check this out!”

Oscar hurried over to see what Chris had found. They held up a camera that looked like it had come straight from the 1970s. “A Super 8 Movie Camera with 8-1 Auto Zoom, movie light, and omnidirectional microphone!”

Tina snorted. “You’re such a nerd.”

“I simply appreciate the classics,” they shot back. “This was what people used to make home movies before VHS and camcorders.”

Oscar shone his flashlight on the open box beside Chris. “Look, there’s a projector, too. And film.”

“And a fold-up screen,” Chris added. “What do you say? Should we take a look at your family’s old home movies?”

Oscar knelt on the concrete floor and began to remove the cardboard film containers. All of them were labeled in a careful, neat hand he didn't recognize. "*Christmas 1971,*" he read aloud. "*Julie's Wedding*—oh gosh, she was one of Dad's...cousins, I think? She died one Thanksgiving while they were visiting us, had a massive heart attack while hiking in the woods. *Fox Family Reunion. Adkins Seance...*"

The word trailed off, his skin suddenly flushing with goosebumps. Clearing his throat, he repeated, "*Adkins Seance, 1972.*"

"Fuck me," Chris said in a low voice.

Oscar stared, frozen, at the film container, his heart thumping so hard his hand shook. After a moment, Nigel's fingers curled around his shoulder. "Do you want to watch it?"

Did he? If Barbara Fox had been a medium and not suffering from mental illness, how had things gotten so bad she'd ended up at the state hospital? Then again, maybe she was both mentally ill and a medium; there was no reason that couldn't be the case.

A part of him was irrationally afraid to watch. Because what if she seemed perfectly normal? Did that mean whatever happened to her might happen to him, too?

Nigel reached into the box and took out another film canister. "This is the last one," he said. "*Cloven Oak Distillery, Ghost investigation, 1972.*"

Their eyes met, Nigel's wide with shock, his own...he didn't know, couldn't name the emotions coursing through him. Then he turned to Tina, who still held the whiskey bottle in her hand.

"Yes," he said in a voice that shook less than he expected. "Let's watch them."

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE WEREN'T any electrical outlets in the storage unit, so they put the box in the van for later. A continued search turned up nothing further of interest, so they drove back to the house.

It was all Oscar could do not to fidget through dinner. Every time he looked at his dad, the box in the van tugged at him with the weight of a heavy secret, and he worried something would show on his face.

He'd hoped to come here and unburden himself of all the things he'd been hiding. Instead, he'd ended up with a whole new secret to conceal.

Unfortunately, he had long practice in keeping a straight face in this house. The lessons must have stuck, because dinner was pleasant, as was the round of board games afterward. When asked what they'd been up to, he told his parents about meeting back up with Josh and let them assume the catch-up session had taken the entire afternoon.

Whether Mom believed him or not, he couldn't say, but Dad smiled with approval. He'd dropped the ghost-hunting business, spent the day doing something "normal" with his friends.

A part of Oscar was starting to regret ever coming back.

His parents turned in early, and the rest of them retreated to the den together. Mom had left a bottle of wine in the fridge for them, as she didn't drink herself, which Tina liberated. After about an hour of small talk, Nigel said, "Do you think it's safe to set up the projector?"

Nervousness washed over Oscar, but he nodded. “Yeah. And hopefully, if they get up to pee and hear anything, they’ll think it’s just the TV.”

Chris hopped up. “I’ll get the box. Be right back.”

There was a sense of solemnity as they set up the projector and small screen. No one made any unnecessary noise. Nigel took a notebook and pencil out of his bag. He sat beside Oscar on the couch, their thighs touching, the warmth of his presence comforting.

“Thanks for doing this with me,” Oscar said, as Chris threaded the film into the projector. “I don’t...I wouldn’t want to watch this alone.”

Tina held up her glass, as if in a toast. “We’re here for you, Oscar.”

“And it will be fascinating to see a genuine nineteen-seventies seance,” Nigel added. “The era is sadly lacking in documentation—most parapsychology departments were focused entirely on telepathy and precognition by then, to the detriment of survival research. The few highly publicized cases of hauntings were fraudulent from beginning to end, created by the credulous media and fame-seeking charlatans.”

Oscar grinned, the heaviness in his heart momentarily lightening. “Wow, sweetheart, tell us how you really feel.”

Nigel flushed. “I’m sorry—that came out wrong. It’s not just the historical interest; I’m glad to be here with you.”

“You’re such a romantic.” When it looked like Nigel was going to protest, Oscar leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. “Just take your notes.”

“Okay, it’s ready, I think.” Chris frowned at the projector. “These things can be temperamental. And we’re assuming it still works, and the film hasn’t degraded too badly. It looks in great shape, but—”

“Just play it,” Tina said.

The old projector whirred to life. “This is the Adkins Seance film,” Chris said. They hovered over the projector,

ready to spring into action if anything went wrong.

There was no introduction; the film began with a group of five people sitting around a small, round table, their hands joined. All of them wore early seventies hair styles, complete with bushy mustaches on the men. The room was too dark for the camera to capture much beyond the light of the candle at the center of the table, and the faces and hands of those gathered around it.

“The camera must be on a tripod,” Chris murmured. “It’s too steady, otherwise.”

The woman directly facing the camera took a deep breath, and Oscar felt his insides twist. There were no pictures of Mamaw Fox in the family albums, but he knew immediately this must be her.

She was in her early thirties, her long brown hair curled into waves. Even at a glance, he could see his dad in her small, refined features.

“Spirit of William Adkins,” she said in a commanding voice, “we’re here to speak with you. Draw on the energy of our circle to manifest. If you are here, please let us know by knocking.”

There was a long moment of silence—then a sharp knock came from seemingly nowhere, causing the group around the table to jump. Nigel frowned slightly and leaned forward, squinting at the screen from behind his glasses.

The woman—Barbara, Mamaw—remained perfectly still. “William Adkins, are you the spirit scaring your family? Did you break the good china and make the milk go sour? One knock for no, and two for yes.”

Two knocks sounded.

“But why, Daddy?” one of the men exclaimed. “Why would you do that to us?”

“That’s too complicated a question to answer through knocks.” Barbara closed her eyes and took a deep, slow breath. Grounding herself in preparation, Oscar guessed. After a long pause, during which she seemed to be mentally readying

herself, she said, “William Adkins, should your intent be peaceful, draw upon the energy of this circle. Use my mouth to speak your words.”

A shudder ran through her—then she opened her eyes, revealing only blank, white orbs.

Nigel watched fixedly as Barbara Fox turned white eyes on those seated around her at the circle. This could, of course, always be a show. Rapping was easy to fake, as were most other outward signs of spiritual activity, and there were no scientific instruments present at the seance that he could see.

But mediumship often ran in families, and Oscar had a true gift. That alone made him believe the seance was probably real.

When Barbara spoke, it wasn't with the voice of a young woman, but rather that of an elderly man. “Where is my watch?” he asked in a faint, thready voice.

For a moment, there was nothing but shocked silence. Then the man who had spoken before said, “Your watch, Daddy? What do you mean?”

Barbara's head twitched, and the voice issuing from her mouth grew agitated. “My pocket watch from the railroad. Who has my watch?”

The man exchanged fearful glances with the woman beside him. “We...we buried it with you, just like you asked.”

“No!” Barbara's back straightened, and her lips twisted into a grimace. “Thief! Bring back my watch!”

“I'm sorry!” one of the other men—a boy, really—shouted suddenly, even as he jerked away and broke the circle.

There was a long moment of silence, punctuated only by his wild breathing. Then Barbara blinked, her eyes once again her own. “Did you take your papaw's pocket watch, Billy?”

Billy's voice shook. "I'm sorry! I need the money—I don't want to rot in this fucking town! I need the money to get to California, and it's not like he's got any use for it being dead, and—"

The woman beside him gave him a sharp smack across the back of the head. "Where is it? If you've pawned it, so help me..."

"It's in my room! I swear! I didn't have the chance to sell it yet."

Barbara cleared her throat, drawing everyone's attention back to her. "The solution here is simple. Go to William's grave at three o'clock in the morning, dig a hole, and put the watch in it. Cover the hole, then apologize to him for stealing."

"And that will stop...everything?" the man asked.

She nodded. "It should. If you have any more trouble with William afterward, let me know, but I think he'll sleep easy once he has his watch back."

The film came to an end, the screen going white. Nigel glanced at Oscar, saw his face had gone pale and he held a hand over his mouth.

"Love?" Nigel said quietly.

Oscar swallowed and dropped his hand. "She was a medium. She really was. She saw things, and people believed her. Came to her for help."

"So what went wrong?" Tina murmured.

"We have to—we have to watch the other tape." Oscar swiveled around to stare at Chris. "What was the name on it? Oak something distillery? No, wait—Cloven Oak."

"Just give me a minute."

While Chris rewound the first film, then loaded the second, Nigel took Oscar's hand. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know." Oscar rubbed at his eyes with his free hand. "There aren't any pictures of her in the house, did you

know that? I think...before now, it wasn't like she was even real to me. Just a cautionary tale, an angry warning of what comes from 'acting crazy.' But she was a real person with a whole life."

Nigel silently cursed Oscar's dad. Scott had doubtless been reacting to his own trauma, but he'd hurt Oscar in the process, and that wasn't all right.

"Okay," Chris said. "Are you ready?"

Nigel squeezed Oscar's hand. Tina put down her wine glass, got off the couch, and sat down on Oscar's other side, leaning her shoulder against his.

"Let's see it," Oscar said.

Unlike the previous film, this time the camera was clearly being held in someone's hand. They were outside, standing in front of an enormous stone building that was being slowly subsumed by the green of vines, shrubs, and trees. A brick chimney loomed up behind it, with a scattering of other buildings off to the side. The mountains formed the backdrop, and as the camera panned slowly over the scene, a creek could be seen flowing nearby.

The camera paused on the steep hill above the—building? Factory? A huge oak stood there, growing in three pieces from a split trunk.

"Is that the cloven oak?" asked a woman's voice that Nigel didn't recognize.

"Looks like it," replied Barbara from off-camera.

The camera swung to her. She stood a few feet away, a handkerchief covering her hair and holding it back from her face. She wore a pair of blue pants with wide, straight legs, a checkered shirt with a huge collar, and a vest that matched the pants. The grin she aimed at the camera held the same easy charm as Oscar's.

"Well," she said, gesturing grandly to the abandoned buildings behind her, "welcome to my inheritance."

“What the *hell?*” exclaimed Chris, at the same time as Nigel said, “Wait, what?”

Oscar felt the blood draining from his head. He couldn't have heard that right. “Chris, rewind it.”

Chris stopped the film, rewound it, and started again. Once again, Barbara grinned at the camera. “Well, welcome to my inheritance!”

What the fuck? What did she mean?

“You're a real queen of the castle, Barb,” said the camera operator dryly.

Barbara posed for a moment, then laughed. “Okay, maybe it's not really mine. It might be, if I had a good lawyer and plenty of money, or wanted the old heap in the first place.”

“Then get on telling us about it!”

“All right, all right!” Barbara put her hands on her hips and addressed the camera directly. “I'm Barbara Fox, here with my friend Sharon, who thinks we'll send this tape to the news and become TV stars.”

Sharon sighed audibly from behind the camera.

“We're here at the Cloven Oak Distillery in Marrow, WV.” Barbara gestured at the cluster of buildings behind her. “My great-granddaddy Ivan Corbett built it in 1872 to make the finest whiskey this side of the Mississippi. The business did pretty well, but uh, the family didn't.”

She turned to look at the distillery, then back at the camera, unease breaking through her earlier smile. “Accidents on the property took the lives of Ivan, his son, and his oldest grandson in their turn. My daddy was the younger grandson, and since he had a falling out with the family, the distillery went to a cousin. Things went downhill from there, and it went out of business altogether a few years back.”

“Did you know?” Tina asked.

Oscar could only shake his head. “I didn’t even know her maiden name, let alone...any of this.”

On the screen, Barbara touched her pocket in what looked like a nervous habit. “My mamaw, Miss Virginia, thought there was a curse on the family, something to do with the distillery itself. Since she passed, I’ve been trying to take up her mantle. Doing seances and the like.” She took a deep breath and redirected her stare to the camera. “If she was right, if there is a curse on this place, the ghosts of my ancestors who died on this land might be trapped here. If that’s the case, I mean to help them move on.”

There came a moment’s pause, then Sharon said, “Spooky.”

Barbara reached into the pocket she’d touched earlier and pulled out a leather bag. “That’s why we brought our salt. Plus iron nails and moss from the south side of an oak tree.”

“And a lucky rabbit’s foot.”

“Everything we need.” Barbara walked back toward the buildings, arms outspread. “Come on. Let’s see what’s inside.”

Tina turned to Oscar. “She was doing the same thing as us—as you! It’s like a proto-OtP film!”

“This is crazy,” he murmured. “I-I never met her, she died before I was born...”

Nigel’s chilly fingers wrapped around his own. “Do you need us to stop?”

“No. I need to see this. I need to *know*.”

The scene cut, then switched to the inside of a building with stone walls and a concrete floor. Barbara crouched beside a pool of water in the center, one hand resting on the iron railing surrounding it. In her other hand, she held an empty whiskey bottle, which she displayed to the camera.

“That’s the same bottle we found in storage,” Tina murmured.

On camera, Mamaw said, “This spring water is what was supposed to make the whiskey so good.” She leaned forward

and dipped the bottle in the water. Once it was full, she tipped her head back and took a long drink.

“How is it?” Sharon asked from behind the camera.

The expression on Mamaw’s face turned contemplative, almost uncertain. “I don’t know. I mean, it tastes fine, but... maybe old Ivan was onto something after all.” Then she shook herself and popped a cork into the bottle. “I’ll keep this for later. Let’s take a look at the distilling room.”

The scene changed again, camera panning over a stone building with a high roof. Light filtered in through skylights high above.

“This is the distilling room,” Mamaw said, pointing at a two-story tall column of tarnished copper connected to an enormous copper vat. She turned back to the camera, her expression serious. “I don’t like the vibes in here.”

“What are you sensing?”

She walked slowly toward the center of the room, her image going grainy as she passed into shadow. “Fear. Pain.” She tilted her head back, looking up toward a series of catwalks along the back wall. “I think someone died in here.”

The camera view grew noticeably shakier. “Are they in here with us?”

“There’s too much daylight.” Mamaw turned away from the catwalks. “Come on, I want to see the old aging warehouse, where they kept the whiskey.”

The scene changed once more, only this time the interior of the building was so dark it was hard to make out anything but shadows. Oscar wasn’t sure if night vision had been invented yet in 1972, but even if it had, a consumer-grade camera wouldn’t have been equipped with it.

“Barbara?” Sharon called, a note of fear in her voice. “What is it? Who are you talking to?”

One of the shadows moved, and Mamaw said, “Ivan Corbett, is that you? Great-granddaddy?”

Several seconds of silence followed, then she let out a hiss. “What do you mean? Who?”

“Barbara?” Sharon asked again.

“No.” Mamaw stepped back in Sharon’s direction. “Why? Who?” She stared at nothing for a moment, then turned sharply. “We’re leaving.”

“Barb, what’s going on?”

Mamaw’s face was grim, before she vanished to one side. The camera jerked—she must have grabbed Sharon’s arm and was shoving her out of the building. “We need to get out of here.”

They emerged back outside, but not into the daylight of earlier. Black clouds covered the sky, and wind whipped the tree branches. “Where did this storm come from?” Sharon asked.

“It doesn’t matter, we need to...oh fuck, Sharon, *run!*”

The camera angle swung wildly; there was the sound of running feet, then a short scream—

Then the rain came pouring down. The last image was of Mamaw rolling on the ground, her mouth open in a silent scream, before the camera cut off.

CHAPTER FIVE

“JUST LIKE HIGH SCHOOL,” Oscar said shakily as he poured a measure of whiskey into a coffee mug. “Stealing from Dad’s liquor cabinet.”

He took a healthy gulp from the mug; the whiskey burned on its way down. Jack Daniels, not whatever brew their ancestors had made at Cloven Oak. Was it better? Worse?

He sat on the couch, Nigel’s arm around his waist in silent comfort. Tina put down the whiskey bottle after pouring some for herself, Chris, and Nigel, and topping off Oscar’s drink again.

Chris came back into the den and snagged their drink. “Fuck, it’s cold out there.”

“Thanks for putting everything away,” Oscar said. While Tina found the booze, Chris had hastily folded up the screen, packed the projector and films, and taken the box back out to the van where Oscar’s parents wouldn’t see it.

“Sure thing.” They sat down on their air mattress and looked up at him. “So...what was that? At the end?”

Oscar glanced at Nigel questioningly. Looking troubled, he shook his head. “I’m not sure. Something disturbed her in the aging warehouse, but she didn’t seem to panic until they were outside. As for what happened to her after that, it’s impossible to say from the film. Was she being attacked? Having a medical emergency?”

“Was it what got her sent to the state hospital?” Chris asked.

“Maybe. She was sent away that year, but I don’t know the date.” Oscar felt in his pocket for his phone. “We should look up the distillery.”

“Already ahead of you.” Tina bent over her own phone. “There’s not much, just the stub of a Wikipedia article. It says Cloven Oak Distillery was founded in 1872 in Marrow, WV, by Ivan Corbett. Which we already knew.”

“So it’s near here?” Nigel asked, looking to Oscar.

“I guess?” Oscar felt wrong-footed, suddenly aware of a gap in his knowledge he’d never expected. “I think there was some mention of it in a class, maybe? About the history of the town? But I’m not sure.”

Nigel leaned against him, comforting. “There aren’t any ghost stories about it, then?”

“No, not that I know of.” Oscar sifted through memories left undisturbed for over a decade. “I got pretty into ghost stories when I was in my late teens. The lure of the forbidden, I guess. There’s a crybaby bridge out on Cold Creek Rd., and a woman in white who supposedly hitchhikes near the high school on moonless nights, but those are the only local legends I know. And I never had the guts to check if they were real or not.” His mouth twisted bitterly. “If I’d seen something and no one else had...according to Dad that’s the mark of a crazy person, so it was the last thing I wanted to be.”

Nigel squeezed his hand in support. “You deserved better.”

“Thanks.” Oscar took a deep breath and glanced at Tina. “Is there anything more?”

“The distillery closed in the early sixties,” Tina said. “And that’s about all there is to find online.” She looked up from her phone. “Do you think your Dad would know more?”

Did he? Dad would have been a baby when the distillery closed down, and from what Barbara had said, they weren’t the inheritors anyway. The place had been abandoned even in local memory, except for those who wanted to preserve the history of Marrow. Possibly he didn’t know any more than they did.

“Maybe, if I could ask him.” Oscar said unhappily. “If it wouldn’t turn into a fight.”

“We passed a library when driving into town,” Nigel said. “They might have records. Is there a historical society?”

“Not that I know of, but that doesn’t mean anything.” Oscar finished off his whiskey and put the mug down. “The library, that’s a good idea, though. If they have old newspapers, maybe we can learn more.” He glanced at them, one at a time, ending on Nigel. “I know this wasn’t our original agenda when we came here...”

Tina held up her hand. “Please. This is important to you, *and* it involves ghosts. Which is exactly what we all signed up for.”

He smiled, feeling lighter than he had since viewing the film. “Thanks, guys.”

“We’d better get some sleep,” Tina said, standing up. “And come up with an excuse as to why we’re visiting the town library tomorrow, so your dad doesn’t get suspicious.”

“I’ll think of something.”

Chris, Oscar, and Nigel took turns changing into their pajamas in the bathroom, then crawled into their respective beds. Within minutes, Chris was snoring softly into their pillow.

Nigel and Oscar lay facing each other. Nigel lifted his hand and ran thin, cool fingers over Oscar’s face, tracing a line from forehead, to cheek, to jaw, and finally landing on his lips. Oscar kissed his fingertips, then pulled Nigel closer and kissed him properly. Despite everything, his heartbeat quickened with desire, and he wished they had a room to themselves.

“I love you,” Nigel whispered. “I’m here for you, whatever you need.”

“I love you, too. And I know.”

They held each other in silence, until eventually Nigel’s breathing evened out. Oscar started to roll over, then stopped when he heard the soft creak of a floorboard.

He lifted his head and looked to the door. There was a flash of white...then nothing.

The spirit was gone.

Oscar lay back down. "Goodnight to you, too."

The town library was a tiny brick building constructed on a slope. The main entrance off the road led straight onto the second floor, with the first floor below sunk half into the hillside running down to a creek. Looking at its small size, Nigel wasn't sure they'd find what they needed, unless the place was truly jam-packed with material.

"I don't know how much help I'm going to be," Chris said doubtfully as Oscar pulled the van into a parking space near the front. "Research isn't my specialty."

"Or mine," Tina added.

"I know," Oscar said, shutting off the engine. "But it would have looked weird if we'd left you at home, while Nigel and I went off for a drive together."

"Weird, or romantic?" Chris countered.

"I have enough research experience for us all," Nigel said, changing the subject. "The question is whether or not there's anything here to find."

They climbed out of the van and made for the front door. The building was clearly old, judging by its bricks and the National Historic Register plaque by the door. But work seemed to have been done on it recently; the white paint on the door and window frames was bright and unweathered.

The smell of dusty books common to all libraries rose up as they stepped through the door. Nigel took a deep breath, even though the dust made the inside of his nose tingle. Tension slid from his shoulders, as though he'd come home from a long journey.

Clearly, he spent far too much time in the stacks at the university.

An elderly white woman sat behind the desk, her silver hair in short curls. As they entered, she looked up with a smile. “Welcome to the Marrow Township Library. Let me know if I can help y’all with anything.”

“Mrs. Simpson?” Oscar asked, sounding surprised.

Her face creased for a moment—then cleared. “Oscar Fox! I’d heard you were visiting.”

Grinning, Oscar went over to the desk and hugged her. “Mrs. Simpson was my elementary school librarian!”

“Retired now,” she said, beaming at him. “Well, from the school system, anyway. I work here part-time; it gets me out of the house and keeps me out of trouble.” She glanced from him to the rest of them. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Yes,” Nigel said. “I’m Dr. Nigel Taylor; my pronouns are he/him. We’re looking for any information you might have on the old Cloven Oak Distillery. Plus, if you have an archive of local newspapers from the 1970s, that would be extremely helpful as well.”

Mrs. Simpson looked a bit taken aback. “Cloven Oak? I haven’t heard that name in years. Yes, I’m certain we have some information, and there will be more in the papers.” She bustled toward the stairs leading down. “I’m afraid we haven’t gotten around to digitizing our newspaper collection, but we do have issues on microfiche from the nineteenth-century on. I’ll check to see if we have any books on the topic of West Virginia distilleries while you look.”

“Thank you,” Nigel said. “And if you have any books on local legends, ghost stories, anything of that sort, it would be a great help.”

Mrs. Simpson showed them how to use the library database and pointed out the microfiche readers. Once she left to look for books, Nigel said, “We should divide and conquer. Who wants to search the database?”

“I will.” Tina sat down at the computer.

“Use as many keywords as you can think of, starting with the distillery’s name,” Nigel instructed. “Chris, if you would pull the microfiche once Tina gives you the location information, I’ll start reading. Oscar, would you mind looking through any books Mrs. Simpson finds?”

“Sure thing, doc,” Chris said, at the same time as Oscar’s “No problem.”

Nigel nodded and turned to the microfiche reader. “All right, let’s see what we can find.”

Oscar helped Mrs. Simpson pull books, then sat down with the pile. Back at Marrow Elementary, she’d always encouraged him when it came to reading above grade level, unlike some of the other librarians there. If it had been cranky old Mrs. Watson behind the desk here, he probably wouldn’t have had the guts to ask for help.

Was she even alive now? She’d been ancient already back then—but Mrs. Simpson had seemed ancient to his young self as well, so who knew.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” Mrs. Simpson said. “And tell your parents hello from me. I hope they’re doing well?”

Since the group was supposedly on a drive through the mountains to visit some scenic overlooks, Oscar had no intention of passing on her greeting to Mom and Dad. Instead of lying outright to her, he said, “They’re doing just fine, thank you. They delayed Christmas dinner so we could all have it together.”

He could tell her curiosity was burning, even before she said, “So, your friend is a doctor?”

Dad wouldn’t want him to talk about anything connected to ghosts...but he wasn’t here. “Nigel’s my boyfriend, and yes. He has a PhD in parapsychology—he studies hauntings, spirits, that sort of thing. Chris and Tina are on a ghost hunting

team with me. *OutFoxing the Paranormal*—you can find us on the internet, we do videos of the locations we go to.”

“Goodness me,” she said, putting a hand to her chest.

“I don’t suppose you know any stories about the distillery” he asked. “I heard it might be cursed...?”

“I don’t know about that.” She frowned, as if searching her memory. “I haven’t heard much about it at all since I was young. People don’t go there—no reason to, I guess. I can’t think of anything.”

He hid his disappointment behind a smile. “Hopefully the books will have some more information in them.”

“I’m sure they will, honey. Just let me know if you need anything, you hear?”

She started to walk away, but a thought suddenly occurred to him. “You’ve lived here your whole life, isn’t that right, ma’am?”

She stopped and turned back around. “We moved here when I was five, but otherwise, yes.”

“Did you...by any chance, did you know my mamaw? Dad’s mom?”

A wave of sadness passed over her face, answering him even before her words. “Not well, but yes. I did.”

She’d never said anything before—but of course she hadn’t. No one wanted to bring up the family shame. “Did you know she would do seances?”

Her expression turned uncomfortable. “Yes. Well, I heard the rumors. I wasn’t raised to approve of that sort of thing, though. My parents wouldn’t even let me talk to Miss Virginia—that was your mamaw’s mamaw.”

What was it Barbara had said about her grandmother on the film? “*Since she passed, I’ve been trying to take up her mantle. Doing seances and the like.*”

“Why not?” he asked.

Mrs. Simpson shifted awkwardly. “Oh, well...she had some mountain ways that seemed strange to my folks. I’m sure there was no harm in her.”

In other words, she wasn’t going to talk about spirit work, or whatever folk magic might have been mixed in with it. “Did Mamaw have a friend named Sharon?” he asked without much hope for an answer.

To his surprise, Mrs. Simpson’s face cleared. “I don’t remember for sure, but Sharon Griffith would be about the same age as Barbara, and she’s lived here since birth. It might be her. I’m sure she’s in the phone book if you want to give her a call.”

“Thank you. I’ll do that.”

Mrs. Simpson scurried away, as if afraid he’d ask any more uncomfortable questions about the past. He paused just long enough to enter Sharon Griffith’s name into his phone for later, then turned his attention to the books.

There was a single slim volume on the history of brewing and distilling in the state, most of it focused on moonshining. As for Cloven Oak, there was only a paragraph mentioning the date of its founding by Ivan Corbett, and that it had survived prohibition by securing a government license to brew “medicinal” alcohol for distribution to pharmacies.

Hopefully he’d find more in the stack of volumes concerning ghost lore in West Virginia specifically and Appalachia generally. Though it sounded as though any local ghost stories had faded from memory between Mrs. Simpson’s time and his own. He opened the first book, scanned the table of contents...and froze.

There was a section on insane asylums. Including the place where Mamaw had been locked away. Where she’d died.

Of course there was—what had he expected? A place with such history, whose walls had seen so much suffering over its hundred-plus years of operation...it would be a shock if it *didn’t* have the reputation of being haunted.

He was supposed to be looking for anything on Cloven Oak, but instead his shaking hands turned to the chapter about the asylum.

Disembodied voices, doors closing by themselves, at least one shadow man, an angry nurse, a ghostly girl...the litany of the unquiet dead was a long one. And the activity had begun decades before the asylum closed, experienced by nurses and patients alike.

What must it have been like for a medium to be locked away in there, unable to escape the screams of the tormented dead?

CHAPTER SIX

AS FAR AS Nigel could tell, the diner was the only restaurant in Marrow. That was probably why they went back there to eat and regroup after leaving the library.

Not because Oscar wanted to see his old flame Josh again.

The diner was a bit busier today, though Josh still found time to pop out of the kitchen and greet them. They chose a table well away from the other customers; in this small a town, word would likely get back to Scott if his well-known and popular son was overheard talking about ghosts.

Oscar had been unusually quiet ever since the library, though he'd put on his normal charming smile for Josh. "Are you all right?" Nigel asked as they sat down.

"I'm fine," Oscar said.

Nigel arched a skeptical brow at him, but let it go. Taking out his notebook, he said, "I've created a timeline from the articles we found."

The cashier/waitress—Kayla, that was her name—carried a tray with four plastic restaurant cups on it. "Three sweet teas and a water with lemon," she said.

Chris held up their hand. "I'm the water."

She retreated again. Nigel took a sip of his tea, which was so thick with sugar a hummingbird could have drunk it. Oscar squeezed lemon into his, saying, "Let's hear it, then."

Nigel cleared his throat. "Cloven Oak Distillery was founded in 1872 by Ivan Corbett—which we already knew, of course. At the time, it was the largest employer in Marrow.

Apparently there wasn't even a town here before, just an unincorporated area, but the distillery drew people from all over to work at it."

"Wow." Oscar looked surprised. "So my ancestor was responsible for the town existing?"

"Pretty rad," Chris put in.

"Corbett ran the company until his death in 1897," Nigel went on. "His son, Edwin Corbett, took over from him, and continued on until he died in 1922. *His* oldest son then did the same, dying in 1947."

Oscar let out a low whistle. "Every twenty-five years, like clockwork."

Nigel blinked. "Oh—I hadn't noticed."

"Leave it to Oscar to figure out numbers," Tina said.

Oscar's lip twitched, as though the ghost of a smile tried to push through in response. "And there were twenty-five years between 1947 and 1972. Mamaw didn't die, not then, but..."

A chill that had nothing to do with the wintery weather settled into Nigel's bones. "It can't be a coincidence. Did anything happen to that side of your family in..." he paused to do the math "1997? You mentioned a cousin who died while visiting—what year was that?"

Oscar rubbed at his forehead. "Julie. I don't remember. I was pretty young. I mostly remember all the adults being upset, mom crying. She was buried in her home state, so we didn't go to the funeral."

Kayla picked that moment to return with their orders. Once she was gone again, Tina said, "I don't want to alarm anyone, but 2022 is twenty-five years after 1997. And it's still 2022 for a few more days. Maybe nothing happened in 1997, but if it did..."

"It's due to happen again," Oscar said. "Fuck."

Nigel had picked up his pepperoni roll, but now he set it down again, all appetite gone as fear set in. It was already

December 28—if there was due to be another death, it would happen soon.

Their visit had brought Oscar to the vicinity of something that wanted to kill him.

“We should leave Marrow until next year,” he said quickly. “At least until after New Year’s.”

Oscar shook his head. “If we assume something dangerous is going to happen in the next few days, Dad could be a target as well.”

“Then you have to try and convince him to leave too.”

Tina dragged her fry aimlessly through the ketchup, making abstract patterns. “He won’t even listen to Oscar about ghosts. If we start telling him he’s going to fall victim to a curse before New Year’s...”

“He’ll never listen,” Oscar agreed.

Nigel pressed his palms against the tabletop. He wanted to grab Oscar and drag him away from this place and its ghosts. Away from his family and whatever ‘curse’ might be stalking them, and to hell with Scott if he was too stubborn to save himself.

But Oscar wouldn’t abandon his family if he thought there was the slightest chance they might actually be in peril.

Damn it.

“How did they die?” Oscar asked. “The Corbetts who died at the distillery, that is.”

Nigel referred to his notes. “Ivan was crushed when some of the barrels in the aging warehouse fell on him. Edwin was electrocuted in the powerhouse, and the grandson, Jeff, broke his neck when he fell from a catwalk in the distilling room.”

“Barbara sensed a presence in there, remember?” Chris asked. “And she was talking to someone in the aging warehouse when something made her want to leave. Did Ivan threaten her for some reason?”

“Yeah.” Oscar frowned. “Let’s not jump to any conclusions about Ivan yet. As for Jeff, he must have been my great-great uncle. The one Barbara’s dad had a falling out with.”

“He was.” Nigel flipped to a page where he’d drawn a family tree and slid it over to Oscar. “I was able to piece together some marriage announcements and obituaries. Jeff Corbett died without ever marrying, but I couldn’t find out much about the cousin who inherited the property from him, no doubt because that branch of the family had moved away.”

“Would your parents know more?” Chris asked Oscar. “Maybe if you said you’ve gotten into genealogy, you could find out something.”

“Maybe,” Oscar said. He took a sip from his tea, seemingly lost in contemplation for a moment. Then he looked up again. “Mamaw thought the spirits of our ancestors might be trapped inside the distillery where they died. Sure as hell *something* was in there when she investigated. And if there’s a curse, it’s due to strike again in the next few days.”

“Agreed,” Nigel said cautiously, hoping against hope he was wrong about what Oscar was about to say.

He wasn’t. Determination filled Oscar’s brown eyes, and his back straightened. “This place has been taking people every twenty-five years, destroying their lives one way or another. I’m going to put an end to it, and I’ll need all of you to help me do it.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“YOU DON’T HAVE to do this,” Nigel said. “We could still leave. Go home.”

Oscar walked slowly up the steep hillside behind his parents’ house. Nigel followed behind him, feet slipping on the snow-covered leaf litter. The forest around them was still, with only the distant sounds of car engines to disturb the silence.

“I used to come up here a lot as a kid,” Oscar said, instead of answering. “Whenever I wanted to think, or just get out of the house and be by myself for a while.”

The forest broke open, revealing a stretch of bare rock, the mountain’s stony core erupting through the skin of soil. Gray forest, gray stone, gray sky.

He climbed up onto the outcropping, then reached down and hauled Nigel up after. Nigel’s fingers were ice cold; he’d left his gloves back at the house.

“Thanks,” Nigel said. Then, “What you’re talking about doing is dangerous, Oscar. Whatever is lurking in the distillery killed three of your relatives and probably did something to your grandmother. We need to get as far away from it as possible.”

Irritation flickered through Oscar—they’d already had this discussion at the restaurant. So instead he tried a new tack. “You were all right with us risking ourselves to release the ghosts of the Matthews house.”

Nigel's eyes widened behind the shields of his glasses. "I had no idea the investigation would turn out to be so dangerous!"

"But when it did, you were okay with letting me use my abilities to put an end to the haunting," Oscar snapped. "Jones was a dangerous ghost, and maybe whatever is in the distillery is too, but we handled him and we'll handle this."

"Fine, but at least wait a week, or a year." Nigel folded his arms over his chest, tucking his fingers beneath his armpits for warmth. "If this thing becomes active every twenty-five years, that means we'll be challenging it at its most powerful."

How could Nigel not see? "You know why! If I leave and something happens to Dad, I won't be able to live with myself!"

"There's no reason to think he's in danger!" Nigel dropped his arms. "It's been fifty years since your grandmother went to the distillery, and he's been fine! Barbara probably would have been, too, if she'd stayed away or gone some other year!"

Oscar rubbed a hand over his face, trying to scrub away his aggravation. "And what if you're wrong? The risk is too great. I don't understand why you're being like this!"

"Because I don't want to lose you!"

Nigel's shout echoed through the trees, before fading into silence. His gray eyes blinked rapidly, as if holding back tears, and his hands balled into fists.

All of Oscar's frustration evaporated. "Hey," he said, holding out his arms. Nigel stepped into the embrace, and Oscar wrapped him in a tight hug. Nigel's slight body trembled against his. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You can't promise that," Nigel said, voice muffled by Oscar's sweater.

"Okay, fair." Oscar rubbed circles on Nigel's back with one hand. "But I know to be careful. And unlike Mamaw Fox, I have an experienced team with me, including you."

“We don’t know what happened to Barbara, though. Was she possessed? Did something attach to her? Did something cause a medical emergency that resulted in brain damage?”

The last possibility was the one that scared Oscar the most. “We have experience,” he repeated. “If I start yelling at something to get off me, break out the salt and the electrostatic discharge strap. You know what to do.”

“I wonder if there could have been something done for her, even after.” Nigel shivered against him, though not, he suspected, from the cold. “Do you think your grandfather knew about her spirit work? Or believed, if he did?”

Oscar shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. Even if he did, it got to the point where he called for a doctor. And then... fuck.”

Nigel pulled back and looked up at him. “What is it?”

“Every book of Appalachian ghosts that I found at the library mentioned the lunatic hospital. The one she was held in.” His throat had gone dry. “If it’s as haunted as the stories say, and she was a medium on god-knows-what medications...”

Nigel swore softly. “She would have been completely exposed, not just to confused and frightened ghosts, but to any negative ones who wanted to manipulate or possess her.”

“Yeah.” The thought made him ill.

“I wish I could say something other than ‘I’m sorry.’” Nigel’s arms tightened around his waist. “The whole situation is tragic.”

“I know. I keep thinking, if things had been different, if she’d lived, if I could have trained with her.” What would it have been like to grow up knowing he wasn’t crazy, that he didn’t have to hide? “But I’ve been practicing, you know I have. Shielding, grounding, envisioning white light, everything in the journal pages that Dr. Lawson copied for me.”

“And you think it’s enough to take on Cloven Oak.”

It wasn't a question, but Oscar nodded anyway. "I need to do this. I can't risk running away from whatever is out there preying on my family, just hoping it doesn't get Dad, too. We have no idea what its reach might be, or why it's after us, or anything about it."

Nigel met his gaze. "All right. If you think we can do this, it's good enough for me. I'm still frightened...but this is your choice, not mine. I'll support you."

Oscar hugged Nigel tighter. "Thank you."

Nigel hugged him back. "I'll contact Mrs. Montague tonight. If we're going into a dangerous, haunted old distillery, we might as well get paid for it." He pulled away and looked up. "If you're okay with that, I mean."

"I'm not going to turn down a rich old lady's money," Oscar said with a rueful grin. "I'm thinking we do the initial sweep tomorrow, in the light of day."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Right." Oscar looked down at the house below. The short day was rapidly drawing to a close, and the lights within shone warmly through the gray twilight. "Let's go back. I want to ask my mom about cousin Julie."

"I'm pleased to hear that," Patricia Montague said through the phone. "Do you need any equipment? I can have it shipped to you overnight."

Nigel paced back and forth in the driveway near the van. He'd come out here so the call could be private, but he felt like his hands were about to freeze off. He shouldn't have left his gloves in the house, but it was too late to get them now.

"We have most of our investigation equipment," he told her, "but we were expecting to be working inside of an occupied house. So we don't have a generator, or a tent, or heaters, or anything else required to set up a command center at an abandoned location in the middle of winter."

“Text me a list and the address. Everything you need will arrive tomorrow.”

The perks of having a rich patron. “I will.”

“Of course, I expect a copy of any raw footage collected during the investigation. And I would like to view the old films you found.”

The small hairs on his neck prickled. Patricia Montague had known the medium Robin, whose photocopied journal pages Oscar had been learning from. She’d apparently been friends with both the medium and Dr. Lawson. He didn’t know what their history was, exactly, but it had ended with Robin dead, Dr. Lawson antagonistic, and the Montague family withdrawing their financial support from the Institute of Parapsychology.

At least, until Dr. Lawson retired and he came along. Had Montague just been biding her time, waiting for the next survival researcher she could get her hooks into?

Not that it mattered; without her generous grant and donations, he would likely have fallen victim to the next round of budget cuts at the university. And it was because of her that he’d met Oscar. So he owed her twice over.

“Right,” he said. “Oscar may prefer to get the films transferred so he can keep the originals, I don’t know, but I’m sure he won’t mind letting you view the footage.”

“Thank you, Dr. Taylor. Is that all?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do keep me informed.”

She hung up. Nigel immediately texted her the list and an address—though not the one belonging to Oscar’s parents.

On the way up the hill, they’d discussed how to handle things. Oscar decided to text Josh and see if he was willing to have their equipment sent to his house, away from the prying eyes of Oscar’s parents. Scott wouldn’t be happy if they went looking for ghosts in the same place something terrible happened to his own mother.

Not that Nigel could entirely blame him for that. He wanted to grab Oscar and haul him back to Durham, back to his warm, ghost-free apartment.

Far away from whatever cursed family legacy lurked in these hills.

When Mom offered to wash the dishes after dinner, while everyone else went to play a board game, Oscar seized on his chance to talk to her alone. "I'll give you a hand with those."

"No need, honey."

He began stacking plates. "I insist. You've been waiting on us hand and foot; it's the least I can do."

She smiled. "Well, I can't argue with that. I'll wash and you dry?"

They worked for a few minutes in silence, while everyone else drifted into the den. Mom spoke first. "I like your friend Chris. They're funny."

Oscar grinned. "Don't tell them that, it'll go to their head."

"It'll be our secret." She glanced casually over her shoulder, then said, "Did you go to the storage place?"

"Yes." Oscar lowered his voice, even though there was no way Dad could hear him. "We found some things. Films of Mamaw. She was a spirit medium, did you know that?"

"Good heavens, I certainly didn't!" She frowned slightly as she scrubbed a stubborn bit from a casserole dish. "Maybe that's why your daddy is so dead-set against this ghost hunting of yours."

"Probably. Did you know Mamaw's family used to own a distillery just out of town? Cloven Oak?"

Mom shook her head. "I didn't know there was one. But then, I'm not from around here originally, and Scott never

talks about his family. I think Julie was the only one from your mamaw's side left anyway."

Oscar nearly dropped the plate in his hands. "I wanted to ask about her, actually."

She sobered. "It was a terrible thing, and at Thanksgiving, too. I'm just glad you were so young; I don't imagine you remember much of it."

"Just that she died. What happened, exactly?"

"I don't like thinking about it." Mom pursed her lips, then sighed. "But I know you wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. Julie's daddy moved them to Kentucky back when she was a little girl. There was some kind of falling out between his side of the family and your great-grandfather—Mamaw Fox's daddy."

"Do you know what about?"

"I surely don't. Scott might, but it was a long time before he was born, so it's hard to say. At any rate, they'd gotten back in contact at some point, I'm not sure when, and Julie and her husband came visiting for Thanksgiving." A little smile touched her mouth. "We had a full house that year—there was Julie, and of course Papaw Fox, and my mama and daddy, and a bunch of cousins on the Fox side." The smile faded. "A shame it ended the way it did."

Oscar tried to recall any specifics, but the memories were vague, blurry. So many Thanksgivings had featured the same cast of relatives coming over, sitting around the TV watching football, then stuffing themselves on turkey, sweet potatoes with marshmallows, and cornbread.

"It was the Saturday after," Mom went on. Her hands had stilled in the sink, sudsy water dripping slowly from her fingers as she stared into a time that no longer existed. "Julie and her husband...what was his name? David, that was it. She was a real outdoorsy type, loved to hike. They left to hike somewhere—she was going to show him something..." Her brow furrowed.

A cold feeling went up Oscar's spine. "Could it have been the old distillery?"

"I don't remember, hon." Mom sighed and turned her attention back to the last of the dishes. "After having people in and out for two days, with you running around the house on a sugar high from all the candy Papaw Fox kept slipping you, I was exhausted. I laid down for a nap, and I woke up with Scott saying we needed to go, that Julie'd had a heart attack." She handed him the last plate. "Poor David. Not many people had cell phones back then, and he'd had to run back to the car and drive into town to phone for help. By the time he guided the EMTs to where she was, it was too late. At least she didn't have any children to leave behind."

The cold around him deepened. "And what year was it, again?"

"Nineteen-ninety-seven."

Twenty-five years after Mamaw Fox had her encounter at the distillery. It fit the pattern.

"Thanks, Mom," he said. "If you remember anything else about it, let me know."

He started to turn away, but she said, "There was one thing. Maybe you don't remember—you probably don't, you had so many nightmares when you were young."

He turned back slowly. "What do you mean?"

"You woke Julie up one night, do you remember?"

He cast his mind back, but the incident was lost in the fog of early childhood. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you were probably sleepwalking—little kids do that. She opened her eyes in the middle of the night and found you standing by her bed. You said something about a lady wanting to talk to her, over and over again. She came and woke me up, and I put you back in the bed, and we both had a laugh at little kids and their imaginations." Mom put away the kitchen sponge and turned to him. "Lord, I hadn't thought of that in years. You had so many incidents like that..." she trailed off.

“Yeah,” he said, mind spinning in circles.

“I’m going to go into the den and see if they have room for another player.” She started past him. “You coming?”

“In a minute.”

Once she was gone, he turned slowly to the window above the kitchen sink. His reflection looked back at him, unnaturally pale.

“Did you try to warn Julie?” he whispered to the air. “And if so, who are you?”

He received no answer.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THEY LEFT the house the next day, using the excuse of visiting Josh and some of Oscar's other old friends from high school. As they drove, Oscar filled them all in on his conversation with his mother.

"So the cycle was fulfilled in 1997," Nigel said when he finished. Fear for Oscar gripped him, and he struggled to push it down. "But only after she chose to come to the distillery."

"Assuming that's what she meant to show her husband," Tina countered. "We should try to contact him if we can. He could tell us what really happened, and where."

Of course—Nigel was letting his fear run away with him. Just because Julie had died in Marrow didn't mean it was connected with the distillery her family had once owned.

But it was a hell of a coincidence if it wasn't.

The van passed through the tiny town in a matter of minutes. Beyond lay farmland, the fields bare beneath a light blanket of snow. It would be a beautiful drive in the fall, with the hillsides aflame with color, but at the moment it struck Nigel as almost mournful.

"That's the Greenbark River," Tina said, glancing from her phone to the snaking line of water. The road roughly followed its course, sometimes jumping a bend with a bridge. "The distillery is actually off a little side-creek called Lucky Run."

"Just tell me when to turn," Oscar said.

The valley narrowed, the mountains closing in until they loomed nearly overhead. The fields disappeared, replaced by

dense woods.

“Slow down,” Tina said. “There should be a road on the left coming up around this bend.”

Oscar slowed as ordered and put his blinker on. Chris peered out the window as the van came nearly to a stop. “That’s not a road, Tina,” they said.

The gap in the trees was badly overgrown, grass sprouting from cracks in the asphalt. “Can we make it through?” Nigel asked dubiously.

“Only one way to find out.” Oscar turned onto the track.

Dead grass and brambles scraped against the van, alongside fallen branches. Oscar drove slowly, but even so it was a rough ride, with wheels dropping into potholes, equipment rattling threateningly every time.

“I don’t think we want to make too many trips out here.” Chris clung to the back of their seat, bracing a foot to help with the jolting. “The van won’t survive, let alone our gear.”

Though the road hugged the mountain’s foot, it was still on the flat land carved and deposited by the river, so at least they didn’t have to strain the engine going uphill. Within a quarter mile, the forest thinned, then abruptly opened up, giving them their first glimpse of the distillery.

The place was massive; no film shot from the ground could convey its true size. Nigel hadn’t realized how many buildings there would be. A huge edifice constructed of roughly shaped stone dominated the site, surrounded by a cluster of other structures: a grain silo made from corrugated metal, two brick warehouses, and another stone building sporting a tall brick smokestack towering over everything else.

It hadn’t been in perfect shape when Barbara Fox had come here, and another fifty years of abandonment had left their mark. At least one of the buildings had a caved-in roof, and any wooden shutters and doors that still clung to their frames were black with rot.

Nature was working hard to take back the site; trees and grasses sprouted wherever the concrete pavement ended, and

skeletal vines climbed and twisted over every wall. In the summer, it would have been a riot of green; now, it made the place look strangely lifeless.

The complex stood on the last stretch of relatively flat land tucked hard against the mountainside. On the slope above loomed a truly gigantic oak tree. Some long-ago injury had caused the massive base to split into three pieces, about six feet above the ground. Each of the three sections had continued to grow until any one of them would have been a huge tree on its own.

“Cloven Oak,” Nigel murmured. “Do you think that’s where Corbett got the name?”

“Maybe?” Oscar pulled the van to a halt. “Some species of oaks can live centuries. That’s one of the biggest I’ve ever seen with my own eyes, so I’m sure it was here when the place was built back in the 1870s.”

They climbed out of the van. A chill breeze funneled through the valley, and Nigel tucked his hands into his pockets.

Chris studied the conglomerate of buildings in front of them. “This place is really falling apart, boss. We need to be careful.”

“That’s why we’re doing the initial sweep in the daylight.” Oscar swung open the back of the van. “We don’t know how badly the buildings have deteriorated inside, so I want us to stick together. Everyone wears a hardhat, and no one goes off on their own.”

“Do we have time for an initial sweep?” Tina interjected. “It’s December 29—that only leaves us two more days before New Year.”

“And if we go into it blind, we’ll be putting ourselves in even more danger,” Oscar countered.

Nigel didn’t want to agree—like Tina, he itched to get this over and done with as quickly as possible. “We know something happened in the aging warehouse, where Ivan Corbett died.”

“But Mamaw was attacked outside,” Oscar countered. “Maybe Ivan was warning her to leave; we just don’t know.”

Nigel wanted to argue with his logic, but couldn’t. “You’re right—flailing around blindly won’t help things,” he admitted.

“I thought we’d leave some stationary cameras overnight,” Oscar said. “How would you suggest we cover the site, Nigel?”

The question seemed genuine, rather than a sop to Nigel’s ego. “How many do we have?”

“Three night vision and one thermal,” Chris said. “Plus the regular camera, obviously.”

“I’d like to have at least one camera set up in a random area where we aren’t expecting activity,” Nigel decided after a moment. “Possibly two. If we use the laser grid, we can film it with the regular camera, right?”

“And leave it here overnight?” Chris asked, looking pained.

Tina elbowed them. “It’s a camera, not a baby.”

“Take that back right now.”

“That’s a good idea,” Oscar said, ignoring them both. “So we set up at the powerhouse, the aging warehouse, the distilling room, and two other locations. Should I select them if I feel something, or...?”

“No, I’ll pick,” Nigel said. “If you feel something, tell us after. And of course we can move the cameras to wherever you want after tonight. This way we’ll at least lessen some of the bias, and maybe learn something unexpected.”

“Perfect. Let’s gear up, then.”

Nigel secured his hardhat; it had a flashlight affixed to it, but he accepted a second flashlight from Oscar. Ghosts would drain batteries in a heartbeat, and even in the daytime he didn’t want to get caught in the crumbling buildings without a light.

Chris took the main camera, and the rest of them split the bags with cameras, tripods, and the laser grid between them.

“Do you want to do any kind of intro?” they asked Oscar uncertainly. “Just in case?”

Oscar’s brow furrowed in thought, and he looked away. Then he frowned. “Does anyone else feel like they’re being watched?”

Nigel glanced around automatically, but saw nothing. “I don’t feel anything.”

“Are you picking up something?” Chris asked, camera half-raised as if they weren’t sure whether they should start filming.

Oscar hesitated, then shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s a spirit; maybe it’s just nerves.” He put his hardhat on. “Either way, let’s get to work.”

Oscar looked around at the sprawl of buildings as they made their way toward the main stone structure. From what they’d seen on Mamaw’s film, it should house the distilling room, probably others as well.

To think, his ancestors had owned all this. Built it from the ground up, employed who-knew-how many men looking for work. Put Marrow on the map, from what Nigel had said.

He’d only ever known Marrow as a dying town, caught in a vicious cycle. People left for better prospects, so stores didn’t have enough customers to stay open. The stores closed, and the former employees went elsewhere looking for work, leading to yet more closures.

He’d never imagined what it must have been like in its glory days, or even wondered what people had done back then, and where the jobs had gone. The distillery hadn’t been the only industry in Marrow, no doubt, but clearly its decline and abandonment hadn’t helped anyone.

When he’d first planned this trip, he’d thought he might have a chance of reconnecting with Dad. But maybe, instead, he could reconnect with this lost history. With Ivan and his

legacy. Maybe even do right by them, by moving on whatever had led to their early deaths and helping them rest in peace. The thought cheered him.

He stopped a short way from the entrance to the building. “I want everyone to ground and center before we go in,” he said.

They’d all worked on the exercise, even though he was the only medium, on the theory that staying calm would keep any destructive ghosts from feeding as much on them. Human presence gave spirits energy, but high emotions such as fear amplified that energy enormously.

Oscar focused on the earth beneath his feet and concentrated on his breathing. Once he felt steadier, he envisioned an invisible shield around him—in this case, his old football equipment. He didn’t put a lot of energy into the shielding yet, but hopefully it would be enough in the daylight, when any ghost should be much weaker to start with.

Of course, it would be dark inside the abandoned buildings.

“Ready?” he asked. When he got a series of affirmative murmurs, he started for the door.

Though the stone walls looked solid, the wooden shutters still hanging beside the big windows sagged, some barely clinging on by a single hinge. “Not a lot of broken windows,” Chris observed. “And no graffiti at all.”

Which could be a bad sign; some hauntings were so strong, so dark, that even non-mediums didn’t like to get too close, even if they couldn’t say why. But there were other, non-supernatural reasons, too.

“No one really remembers it’s here,” he pointed out. “I was born and raised in Marrow, drove past the turn-off a thousand times, and didn’t have a clue.”

The entrance was a rolling door set off to the side. The wood had rotted, and the whole thing sagged off its frame, almost ready to collapse. It was slightly open, enough for someone skinny like Nigel to slip through, but Oscar wasn’t

going to fit. It took a few minutes of wrestling and cursing with the damn thing, but eventually he and Chris forced the gap wide enough for them to all get through.

The door led onto a wide, concrete hall. Oscar played his flashlight over it, revealing worn painted letters. DISTILLING ROOM read one set, with an arrow to the left, and FERMENTING ROOM read the other, with an arrow to the right. He went left.

The interior of the distilling room was cavernous, filled with metal pipes, catwalks, and other equipment. The copper distilling equipment, tarnished in Mamaw's old film, was now covered with a diseased layer of green corrosion. Intact skylights above let in grimy sunlight, though shadows still clustered in the corners and beneath objects. Most of the metal work was rusted or had paint bubbling and peeling off in scabs. Along the back wall the windows looked like they led into interior offices of some kind.

Tina craned her head back. "Which one of these catwalks do you think Jeff Corbett fell from?"

"I have a feeling we're going to find out," Oscar said grimly. "Let's use the thermal cam in here. We'll set it up on one of the higher platforms to get a fuller view. Assuming it's safe to get up there."

Stairs were always one of the most nerve-wracking parts of exploring abandoned buildings. At least these were made of solid steel grating instead of rotting wood—but that didn't mean none of the rusting iron bolts weren't ready to snap the moment they had weight on them.

"I'll stay down here," Tina said. She glanced at Nigel. "I'm not a fan of heights."

"Chris and I will go," Oscar decided. "Unless you feel some need to climb up there, Nigel?"

He looked as though he wanted to go...but shook his head. "There's not much I can add at this juncture."

"You can be in charge of calling for an ambulance if something gives way," Chris said.

Nigel paled and took out his phone, as if expecting to have to call at any second. Then he frowned. "There's no service."

"That's not unusual out here," Oscar said. "Not many towers, plus I think the mountains block the signal. Don't look so worried," he added. "We're going to be careful. We're professionals, remember?"

As usual, Oscar went first, on the theory that if the stairs would hold him, they would certainly hold Chris. He set his feet close to the wall, taking each step slowly.

The first set of stairs and catwalk were firm, so he signaled to Chris, who had their camera on their shoulder, filming. "Let's go as high as we can," he said, once Chris had joined him.

Grit crunched under their boots as they made their way down the catwalk to a second set of stairs. These were steady as well, and Oscar began to hope the place was in better shape than it had looked from the outside.

Until the steel of the third and final staircase groaned when he was halfway up.

Oscar froze instantly, senses straining. There was no movement, no treacherous bending of a bolt about to tear free of the stone wall it had been driven into so long ago.

"Boss?" Chris called up, though their tone remained calm.

"It still feels solid." He shifted his weight, but nothing else moved. "Let's go carefully, though."

There was another groan or two as he finished making his way up, but nothing more. The steel had been heated in the summer and cooled in the winter, with nothing heavier than a raccoon on it for over fifty years. Probably it was just imperceptibly flexing back into shape.

He hoped.

As he stepped onto the highest catwalk, a wave of dizziness and nausea instantly swept over him. The room seemed to spin, and for a moment he was certain he felt

something strike him from behind, even as shouts of alarm sounded from all sides.

Then his legs went out from under him, and he collapsed to the catwalk.

CHAPTER NINE

“OSCAR!” Nigel shouted, his heart seizing as Oscar slumped on the treacherous catwalk high above. He started for the stairs, but Tina grabbed his arm.

“Wait!” she ordered. “Chris is on it!”

Chris put down their camera, then dashed up the stairs, the steel ringing and groaning beneath their boots. They dropped down by Oscar, grabbing his chin and tilting his head back to look in his face.

Oscar seemed to come out of his daze. He pulled away, then clasped Chris’s hand. “I’m okay.”

Relief battled with concern. “You should come down,” Nigel called.

“In a minute.” Oscar’s voice sounded stronger. “Chris, get the tripod and thermal camera set up.”

“What happened?” Chris asked worriedly.

“Just a moment of dizziness,” Oscar replied. “Don’t worry, I’ll tell you later.”

“He sensed something,” Tina murmured to Nigel.

It seemed likely. He watched anxiously while Chris set up the camera, and Oscar drank from a water bottle. Once the camera was in place, Chris pulled a canister of salt from his backpack and poured a circle around it. It was a preventative measure to keep any spirits from draining the battery, but Nigel wasn’t sure if it would work this time, given how much salt fell through the open grating.

Once they were both back down to ground level, Nigel resisted the urge to hurl himself at Oscar. “You gave us a turn,” he said instead, putting a hand to Oscar’s shoulder.

Oscar’s mouth quirked slightly. “I gave myself a turn, if that’s any consolation.”

“Not particularly.”

“Where to next?” Tina asked.

“I’d suggest we make for the powerhouse, stopping at any other buildings on the way to look for places to set up the extra cameras.” Nigel glanced at Oscar for confirmation.

Oscar grabbed up the equipment he’d put down for the climb to the catwalk. “Sounds good.”

As they stepped out of the distillery building into the pale winter daylight, the fine hairs on the back of Oscar’s neck prickled.

They were being watched; he was more certain of that than ever.

He cast about at the ruined buildings, the winter-gray overgrowth, the steep slope of the mountain dominated by the ancient oak. Nothing.

At least, nothing visible.

The original buildings were clustered tightly together, so it was only a short distance to the powerhouse. Its brick smokestack towered above every other structure on the lot, still standing solid against the overcast sky. If it had been spring or summer, likely chimney swifts would have been swooping in and out. But in the dead of winter, the stack was as abandoned as everything around it.

The door opened onto a long, large hall. To one side, grimy windows let in thin light; one of them had broken, and vines reached inside like grasping hands. From above, large metal chutes, constructed in pairs, fed into what looked like some

sort of enclosed bin with large grinding teeth at the bottom. The air had a chill in it that seemed deeper than outside.

“I wonder what all of this did?” Nigel said, the beam of his headlamp sweeping over the corroding machinery.

“Coal feeders,” Tina said, pointing at the chutes. “They’re feeding into the pulverizers, to reduce the chunks before going into the boiler, which is probably on the other side of that wall. Judging by the layout of the building, the turbine hall is probably above us.” She grinned at his startled expression. “What? Oscar is into old houses; I’m into power plants.”

“Nerd,” Chris said as they stopped to snap some still pictures of the manufacturer’s nameplates on various pieces of equipment. Tina stuck her tongue out at them.

A loud clanging sound echoed from above.

Everyone froze and fell silent. “What was that?” Tina whispered after a long moment when nothing else happened.

Chris shook their head. “It almost sounded like someone dropping a tool on the floor above.”

“Could someone be in here?” Nigel asked. “Someone living, I mean.”

“Only if they hiked in instead of drove,” Oscar said. He looked around carefully, then made for the steel stairs leading up to the next level. “I’m going up.”

Nigel grabbed his sleeve. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

Oscar swallowed and put his foot on the metal grating of the stairs. It felt solid, so he went up another two steps.

A set of quiet footsteps, barely audible, crossed the floor above, just out of sight of where he stood.

Gooseflesh rose on his arms, and he swallowed hard. “Hello?” he called. “Is there someone else here? We’re not here to hurt you.”

Only silence answered. But every sense screamed at him that someone was present, was *right there* just out of sight.

Oscar took a deep breath—and charged up the rest of the stairs.

Weak sunlight fought through the grime coating the overhead skylights, and the windows puncturing the walls—dim, but enough for him to see most of the room clearly.

No one was there.

“No one up here,” Oscar called down. “No one living, anyway.”

Nigel shivered. They’d all heard the clang and the footsteps; there had definitely been a presence above them just now.

“Is it safe to come up?” Chris called.

“Yeah, it’s solid.”

This flight was shorter than the ones in the distilling room and let out onto a concrete floor at the top. Pipes ran up—or down?—through the large opening in the floor that accommodated the stairs, and there was a matching opening on the other side of the room, though with less pipes. In the center was the turbine itself, its inner workings hidden behind thick steel.

Chris half-circled the turbine to get some footage, before swapping out the camera to get some still shots. “Is it just me, or is this place oddly clean?” they asked.

Nigel ran his boot over the smooth concrete. There was some grit, but less than they’d seen in the distilling room. “The windows up here are intact and there aren’t any open doors—perhaps not as much dust blows in?”

“That’s a good possibility,” Oscar agreed. “Unless Edwin Corbett is spending his afterlife sweeping up.”

Nigel looked around. Within the turbine hall, there was an enclosed brick room with windows looking out into the hall itself. “Tina, do you know what that room is?”

“The control room,” she said confidently. “Hey, Chris, there might be some cool shots in there for you.”

“On my way there next.”

Nigel approached Oscar. “Do you want to set up the laser grid or night vision camera in here?”

“Hold up a minute.” Oscar put a hand on Nigel’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “I know we have a job to do, but take a second to appreciate how cool this place is.”

Nigel blinked, then looked around. “I suppose?”

“Well, maybe it’s not for everyone.” Oscar took a step forward, gesturing at the turbine. “But this is one of the reasons we decided to ghost hunt in abandoned buildings. People built these places, sometimes a long time ago, and worked in them, and improved on them...and then left, for one reason or another. But the buildings are still here, slowly crumbling back into dust. Still holding onto the memories of those people, maybe long after they’ve passed on.”

Nigel was silent for a moment, absorbing Oscar’s words. This was one of the things he loved about Oscar—the way he looked at things, his appreciation for the weight of history. “I hadn’t thought about it that way,” he said at last.

“Yeah, well.” Oscar shrugged. “Maybe I’m weird...”

“No, I like the way you look at things.” Nigel said, smiling up at him. “Thank you for sharing it.”

Oscar gave him a quick kiss, more like a brush of the lips. “I’m thinking the night vision camera.” He frowned. “It would help to know where Edwin Corbett was electrocuted.”

“Tina might have an idea. I’ll ask her.”

Nigel crossed the hall and stuck his head into the control room. A bewildering number of metal control panels greeted him; the instrumentation looked as though it dated from the 1940s at the latest. Chris was eagerly photographing the peeling paint, old dials, and toggle switches.

Tina stood at one of a series of desks—stations?—in the center of the room, ruffling through an old logbook of some

kind. She looked up when he cleared his throat.

“Where was the most likely place for Edwin Corbett to have been electrocuted?” he asked. “Can you guess?”

She thought for a long moment. “The switching room, I suppose,” she said slowly. “Where the manual breakers are.”

“And that would be...?”

“Adjacent to the turbine hall.” She stepped out of the room, Nigel following, and pointed to a door in the opposite corner. “Probably there. Let’s take a look.”

Through the door lay a long corridor that ran alongside the wall of the turbine hall as she’d predicted. Unlike every other room they’d been in, this one had only a single window at each end, whose grimy panes barely permitted any light to enter.

Nigel switched his headlamp on to reveal a dreary sight. One side was completely lined with metal panels set with dials, knobs, and heavy breakers. Their yellowish paint peeled, tiny flakes forming piles on the floor.

The air of the long room carried a deep chill, and he wished he’d thought to bring a scarf. “We should tell Chris to put the night vision camera at one end,” he suggested.

“He’ll want to get some shots of this,” Tina said, reaching to touch one of the panels.

There was an unexpectedly loud crackle of static electricity, and she yanked her hand back with a startled shout. “Fuck!”

“Are you all right?” Nigel asked, at the same time Oscar called from the main hall: “Tina?”

“I’m fine!” she shouted back, wringing her hand.

A moment later, Oscar stepped inside the hallway. His eyes widened—was he sensing something they couldn’t? “What happened?”

“Just static electricity,” Tina replied. “Dry winter air, metal...” she trailed off, staring at her hand.

A feeling of dread settled in Nigel's gut. "Tina?"

Silently, she held out her hand. On the tip of the finger that had touched the panel was a bright, red burn.

CHAPTER TEN

“THERE’S no electricity to any of these buildings, and the turbine certainly isn’t running,” Tina said while Oscar applied burn cream from their first aid kit to her finger. “It had to just be static...”

“But normal static wouldn’t cause an injury to the skin like that,” Nigel replied.

Oscar glanced up at his boyfriend, who stood a few feet away, arms folded over his chest and a worried expression on his face. They’d retreated to the turbine hall to tend to Tina’s burn, but Oscar could still feel...something.

A presence. Not as strong as in the switching hall, but definitely there. Waiting to see what they would do next, maybe.

“We shouldn’t go back into the switching hall, except to set up the camera,” he decided. “I’ll go in with Chris, and have some salt in hand, just in case.”

“I don’t like this,” Nigel said.

Tina held up her bandaged finger. “For the record, I’m not a fan either.”

“These ghosts are getting very aggressive very fast.” Nigel stared worriedly into the shadows just outside the circle of their lights. “The situation is getting dangerous; someone could get seriously hurt. And the longer we’re here, feeding the spirits our energy, the worse it will get.”

“I know.” Oscar bit his lip. “The rest of you should go back to the van and wait for me there. I can set up the cameras

—”

“Like hell,” Chris objected.

“I’m not leaving you here alone,” Nigel said with a scowl.

“Let’s just hurry and finish up, and then we can all go back to the van together,” Tina suggested.

Oscar hesitated. Nigel was right; a ghost causing a physical injury like a burn, even a mild one, was a bad sign. Doubly so, given what had happened to Mamaw. But he couldn’t just leave, and it seemed none of the others were willing to sit on the sidelines. “We’ll make it quick, then.”

Oscar and Chris worked fast, Chris setting up the camera while Oscar stood watching the seemingly empty hall. But if Edwin Corbett was lurking, he didn’t do anything further to disturb them. Still, he was glad it only took a minute or so to get the camera in place, pour the salt circle around it, and get back out.

Their final destination, and the one he’d been dreading the most, was the aging warehouse. Oscar felt his steps slowing as they approached, then stop altogether just outside the rotting wooden door.

“We don’t know what’s inside,” he said, “but please, everyone, be careful. Remember the film—something happened that worried Mamaw in here. And as soon as she left...”

Nigel moved closer to his side, as if determined to protect Oscar from the same fate. Tina put down her backpack and pulled out her canister of salt. “Locked and loaded. Anything that tries to mess with us is going to get a face full of good old sodium chloride.”

Oscar grinned, some of the weight lifting from his shoulders. Whatever might be waiting inside, his team had his back.

And he had theirs. He took a moment to strengthen his shields, imagining a flood of white light filling him from above. If anything tried to latch on to him, or to anyone else, it was going to have a fight on its hands.

“Let’s go,” he said, and opened the door.

The aging warehouse was an enormous brick structure, but where once light had streamed through the many glass windows, now there were only shadows. Trees and vines had grown close against the outside walls, covering most of the windows in a gray blanket.

Once inside, Oscar panned his headlamp slowly across the vast space. At one time it must have been filled to the ceiling with barrels of whiskey, the alcohol gradually absorbing color and flavor from the charred oak interiors. Now all that remained were piles of broken, rotting boards that looked as to have been part of the storage racks, and a smaller pile of abandoned barrels in one corner.

“Is it just me, or is this place creepy?” Chris asked.

“Very creepy,” Tina agreed. “I’d go so far as to say downright spooky.”

“Do you sense anything, Oscar?” Nigel asked urgently.

Oscar took a deep breath and concentrated. It took a moment, but he did sense...something. Someone.

“Over there,” he said, pointing toward the opposite end of the warehouse. “I think someone is there. But they don’t feel hostile. More...curious? Hopeful?”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Tina said with a frown. “I mean, going by the footage from your grandmother’s experience...”

Oscar shrugged. “I don’t feel anything hostile in here with us. But let’s keep our guards up anyway.” Just in case, he took a moment to ground and center again, and to reinforce his mental image of his old football equipment and its protection. The sense of watching eyes faded slightly, but he knew they hadn’t left.

“Should we get some footage?” Chris asked. “In case you decide we should put it on our channel later.”

Might as well; no harm done if he decided against making this public. “Go for it.”

Chris focused the camera on him. “This must be weird,” they said. “We’re going on a tour of ‘places your ancestors died horribly.’”

“It is,” Oscar said, switching to his on-camera voice. “We’re standing in the room where my great-great-great grandfather, Ivan Corbett, was crushed to death by barrels of his own whiskey. Possibly on this very spot,” he added, then wondered if that was too hokey even for a ghost-hunting show. “A few days ago, I didn’t even know he existed. Now, I’m here searching for his ghost.”

Chris gave him a thumbs up, then moved on to capture more footage of the warehouse. Nigel stepped closer to Oscar. “How are you really feeling? In a non-medium capacity, I mean.” He grimaced. “That sounded a lot more formal than I meant.”

“It’s your smooth talk that really swept me off my feet,” Oscar teased. “As to your question...I don’t know. Weird? What happened to Mamaw Fox—to Barbara—has hung over me my entire life. But this?” He turned slowly, the beam of his headlamp failing to pierce the deepest shadows. “I guess I’m proud my ancestors built it, but sorry this is how it ended up. Sad they died before their times.”

Nigel nodded. “That’s a lot of feelings.”

“Tell me about it.” Oscar hesitated...but nothing threatening had come to confront them, and he still didn’t sense anything hostile in the warehouse. “I’d like to be alone for a few minutes, if you don’t mind.”

“Is it safe?”

“I think so.” Oscar gave his arm an affectionate squeeze. “I promise I’ll let you know the second anything changes.”

“Okay. I’ll corral the others and we’ll start setting up the laser grid and the camera.”

Once he had gone, Oscar looked over the space once again, wondering where the accident that took Ivan Corbett’s life had happened—and what had caused it. Had some unseen

hand loosened a bolt, or a strap, or given an unsteady barrel an extra push?

Casting his mind back to the bout of dizziness he'd had in the distilling room, he felt nearly certain that something had pushed him. Not in real life—but had he caught some fragment of Jeff Corbett's dying memories?

Ordinarily, he would have cautioned himself against jumping to conclusions. But his family had been dying, or at least been hurt, at twenty-five year intervals here for the last one-hundred and fifty years. And they didn't have long to figure out what was going on.

"Ivan Corbett," he whispered into the deepest shadows of the room, where he sensed the presence. "I'm your great-great-great grandson. Blood of your blood, and that still means something in these hills. I need your help, before whatever killed you does the same to my dad or me.

"So please, help me and my friends to figure this out. Tell me what's killing us and help me stop it. Please."

He stood still for a long moment, breath steaming in the cold. But if Ivan answered, Oscar didn't hear it.

They set up the second-to-last night vision camera at a distance, beneath the shelter of a partly collapsed building that might have once been used for administration. The structure itself was in far too bad shape to go inside, so Chris pointed the camera out toward the cluster of original buildings, just in case some outside activity showed up.

"And even if it doesn't," Chris said, "maybe we'll get some cool footage of animals, like deer or something."

"Probably; there are enough of them around here," Oscar agreed. God, he hoped some of the cameras caught some activity, anything to tell them where to concentrate their in-depth investigation tomorrow night.

The last camera was set up at the spring house, which struck Oscar as the most peaceful place on the property. It was a single-story stone building, and remained mostly intact despite the depredation of years.

The interior was just as it had been in Mamaw's time: a metal railing surrounded an opening roughly the same size and shape as a swimming pool. Though a thin skin of ice clung here and there at the edges, the water within had enough natural movement to keep it from freezing over, at least in these temperatures.

An almost refreshing feeling seemed to fill the air, and Oscar noticed everyone else visibly relax once inside. "Mamaw said this is where they got the water for the whiskey," he said, while Chris eagerly snapped pictures.

"You'd think they would have used the creek," Nigel remarked.

"The creek would have been needed for the condensers in the powerhouse," Tina replied. "And, unless there are some sort of dangerous mineral contaminants, the spring would be a purer source. We could probably drink out of it right now and be fine. Barbara did, after all."

"It's a shame this is just sitting here." Oscar could almost imagine the spring house restored, people laughing as they strolled along the concrete floor, drinks in hand. Perhaps drawing up a bucket of the water itself, using it to toast each other's good health.

He shook his head sharply. Now his imagination really was running away with him. "Let's set up the last night vision camera and head out. We need to get over to Josh's to pick up the gear Ms. Montague sent us."

Josh lived in a small house at the end of a long drive, whose ramshackle pavement had been patched and patched again. The wooden structure looked old, and couldn't have had more than four small rooms total, but the paint was bright and neatly trimmed rose bushes surrounded it. On the tiny porch was a pile of packages of varying sizes.

Josh opened the door and came out as they pulled up. “I’ve got your deliveries right here,” he said. “I’ll help you load them.”

“You’ve done enough,” Oscar protested, to no avail as Josh immediately picked up one of the boxes.

“Just tell me what this is all for, and we’ll be even,” Josh said with a grin.

“Fair trade.” Oscar grabbed a box of his own and followed Josh. “We’re ghost-hunting at the abandoned distillery just outside of town.”

“Wow, seriously?” Josh put the box in the back of the van, then stepped back to stare at what remained of the equipment already inside. “I didn’t know you were into that.”

“We’ve got our own show,” Oscar admitted. “I mean, it’s not big, yet, but we’re getting more subscribers all the time.”

“Give me the name of it so I can check it out!” Josh beamed at him as they went back to get the largest package, the one with the generator in it. “That’s so cool!”

“Thanks, man.” They hefted the generator between them and maneuvered it to the van. “Let me give you a business card—it’s got the address for our channel on it.”

They heaved the heavy box in with a grunt. Josh stepped back and wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. “So what does that have to do with me having to take shipments of stuff for you?”

Oscar’s sigh plumed in the cold air. “Because my dad is dead-set against it. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t go behind his back, but...let’s just say this is a now-or-never sort of thing.”

Josh frowned a little, but nodded. “Yeah, I remember you saying your dad was one of the church-going folks who don’t hold truck with anything supernatural.”

“It wasn’t the church-going part so much as, well. Other stuff.” Oscar shrugged awkwardly.

“I can’t wait to see your videos. Not that I want to go poking around looking for ghosts myself,” Josh added, holding

his hands up, as if Oscar might be on the verge of inviting him along.

Oscar chuckled. “You have to be a little crazy to do it, I guess.”

They stepped away from the van to give the others room. “I hate to ask you another favor,” Oscar said.

“Not a problem,” Josh replied immediately.

“We need to go back to the site tomorrow and do an overnight investigation. I thought...if it’s okay with you, I thought I’d tell my dad we were all coming over here to drink beer and shoot the shit. Then send him a text sometime later and say we had too much to drink and are just going to crash with you.”

Josh laughed. “This really is just like high school, when we’d tell our parents we were staying at each other’s houses, then go out by the old quarry and drink.”

“We were lucky we didn’t drown that night we polished off the Jack Daniels and went skinny dipping.”

“I couldn’t even look at the stuff for years after,” Josh said with an exaggerated grimace. Then his mouth softened, and he met Oscar’s gaze. “I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed you, until I saw you again. Is that weird?”

“You’re welcome to drive down and visit any time. And you’ve got my phone number now.”

“True.” Josh shuffled his feet and glanced at the others, who were busy securing everything in the van. “So, uh, are you seeing anyone?” he asked in a lower voice.

Hadn’t he said...? Hell, no wonder Nigel had been giving him a funny look when they first ran into Josh. “Oh, uh, yeah, sorry, Nigel and I—”

“Oh! Uh, sorry.” Josh took a quick step back, his face flushing. “I didn’t mean—”

“I know; I know.” Oscar’s own cheeks went hot, so he quickly changed the subject. “Thanks, man, for everything. I really appreciate it.”

“Any time.” Josh stuck out his hand, and Oscar shook it. “Watch out for the ghosties, okay?”

Oscar laughed, as if the situation was as light as Josh believed. “Will do.”

He walked back to the van. Nigel squinted at him suspiciously. “What were you two talking about?”

Oscar slung his arm around Nigel’s shoulders and kissed the top of his head. “How handsome my boyfriend is, of course.”

Chris made an exaggerated gagging sound, and Tina rolled her eyes. “Get in the van, lovebirds,” she said. “Or we’re stealing it and going on a road trip to Baja.”



That evening, Nigel shut himself in the upstairs bathroom while Oscar and the others distracted Scott with whatever non-ghost-related anecdotes they could come up with.

Lisa Fox had come through yet again. While they were gone for the day, she’d made a few phone calls to chat with relatives, and managed to get the number for the nursing home where David Armstrong, husband of the late Julie, now resided.

Hoping it wasn’t too late—at what time did the residents of a nursing home go to bed, anyway?—Nigel dialed the number. After a few rings, a tired-sounding woman answered.

“Hi, is David Armstrong available?” Nigel asked.

“Let me check,” the woman said, seeming to perk up. “He doesn’t get many calls; I’m sure he’ll be glad to hear from you if he’s still up.”

Nigel felt a wince of guilt; he was about to not only lie to an old man, but bring up one of the worst days of his life.

A few minutes passed, then the bland hold music stopped, there was the click of transferring lines, and a creaky voice said, “Hello?”

“Hello, is this David Armstrong?”

“That’s my name; don’t wear it out.” The old man chuckled at his own joke.

“This is Dr. Nigel Taylor—I’m dating your cousin Oscar Fox?” His nerves turned everything into a question. “Scott Fox’s son?”

“Little Oscar!” Armstrong exclaimed. “I followed his career—such a shame he didn’t stick it out, he could’ve gone to the NFL.”

Nigel silently bristled; football had never been Oscar’s goal, just a means to get a scholarship. Keeping his annoyance out of his voice, he said, “I’m sure you’re right. The reason I’m calling is, his mom and I have been working on some genealogical research together.”

“Building a family tree to give to Oscar? I’m sure he’ll love that.”

“Exactly,” Nigel lied. “I’m not sure how much you can help, but since you were married to Julie Corbett...?” He let the question linger, hoping Armstrong would fill it in.

“Poor Julie.” Armstrong’s voice grew wistful. “I haven’t celebrated a single Thanksgiving since she died. Just doesn’t feel like a happy time anymore.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t.” Nigel felt the stab of guilt again, but pressed on. “You were out on a hike together, correct?”

“That’s right.” Armstrong sighed. “It was a beautiful day—cold but clear, perfect for hiking. Julie loved the outdoors—we both did. She said she wanted to show me something, so we pulled off the main road a little ways and started up an old road that wasn’t used by anybody anymore.”

Nigel held his breath; he’d expected to have to pry harder for Armstrong to start talking.

“Like I said, it was a beautiful day,” Armstrong went on. “The leaves had passed the peak of color, but there were still plenty on the trees and the ground, both. Like walking through a kaleidoscope.”

He trailed off, so Nigel prompted, “What happened?”

“There was some kind of old factory? I don’t remember rightly...”

“A distillery,” Nigel filled in.

“Right, that was it! You know more than I do, young man, maybe I should be asking you questions instead.” Armstrong laughed his wheezy laugh again. “We didn’t go in, of course—didn’t want to trespass.”

Nigel sat up straighter. “You didn’t go inside any of the buildings?”

“No, like I said, we weren’t sure who owned them these days. You don’t just go traipsing around on other people’s property.”

“No, no, of course not.”

“Anyway, Julie said her dad had owned it, inherited it from somebody, I don’t remember now. He wasn’t really interested, and the business just kind of died or got sold off or something. The mountain by it was pretty, and Julie wanted to hike up a little ways, to look at the place from above. So we started up, and that was when the weather turned.”

This was something new. “What happened?”

“Weather comes in fast in the mountains—real fast. Keep that in mind, if you ever go for a walk up there.”

“I will.”

“It went from sunny to overcast. Got real windy, and started spitting sleet. We...we got separated...” The old man’s voice suddenly began to shake.

“Separated?” Nigel asked gently.

“I don’t know how it happened!” Anguish twisted the words. “She was right there, and then she wasn’t! I—I got turned around somehow. The trees were swaying, and it was so cold, and I called and called for her, but she didn’t answer. I don’t know how long I wandered around on that damn

mountainside until I...until I found her.” He let out a long breath. “She was already going cold.”

“I’m sorry,” Nigel said sincerely. “That must have been a terrible thing to go through.”

“It was.” Armstrong was silent for a long moment, then said, “I’m sorry, young man, that wasn’t why you called, I’m sure.”

It was, but Nigel couldn’t exactly say that. “Thank you for sharing it with me. Was there anything else your wife told you about the distillery, or about the family’s time owning it?”

“Not that I recall. I imagine you’d be better off looking at the letters than talking to me, though.”

Nigel’s heartbeat quickened. “Letters?”

“Yes, the letters.” Armstrong sounded puzzled. “After Julie passed, I tried to give them to Scott. He didn’t want them, so I ended up donating them to the library there in Marrow. I don’t know what’s in them, but some of them were real old, from the 1800s even. I figured you’d have already looked at them as part of your genealogical research.”

Nigel tamped down on another surge of annoyance directed at Scott. “I didn’t know about them.”

“Then I guess your call wasn’t for nothing,” Armstrong said with a chuckle. “It’s been real nice talking to you, but the nurse just brought in my evening meds. Tell Scott and Lisa to give me a call, will you? I’d love to catch up with them.”

“I will,” Nigel promised. “Thank you for taking my call, Mr. Armstrong.”

Lowering his phone, he stared blankly at the flower design on the shower curtain. Julie had died in very odd circumstances...not at the distillery itself, but on the slope overlooking it.

Which confirmed that whatever stalked the Corbett family had a longer reach than he’d hoped. Oscar was right—they needed to get to the bottom of this fast, before something happened to either him or Scott.

As for Julie herself...the three Corbett men who had died on the property still haunted it. Had she been free to pass on to the other side, or did she still wander the mountainside, searching fruitlessly for her husband?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I GUESS Mrs. Simpson didn’t know about the letters,” Oscar said the next day, as he steered the van around a winding curve. They weren’t quite on the mountainside, but were certainly at its foot and climbing fast.

Nigel sat in the passenger seat, gloved hands loose in his lap. “I don’t like that Julie died away from the distillery.”

“She was close, though,” Tina offered from the back. “On the property, or at least, I imagine the distillery owned some of the acreage around it.”

Oscar didn’t answer. As far as he was concerned, Nigel’s conversation with Julie’s widower confirmed his every fear. Dad was in danger if they couldn’t put a stop to this.

Which was, hopefully, where Mamaw’s old friend Sharon would come in.

As predicted by Mrs. Simpson, Sharon Griffith’s name and address was in the phone book Mom and Dad kept by their landline. A quick call confirmed she still lived there and was more than happy to talk to them.

The house they pulled up to was made of brick, probably from the 1950s. It sat just a few yards from a nearly identical house on one side, and a much older farmhouse on the other. Likely all three houses belonged to the Griffith family, built back in a time when young folk stayed in Marrow instead of leaving for better prospects.

Just beside the front walk stood a weathered pole with a number of dowels set into it at upward angles. Cobalt blue

bottles had been placed on each dowel.

“A bottle tree,” Nigel said, pushing his glasses up higher on his nose and peering at it. “Meant to trap ghosts and other spirits. They’re usually seen in the low country, though of course people move around and bring their traditions with them.”

“Do they work?” Chris asked skeptically. “I mean, do ghosts actually get stuck in the bottles?”

“I have no idea,” Nigel said. “I wouldn’t think so, based on what we know about spirits and energy, but they’ve never been subjected to any scientific tests that I’m aware of.”

“We’ll give them a try when we have more time,” Oscar said, opening the door to the van. “For now, let’s concentrate on why we’re here.”

The door opened as they approached the porch, followed by the screen door. An old woman with pure white hair and the stooped posture of someone who worked hard all her life, stepped out to greet them.

“Little Oscar Fox!” she exclaimed, beaming. “Come in; come in. I’ve been expecting you for years.”

“Ms. Griffith, what did you mean, when you said you’ve been expecting me?” Oscar asked a short time later.

They sat in the small, somewhat dingy, living room. Since the old folks were never without ice tea, no matter the season, she’d poured them each a tall glass. Oscar took a sip, and the strong, sweet flavor took him straight back to his childhood.

“Don’t be so formal, Miss Sharon is fine,” she chided him. She shuffled slowly around to an armchair set near the wood-burning stove and lowered herself into it carefully. “As for why I expected you—well, you come from a line of gifted people, even if your daddy wants to pretend otherwise. I thought you might end up with at least a touch of it. Am I wrong?”

“No ma’am, you aren’t.” Oscar’s pulse quickened slightly—a *line of gifted people*. A heritage he’d never known about. He had a sudden vision of a chain of shadowy figures, stretching back unbroken into some distant past. “You knew my mamaw.”

“Barb was my best friend, God rest her soul.” Miss Sharon glanced up at the cross hanging on the wall. “I knew her mamaw as well—Miss Virginia was a real mountain granny, the old kind.”

“How so?” Nigel asked.

“She’d help bring babies into this world nice and safe, help those folks on their way out go as easy as possible, and everything in between. And if those who’d passed on got stubborn about hanging around, she had some tricks to make them move along.” Miss Sharon’s eyes grew unfocused. “She knew how to turn the evil eye, summon your true love with a silver knife in the moonlight, set a broken leg, and cure a cough.” Her gaze sharpened and she looked at Oscar. “Back when she was a young woman, it wasn’t so easy to go to the doctor or the hospital, even if folks could afford it, which most couldn’t.”

A hollow ache of regret opened up in Oscar’s chest, for all the knowledge lost. “She sounds amazing.”

“I was a bit scared of her, truth be told.” Miss Sharon chuckled. “Not for any real reason, you know, just because I was young and she was a fierce old woman. And oh how some people talked about her!” She shook her head, laughing. “This won’t be much of a scandal to you young folks, but no one ever knew who fathered Miss Virginia’s daughter. She took that secret to the grave—though I suppose these days, you could do a test and go to one of those genealogy sites and figure it out.”

“That would be my great-grandmother? The daughter, I mean?”

“Millie was her name—I think it was short for Millicent, though I never heard anyone call her anything other than Millie. Yes. She learned a lot at Miss Virginia’s knee, but she

was more interested in boys. Not that I blame her, lord knows I was the same when I was young.” She smiled wistfully. “According to Barb, Millie and Miss Virginia had a falling out over Millie’s choice of husband.”

Oscar swallowed. “Because she was marrying a Corbett, and the family is cursed.”

Miss Sharon’s eyes sharpened. “So that’s what brings you here. I thought it might be.”

Oscar took a deep breath, but there was no way to soften his words—and he didn’t think she’d appreciate the attempt anyway. “We found the film you took that day at the distillery.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, the lids thin and crinkly with age. Then she looked over to the cross again, as if asking for strength. “The worst day of my life. Sometimes I wonder...if I’d tried to talk her out of it...”

“Something would have happened anyway.” Nigel leaned forward. “There’s a twenty-five year cycle, which hasn’t been broken since the distillery was built. Someone in the family dies at the end of each one. Barbara was the only exception, though of course she was...injured.”

Miss Sharon looked startled, then glanced worriedly at Oscar. “It’s this year,” he replied to the unspoken question in her eyes. “Which ends tomorrow, so we’re in a bit of a hurry here. If there’s anything you can tell us, anything at all, it could help.”

“First, tell me: do you have the gift?”

It felt strangely like bragging about something he hadn’t earned. “Yes.” Oscar quickly gestured at the others. “We, uh, we go into old buildings and look for ghosts. Until recently I thought I might be crazy, seeing things that weren’t there...”

He trailed off at her scowl. “That’ll be your daddy’s doing,” she said with surprising venom. “He turned his back on his family, on Miss Virginia and Barb.”

“That’s not fair,” Oscar protested. “He was just a kid at the time. He didn’t know about his mother’s gift, about any of it.”

Just that she was taken away from him.”

She didn't seem mollified, but said, “It was wrong of me to talk bad about your daddy to your face. My mama, God love her, would tan my hide if she was still with us.”

“It's okay, I just need to know what happened.” He leaned forward. “I have some training—I'm still pretty new to things, but unfortunately we don't have time for me to get any more experienced.”

“Needs must when the devil drives,” she agreed. “As for what happened, I'm not sure what I can tell you that wasn't on the film. Barb knew there was a curse on her daddy's family, though she didn't know what or why. I think she hoped it wasn't a real curse, you know—just trapped ghosts.” She sighed and took a swallow of her ice tea. “She—we—underestimated Miss Virginia there. That woman knew curses.”

Nigel looked uncomfortable; curses and the evil eye were far afield from an academic study of survival after death. Oscar sympathized, but at this point he was ready to try anything. “How do you remove a curse?”

“The first step is knowing who cast it. Then you have to either get them to lift it, or do something to turn it back on them.”

“That won't be easy, since whoever cast it will be long dead,” Nigel said, a bit testily.

Miss Sharon held up a finger. “Exactly.” She swiveled in her recliner and pointed the finger at Oscar. “So I hope your gift is strong, because you're looking for a ghost.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“WHAT’S THE PLAN, BOSS?” Chris asked, dipping a fry into ketchup.

They’d retreated to the diner to eat what amounted to a combination lunch and dinner, since afterward they planned to return to the distillery. Oscar had been unusually quiet ever since they’d left Sharon Griffith’s house, his eyes dark with contemplation.

“I’m not certain I’m ready to accept the existence of curses,” Nigel said carefully.

Tina looked at him as if he was insane. “Then how do you explain people dying like clockwork every twenty-five years?”

“It isn’t like clockwork,” Nigel objected. “None of them have died on the same day, at least.”

“Oh my god.” She shook her head in exasperation and stole a fry off of Chris’s plate.

Fine, maybe he was being a bit overly pedantic. “Ms. Griffith wants us to look for a ghost. Vengeful ghosts are different than curses.”

“Which ghost? Where can we find it?” Tina countered.

“I don’t know yet,” Nigel snapped. “The answer might be in the Corbett letters held by the library. We need to look there.”

“The library isn’t open on Fridays,” Oscar said. “It’ll have to be tomorrow.”

Nigel looked aghast. “Not open on Fridays?”

“Or Thursdays—didn’t you read the hours when we went in?” Oscar asked. “The county doesn’t have a lot of money, Nigel; services get cut.”

“Oh.” Nigel looked faintly embarrassed. “I suppose I’m used to city libraries.”

Oscar pushed away his barely touched plate. “For tonight, we stick to the original plan. I’ll call my parents and tell them we’re hanging out with Josh. We go to the distillery, set up our command center, retrieve the memory cards from the cameras, and review the footage. Then tonight, after it’s dark, we go in and investigate. With luck, we’ll figure out who was behind the curse tonight and won’t even need the letters. If we can locate their grave, maybe we can do something to stop it.”

“Like what?” Tina asked.

“I don’t know! Hold a seance, figure out what their grudge is. Salt the grave?” Oscar sat back, clearly frustrated.

“I’ll call Dr. Lawson and see if she has any advice,” Nigel said.

Chris finished the last of their fries. “Be right back; I’m going to take the last chance to pee somewhere that isn’t a camp toilet.”

“Good idea,” Tina said, pushing back her chair.

When they were gone, Nigel turned to Oscar. He slid one hand onto Oscar’s knee and squeezed gently. “You didn’t eat much. Are you all right?”

“I’m not, no.” Oscar sat back and put his hand over Nigel’s. “Obviously I’m getting more worried the closer we get to the end of the year. But that’s not all of it. Listening to Miss Sharon made me realize how much I’ve missed out on. I had this whole heritage, maybe unique to Appalachia or even to the family, and it’s just...lost.”

Nigel tried to imagine what that might be like. His knew very little about his own family; his dad had taken off before he was even in kindergarten. As for his mom’s side, the family had a rotating roster of grudges, which meant that at any given time half of his relatives weren’t on speaking terms with the

other half. Easier to just stay away and stay out of drama that didn't have anything to do with him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wish things were different."

"So do I." Oscar's mouth tightened. "I know my dad and papaw were doing what they thought best. I understand they were afraid and traumatized. But right now, I'm glad we're not going home tonight. I'm not sure what I might say if I had to face Dad over the dinner table."

While Oscar and the others settled up inside the diner, Nigel stepped out onto the sidewalk. The cold air bit at his face, and he moved close to the brick wall to shield himself from the wind.

Dr. Lawson answered on the second ring. "Taylor? What's wrong?"

"Maybe I just wanted to wish you a belated Merry Christmas," he said, a little stung by the implication he only called when he needed something. "Or an early Happy New Year."

"You already sent a card," she replied, clearly not buying it. "And you're supposed to be out of town with Fox. Ergo, something has happened, and you need my help."

Nigel's sigh turned into a puff of steam in the frigid air. "I wanted to see if you had any advice for us."

She listened silently while he filled her in on the situation. When he finished, she said, "My advice is to get the hell out of there. If Fox is worried about his dad, take him with you."

"Scott wouldn't come. He won't even talk about ghosts, or his mother, or anything of the sort. The only reason he hasn't thrown us out of the house is because we've been as sneaky as possible." He paused. "And distance might not help."

"All of the deaths you've told me about are tied to the distillery and happened on its property," she countered. "Or at

least very close to it.”

“Oscar won’t take that chance with his dad.” Nigel put a finger in his ear as a truck in desperate need of a new muffler rattled past. “And I won’t take that chance with Oscar.”

“No, I suppose not.” Her tone softened. “In that case, my advice is to find out what grudge this ghost has against the family. If you can figure that out, hopefully you can move it along.”

“We’ll try. Do you have any advice about sending it to the other side if it doesn’t want to go?”

“Oscar managed well enough with that killer at the Matthews house.”

“This situation is a little different,” he pointed out, trying not to snap.

“True enough. If you find out where its body is buried, dirt from its grave would give Oscar an edge when trying to command it.”

“Which means we need a name, so we can try to find a grave.”

“Ask the ghosts at the distillery. Assuming they know. Otherwise, I don’t know what to tell you.”

Damn it. “Thanks anyway.”

Dr. Lawson seemed to hesitate a moment, then asked, “Have you told Patricia about this?”

He thought about lying, but what would be the point? “Yes. We needed equipment, and she bought and shipped it to us.”

“Of course she did,” Dr. Lawson muttered. “Be careful, Taylor. Whatever is in that distillery sounds truly nasty. You’re going to have to work to keep your boyfriend safe.”

“I’m going to insist on every precaution I can think of,” he reassured her.

“I hope it’s enough. Goodbye, Taylor. And good luck.”

Once they arrived at the distillery, Chris retrieved the memory cards and batteries from the cameras, while the rest of them set up a temporary command center in the parking lot beside the van.

“You didn’t hesitate to ask Ms. Montague for anything, did you?” Oscar asked as they unpacked their equipment.

Nigel shrugged. “She’s rich, and probably expensing all of this to one of her businesses anyway. I don’t see any reason not to take advantage.”

They set up a large, cabin-style tent, where Tina would monitor their activities throughout the night. It included a folding table for the laptop and equipment to set up a local wireless network. A small heater, three camp chairs, and a self-inflating air mattress took up most of the remaining space.

Chris returned with the cards and batteries. “The place continues to be creepy as fuck,” they reported, plugging in the batteries. “The battery on the catwalk was totally drained, by the way.”

“The salt circle didn’t work—too many holes in the grate,” Oscar guessed.

“I’ll start reviewing footage,” Tina said.

Chris stretched out on the air mattress. “I’m taking a nap before the fun starts.”

Oscar was too keyed-up to even consider sleeping. “Nigel, you should rest, too; there’s plenty of space in the van now.”

Nigel picked up a blanket and eyed him warily. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure.” Oscar stepped out of the tent and turned to the hillside above them, where the cloven oak loomed. How old was it? How many secrets had it seen, and what could it tell them if it could talk?

Nigel followed him out and zipped up the tent behind them. Then he put a hand on Oscar's arm, tugging him toward the van. "You're not going off on your own," he said firmly.

"I wasn't going to!"

"Good." Nigel slid open the side door and gestured Oscar in, then climbed in after him. "If we snuggle, we won't have to start the van and get the heat running."

"Look at you, saving gas," Oscar teased, stretching one arm out along the back of the seat.

Nigel tucked himself against his side. "Just thinking about the environment," he said, before kissing Oscar.

They made out for a little while; it was nice to be out of everyone's sight for a bit. After a few minutes, Nigel glanced at the closed tent—then let his hand brush across the front of Oscar's pants. He was already hard from their make-out session, and Nigel flashed him a wicked grin. "You know, I've never had sex in a vehicle."

Oscar's heart beat fast, and his blood sang. "First time for everything."

They kissed fiercely, then Nigel shucked off his boots, pants, and underwear. He draped the blanket over them, either to keep warm or to shield them from view in the off-hand chance someone came out of the tent.

Oscar had already pulled out his cock. Nigel straddled him, then slid down, hot, wet, and ready.

It was quick and hungry, Nigel doing all the work, their arms wrapped around each other. Oscar murmured endearments, until Nigel kissed him hard. Then it was all heat and tongues and slick movement, until Nigel groaned and clenched around him. Oscar took that as his signal to let control slip, closing his eyes involuntarily as his hips came almost off the seat.

They clung to one another for a few moments, breath mingling. Then Nigel slid free with a satisfied sound. "I'll nap better after that."

“I’m just a sleep aid to you,” Oscar said with a dramatic hand to his forehead. “Toss me a wipe, will you?”

The van was well-stocked with supplies, including wipes meant to take care of some of the grime from poking around filthy old buildings. They worked just fine in this case as well.

Nigel pulled on his clothes, tucked himself against Oscar with the blanket secured over them, and promptly fell asleep. Oscar leaned his head against the cold glass of the window and drifted a while himself, fading in and out.

Someone knocked on the window. Oscar jerked to full wakefulness, surprised to see the sun had disappeared behind the western mountains.

Chris peered in the window. “Time to get moving,” they said. “Tina’s found something.”



Nigel stood behind Tina’s chair, while Chris and Oscar sat to either side of her. His nerves thrummed with anticipation, all relaxation from the afternoon’s activities evaporated in an instant.

It had been nice, though. Nigel allowed himself a private smile. Sleeping together in the same room as Chris had been a bit frustrating, so he hadn’t been about to pass up the chance for a quick bit of fun.

“The night vision camera in the spring house didn’t pick up anything,” Tina said as she pulled up the clips she’d selected to show them. “So unless something changes, we probably don’t need to spend any more time there.”

“Of course; it was nicest part of the place,” Chris said. “You ever think we’re in the wrong line of work?”

Tina shushed them, before clicking one of the clips into full screen. “This is from the thermal cam in the distilling room,” she said, unnecessarily in Nigel’s opinion, since the picture was in blues and purples. “About an hour after full dark, this happened.”

An even darker blob of blue appeared just to the edge of the camera's view. Then it suddenly flew outward, curving down toward the floor far below.

Like a man falling to his death.

"It repeats twice, roughly every hour." Tina fast forwarded, then stopped. The cold spot went through the same motions without variation that Nigel could see. "The batteries were draining faster than they should have the whole time, and ran out of juice after that."

Nigel pursed his lips. "So what remains of Jeff might just be a repeater, not a true incorporeal personal agency."

"You mean an intelligent haunting?" Oscar asked.

Nigel's cheeks warmed; sometimes the scientific jargon slipped out even when he didn't mean it to. "Yes. As opposed to whatever repeaters are."

Chris looked over their shoulder at him. "What do you mean? I thought they were just, you know, echoes. One moment in time, repeating mindlessly over and over again."

"Maybe?" Nigel spread his hands. "There hasn't been any real scientific study of them. We know some ghosts react to people—intelligent hauntings, as Oscar said. And others don't seem to have any awareness at all, condemned to reenact a specific scenario over and over again without variation. But that doesn't tell us what they *are*. Does the physical world act like a recorder in certain circumstances, replaying a single tape until it finally degrades into nothingness? Or is a fragment of the original personality still caught here, while the rest has moved on?"

"Or," Oscar said uncertainly, "could they be a full person—an incorporeal personal agency—so caught up in a moment of trauma they can't escape?"

Tina shuddered. "That's awful."

"Most people don't think that's the case...but again, where is the proof?" Nigel met Oscar's troubled gaze. "Either way, we should be able to cleanse the area, whether that means

erasing the tape or giving Jeff Corbett the final nudge he needs to move on.”

“At least there’s that.” Oscar turned back to the monitor. “What else have you got for us, Tina?”

“That was the most consistently active location,” she said, minimizing the clip and bringing up another one. The switching hall appeared in colorless night vision. “The powerhouse seemed quiet for most of the night, so quiet I almost missed the one thing that did happen.”

She zoomed in, the picture going grainy. “See this moth?” she asked, pointing at what looked like a blob of lighter color to Nigel. “Now watch.”

The moth flitted around as the clip played. For a few seconds, nothing happened—then a curl of smoke rose from its tiny body. A moment later, the moth had vanished, and only drifting smoke remained.

“What the fuck?” Chris exclaimed, leaning in closer.

Nigel’s pulse thumped at the base of his throat. “We’re absolutely certain there’s no power to any of the equipment?”

“That turbine has been cold for years,” Tina said, twisting around to face him. “And there’s no outside power running to the facility.”

“The spirit of a man who died by electrocution just burned a moth to ash on camera. After burning Tina’s fingertip yesterday.” Nigel folded his arms around himself, feeling a cold that had nothing to do with the outside temperature. “We have to be very, very careful not to feed it any more energy than we have to.”

Chris looked alarmed. “You think it could do the same thing to us?” they asked nervously.

“It would take a lot more to kill us than it would a moth,” Oscar pointed out.

Tina held up her bandaged finger. “That doesn’t mean it won’t hurt.”

“No, you’re right.” Oscar scowled at the swirl of smoke on the paused video. “Fuck. We’re going to have to try and talk to him; he’s strong enough to communicate if he wants to. He might be our best chance at finding out what’s going on here.”

Nigel wanted to argue, but bit it back. This wasn’t just any investigation; this was Oscar trying to keep himself and his father safe. “Then when we go in, we need as much salt as we can carry. Our strongest flashlights.” He ran his hands through his hair. “If only there was some way to add moisture to the air...perhaps a fog machine?”

Oscar stood up and put his hands on Nigel’s shoulders. “Which we don’t have. Calm down, love. We’re going to be careful.”

“If you can convince him you’re one of the family, it might help.” Nigel dropped his arms. “That would be a good idea in any case. They might be more inclined to answer you during an EVP session, or anything else that becomes necessary.”

“See? Nothing to worry about.”

Nigel didn’t answer. The sheer strength of the ghost, to be able to burn a moth to ashes...and that was only using whatever ambient energy was in the powerhouse, plus anything it might have been able to syphon from them when they walked through the day before.

No matter Oscar’s assurances, it worried him. A lot.

“Moving on,” Tina said, minimizing the clip and bringing up another. This image showed the outside of several buildings, including the distilling building and aging warehouse.

Oscar leaned over her. “We picked something up outside?”

“Mostly cute animals.” She pointed to a pair of glowing, ghostly eyes that was soon joined by another, and another. “A small herd of deer passed through, probably heading down to the creek to get a drink.”

“They’re a lot cuter during the day,” Chris muttered.

Tina fast forwarded a bit, then slowed the clip to half speed. “Right here.”

An indistinct orb floated into view from the direction of the creek. It moved across the screen toward the aging warehouse and disappeared.

“Can we see that again, this time at normal speed?” Nigel asked.

Tina replayed the clip; the orb drifted at a steady pace through the view, before vanishing.

He shook his head uncertainly. “Orb evidence can be shaky at best. Most of the time, so-called orbs are just dust.”

“I agree, it isn’t compelling on its own.” Tina replaced the clip with one that showed only pitch black, interrupted by the green dots of the laser grid. “The activity inside the aging warehouse began roughly around three a.m.”

For a long moment, nothing seemed to happen. Then one of the dots disappeared along the edge of the grid, followed by more as something crossed into it.

Chris let out a long, low whistle. “This is amazing.” Then they winced. “Sorry, Oscar, I know these are your ancestors.”

Oscar put a hand on their shoulder. “You’re right, it is amazing, the evidence we’re getting after just one night. I wouldn’t be much of a ghost hunter if I didn’t agree.”

“Keep watching,” Tina said.

The shape moved back and forth, as if pacing. Then it stopped near one edge of the grid.

A second shape appeared opposite.

“Wait, what is that?” Nigel pushed his glasses higher on his nose, as if that would somehow help clarify the situation.

Both shapes remained still for what felt like forever, though it was only measured in seconds on the time stamp. Then, at the same moment, they vanished.

“That’s all for the night,” Tina said, pausing the video. “But I checked the time stamps of this video against the one

from the outside camera. The orb vanishes beside the aging warehouse, and a figure appears inside immediately after.”

Chris looked up. “What does that mean, though?”

Nigel wished they’d had a wider angle shot of the outside, something that would tell them more about where the second apparition had come from. “It means a fourth spirit is lingering in the area,” he said, meeting Oscar’s gaze. “And, for unknown reasons, it decided to pay a visit to Ivan Corbett.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AT NIGEL'S SUGGESTION, Chris moved the outside night vision camera to a place where it would catch the surrounding area rather than the buildings themselves. The unknown spirit had come from the direction of the creek and the hillside, so if it appeared again, perhaps they could get a better idea of where it originated.

Oscar remembered how he'd felt watched, the afternoon they'd arrived at the distillery. As if there was something taking notice of his presence. Could it have been the mysterious fourth ghost? And if so, was this the vengeful entity that had been killing off members of his family for the last hundred-and-fifty years?

Before they began the night's investigation, he took the van and drove just far enough to get a cellphone signal. He sent a text to Mom, telling her they were crashing at Josh's house. He felt bad about lying to her, but he didn't see any other option.

As soon as he arrived back, they got to work. Tina would remain in the command center, keeping an eye on all the cameras. He, Chris, and Nigel geared up, himself and Nigel with head cams and Chris with their main camera. They tested their mics and walkie-talkies, grabbed extra flashlights, and packed salt canisters into their backpacks.

"Since there's a spirit wandering loose out here, we should put a line of salt around the generator and tent before we leave," Nigel said. "We don't want to leave Tina sitting here in the dark with everything drained."

She paled. “You guys head for the building, and I’ll start on that right now.”

“Call us on a walkie-talkie if you need us,” Oscar told her. “We’ll be out here in a flash.”

“Worry about yourselves.” She went to their supplies and hefted up a five-pound box of salt. “I’m about to turn this place into Fort Knox for ghosts.”

The night air had a bite, its cold stinging Oscar’s sinuses and the back of his throat. Clouds covered any hint of moon or stars, the only sounds their breathing and the crunch of their boots on the dirty pavement. He glanced up at the hillside, but nothing moved. Even the huge oak that had given the distillery its name was lost in the darkness.

“Where to first?” Chris asked, breaking the silence.

“I don’t suggest solo sessions,” Nigel said firmly. “Certainly Oscar shouldn’t be left alone at any time.”

A part of Oscar wanted to reflexively protest that he could take care of himself—but that would be stupid. Something had murdered four members of his family and sent a fifth to a mental institution. He didn’t want to become the next victim if he could help it.

“Don’t worry, I have no intention of wandering off by myself,” he said. “I don’t know that we’ll get anything, but let’s try an EVP in the distilling room. If there is anything left of Jeff Corbett besides a memory, maybe we can make contact.”

The darkness inside the old stone building felt somehow thicker than the night outside. Their headlamps and flashlights barely seemed to penetrate the gloom. Oscar’s skin prickled, and he had the overwhelming sense of something holding its breath.

He took a deep breath of his own before centering and grounding, then strengthening his shields as much as possible. Chris had started filming as soon as they stepped inside, so he unclipped his EMF reader and made sure it was in view of the camera.

It flickered and let out a soft beep. “We’re getting some activity already,” Oscar said. He didn’t know if this would ever make it onto their show, but if it did, they at least wouldn’t have to rely completely on voice-over to explain what was happening. “Let’s move toward the area where Jeff would likely have died.”

As they crossed the concrete floor, Chris suddenly swung the camera up. “Whoa, did you see that?”

Oscar’s heart pounded. “See what?”

They peered at the high catwalk, the beam from the camera’s light shaking slightly. “I thought I saw something move out of the corner of my eye.”

“We could try the EVP session up there,” Nigel said, though he sounded less than thrilled by the prospect.

“No. Not unless we don’t have another choice.” Oscar started forward again. “One attack of dizziness that high off the ground was enough. I’m trying *not* to die here, remember?”

Nigel’s pale face went even whiter. “You’re right, I didn’t —”

“It’s okay.” He shot Nigel a reassuring smile. “I’m shielding as hard as I can. Nothing’s going to get through to me.” He hoped.

The EMF let out another chirp—then lit up, all the way into the red. Oscar stopped, staring down at the concrete floor. There was nothing to distinguish the spot in front of him, no dark stain that might be blood, but going by the footage from the night before, this was where Jeff’s body had hit the floor.

It seemed strange to think a member of his family had died right here. His great-uncle had taken his last breaths in this space—then either passed on, leaving behind the imprint of his trauma, or become stuck in it himself.

He looked up into the camera. “This is where Jeff Corbett died, after falling from the catwalk above.” He paused while Chris panned the camera up. “Given these readings, some part of him is still here.”

Oscar cut off the EMF meter. The silence after was almost shocking. “We’re going to try to capture an electronic voice phenomenon, or EVP, on this digital recorder.”

He swapped the meter for the recorder. Taking another breath, he made sure he was grounded and centered, and let any impressions come to him. There was something here; he could feel it.

“I would like to speak to the spirit of Jeff Corbett,” he said in the authoritative voice he’d been practicing in front of the mirror. “My name is Oscar. I’m your great-nephew, through my daddy’s side. If you’re here, can you say your name into the device in my hand?”

The walkie-talkies crackled, making them all jump. Knowing Tina wouldn’t interrupt them without good reason, he clicked his on. “What is it?”

“The thermal cam is showing something coming toward you from the direction of the catwalk.” The tension in her voice was clear even through the low-quality sound of the walkie-talkie.

As she spoke, the already-cold air turned frigid. “Barometric pressure dropping,” Nigel reported, eyes glued to his meter. “Temperature decrease of five degrees.”

“Oscar, it’s right there,” Tina said. “Right behind you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALL OF THE hair on the back of Oscar's neck stood up. At any moment, he expected to feel breath on the back of his neck.

So much for Jeff being a simple repeater.

He pictured his old football gear protecting him, imagined the weight of it, the padding that would keep away anything trying to hurt him. His heart raced, and he breathed in the icy air, searching for calm.

“Can you tell me why you're still here?” he asked.

The cold rolled over him in a wave, nipping any exposed skin. Nigel's eyes were wide with alarm. Hoping he sounded calm and reassuring, Oscar said, “Was your fall an accident, Jeff, or were you pushed?”

The pause for silence in which the ghost might answer felt as though it stretched forever. Oscar's lips were going numb from the cold, but he forced himself to continue. “Who killed you?”

A bolt of anger tore through Oscar, accompanied by a confusion of other emotions: pride, betrayal, the sense of something that belonged to him being torn away.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the emotional storm dissipated. The air seemed to shift, and Nigel said, “The temperature is returning to normal.”

“I'm losing the cold spot on thermal,” Tina reported. “Everything is returning to baseline.”

Oscar let out his breath in a rush and bent over, hands on his knees. Nigel immediately crouched beside him. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” The wild spikes of emotion had left his nervous system confused, his veins jittery with hormones. “It seems Jeff found another way to communicate. I felt...anger, possessiveness...I don’t know, a lot of things at once.” He forced himself upright. “I don’t think Jeff is happy about being dead.”

“He wouldn’t be stuck here if he’d come to terms with it,” Nigel said. His eyes searched Oscar’s face worriedly. “Do you need a break?”

“We don’t have time for me to take a break,” Oscar said with a shrug. “I think that’s all we’re going to get here for tonight. Let’s head to the powerhouse.”

“Oh joy,” Nigel muttered.

Nigel followed behind Oscar, while Chris trailed them, still filming. Even though they needed to get to the bottom of this so-called curse, he wished they could avoid the powerhouse. The ghost of Edwin Corbett was already far too strong, and he couldn’t help but worry they were putting themselves at risk.

Necessary risk, though. He watched Oscar walk in front of him and tried not to think about what might happen if they couldn’t identify the entity that had been killing off the family. One way or another, they had to get answers, and they needed to get them tonight.

The powerhouse seemed far more menacing in the dark—though that might simply have been his own imagination playing tricks on him. “Do you sense anything?” he asked Oscar as they started up the stairs to the turbine hall.

“Not yet,” Oscar replied. “Though I imagine that will change soon, if what just happened in the distilling room is any indicator.”

Nigel suppressed a shudder. The idea of something standing right behind Oscar, something he couldn't see no matter how hard he looked...

This might be his chosen field of study, but that didn't mean ghosts never crept him the hell out.

Oscar came to a halt within the turbine hall. "Let's see if we can get Edwin to join us out here." He glanced at Nigel. "Where we have a better escape route if we need it."

"Good idea. Another EVP?"

"Since this ghost seems to have plenty of energy already, I thought the spirit box might get good results." Oscar turned. "It's in my backpack if you don't mind pulling it out."

Nigel did as asked, then stepped back while Oscar gave a brief explanation of how the spirit box worked to the camera. In essence, the device skipped very quickly between radio frequencies, generating static occasionally interrupted by a blip of sound from active radio stations. A nearby spirit could manipulate the frequencies to form words and communicate.

Oscar held the spirit box in his hand, facing the direction of the switching hall. "Edwin Corbett, if you can hear me, my name is Oscar. I'm your great-great grandson, and I'd like to talk to you."

He switched on the spirit box, and the roar of static filled the air. Even though he knew it was coming, Nigel jumped.

"You can use this device to talk to us," Oscar went on, a bit more loudly to be heard over the static. "Are you here? Can you speak with me?"

The hairs on Nigel's arms and legs prickled, as if at an electrical charge. He bit his lip, unsure if it was his imagination or the presence of a spirit.

"Yes," said the spirit box.

Oscar looked at the camera, then back at the box. "We need more than a single syllable to be sure any answers aren't just an artifact of the channel switching," he said. "Tell us your name, please."

“Edwin Corbett.” Another burst of static. “I am here.”

Oscar swallowed hard. He couldn't see Edwin, but he felt him, lurking only feet away. “Thank you,” he said, and was a bit surprised his voice didn't shake. “Was your death an accident?”

“Killed me.”

It was what he'd expected, but it still chilled him. “Who killed you?” he asked urgently.

Though the words produced by the spirit box were flat, mechanical in quality, he sensed an angry growl behind them. “This is ours.”

Nigel frowned. “What?”

“Can you give me a name?” Oscar asked. “Who killed you?”

“Ours. Doesn't belong to her.”

A smell like burned pork briefly filled the air, then vanished. The hairs on Oscar's arms rose, as if a lightning storm was building all around them, accompanied by a sense of rage. “Who?” Oscar demanded. “Give me a name!”

All of their lights went out in the same instant the spirit box died, plunging them into darkness. The air crackled, tiny sparks of static electricity lighting up as they moved.

“No!” he shouted, bracing himself for an attack. “Nigel, Chris, get out!”

“Get back!” Nigel yelled, followed by what sounded like a handful of dirt hitting the ground.

The presence lessened instantly. Salt—Nigel must have thrown salt. “Hit him again,” Oscar encouraged, groping for the bag of salt in his own pocket.

A dim light appeared from in Chris's hand, even as the walkie-talkies squawked. “Are you all right?” Tina asked.

“Meet us outside with a flashlight, please,” Oscar replied. To the others, he said, “Let’s get down the stairs.”

“And fast—these batteries are almost dead,” Chris said, shaking the flashlight. The light dimmed, brightened, then returned to its original weak glow.

They emerged just as Tina jogged up with a flashlight to guide them back to the tent. “I don’t think much of your relatives,” she told Oscar. “Not very welcoming at all.”

“Or helpful,” Chris added. “Like, just give us a name, buddy!”

“They’re angry,” Oscar said. The night air felt oddly light after the oppressive atmosphere of the powerhouse. “Which might be why they’re still here, instead of moving on.” He turned to Nigel. “That was quick thinking with the salt.”

“We need to be prepared.” Nigel hunched his shoulders against the chilly breeze. “I don’t know that Edwin Corbett would have harmed us, but I saw no reason to give him the chance.”

Chris clapped him on the shoulder. “I’m glad one of us had their hand on the salt.”

“I just wish we’d gotten more information.” Oscar held up the drained spirit box. “He’s very possessive about something, which could also be why he hasn’t moved on.”

“You said Jeff was, too,” Chris said.

“Edwin kept saying *ours*.” Nigel frowned slightly. “Perhaps he meant the distillery. It belongs to your family.”

“Technically not anymore.” They reached the tent and Oscar held open the flap for the rest to go inside. “Though I doubt he cares about the legal technicalities.”

They plugged in their cameras and headlamps, and began to swap out batteries in the flashlights. “Well, after all of that, I can’t wait to see what’s in store for us in the aging warehouse,” Oscar said, striving for a light tone. “Hopefully Ivan is less aggressive than his son.”

“About that.” Nigel scuffed a foot against the floor, looking as if he was preparing for an argument. “I would like to try something new, if you don’t mind.”

“What?” Oscar asked warily.

“Since we’re hoping to get specific information, this would be an excellent opportunity to use a talking board and a planchette.”

Oscar stared at him blankly, but Chris caught on right away. “Wait a minute,” they said, holding up their hands. “You want to use a Ouija Board?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“IT’S NOT A OUIJA BOARD,” Nigel said. “Ouija Boards are manufactured by Hasbro. I made this one myself.”

“You’re splitting hairs.” Oscar popped a final battery into his flashlight and screwed it closed. “Weren’t you the one worried about the danger here?”

Nigel suppressed a sigh of frustration. He’d expected resistance, so there was no need to get annoyed now. “Most of their bad reputation comes from horror movies and sensationalist books.”

Everyone stared at him skeptically. “Is this like the seance idea you had in the Matthews House?” Tina asked.

Heat suffused Nigel’s cheeks. To say the seance hadn’t gone to plan was an understatement. “No,” he snapped. “Oscar has some training now, and we all have more experience.”

Everyone continued to look at him skeptically, so he threw up his hands. “Talking boards were used by mediums for decades without incident. Even after they were manufactured and sold in toy stores, they were just another tool for communing with the dead. Then they gained a reputation for ‘demon summoning’ thanks to Hollywood, and people started getting afraid when they sat down to use one.”

“And ghosts can feed on fear,” Oscar said.

“Especially, shall we say, negative ones.” Nigel gestured vaguely. “Imagine a group of teenagers with their heightened emotions, gathering around a board, scaring themselves half to

death before they even get started. It's like ringing a dinner bell for any hostile entities in the area."

Chris frowned a bit. "So it's less about the board itself, and more about the people using it?"

"Precisely. And because the Ouija Board comes with that cultural baggage, I made my own. It's just a bit of cardboard with letters sharpied on it, but it should work fine."

Oscar considered, then nodded. "Okay. It sounds like it's worth a try."

Chris put a fresh battery in the camera and picked up the tripod. "Grab that standing light, will you?" they said. "If we're going to get dragged into hell, we might as well get some good footage of it."

As Oscar lowered himself into a sitting position on the filthy concrete of the aging warehouse, he reminded himself that Nigel knew his stuff. The history of parapsychology was his specialty; if he said talking boards had been used for a long time without incident, then it was true.

Which didn't mean Oscar didn't have to contend with any of the "cultural baggage," as Nigel called it, that had grown up around them.

Chris manned the camera from inside a generous circle of salt, just in case Ivan became aggressive. Nigel had lit two white candles, both for light and to give Ivan's spirit another source of energy.

Nigel settled across from him and placed his makeshift talking board between them. Perhaps, in an effort to make it visually distinct from the classic Ouija Board, he'd placed the letters in an almost pyramidal shape. "Yes" and "No" were written to either side, with "Goodbye" at the bottom.

"Some of the old talking boards included 'fair' or 'rain,'" he said. "But since we're not asking for agricultural forecasts, I skipped those."

Oscar managed a grin despite his nerves. “I have a feeling my weather app is more accurate anyway.”

“That seems likely.” Nigel produced a small wooden planchette from his pocket. “I ordered this online years ago, but never used it. Handmade, so never touched by the demonic influence of the Hasbro corporation.”

“Ha ha,” Oscar said drily.

“Just remember, the board doesn’t matter, just what you bring to it.”

Right. So no getting spooked. Easier said than done.

Nigel looked a bit concerned. “You remember what to do?”

Oscar took a deep breath, finding his center. He focused on contact with the ground, its solidity beneath him. The great weight of the earth supporting him, supporting everything, its vast strength anchoring him. “Yes.”

“All right, then. Let’s turn off our lights.”

They clicked off their head lamps, and the camera light followed a moment later, leaving only the standing light to indirectly illuminate the scene. The twin candles spread a warm glow over Nigel’s skin, but their unsteady flames made the shadows move and jump.

Oscar breathed deep again. He had this. He’d been training, been practicing. He could do this.

Nigel rested his fingertips on the planchette, and Oscar followed suit.

“Spirit of Ivan Corbett, I’m Oscar, your great-great-great grandson. I’ve come here tonight to speak with you. Draw upon the energy of this circle and move the planchette if you want to communicate with me.”

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the planchette began to tremble under his fingers, as if he was touching some small, living thing. Very slowly but deliberately, it slid across to the board to the “Yes.”

He looked up, met Nigel's gaze. His boyfriend's eyes were bright with excitement, though his expression remained impassive.

"It says 'yes,'" Oscar said aloud, just in case the camera didn't catch it. His breath had quickened, and he tried to slow it down, remain calm and focused. "Ivan, can you tell me why you're still here?"

The wood seemed to warm behind his fingertips as it slid across the cardboard. "M-I-N-E," Nigel spelled as it moved from letter to letter. "Mine."

"What's yours?" Oscar asked. "The distillery?"

Back to YES.

All of these guys were really obsessed with the distillery. That might explain why they were hanging around, but not why they'd died. "Was your death an accident? Or were you killed?"

The candle flames flickered wildly—then went from friendly yellow to a ghastly blue color in an instant.

K-I-L-L-E-D.

"Okay," Oscar whispered. His breath steamed in the air, which seemed to be getting colder by the minute. The blue glow of the flames gave Nigel's skin an unhealthy color, and for a terrible instant Oscar was irrationally convinced he was sitting across from a corpse.

Their walkie-talkies squawked, making them all jump. Chris let out a curse and fumbled for his. "Tina?"

"The night vision camera outside just picked up movement!" she said frantically. "Something's heading your way!"

The planchette rattled beneath Oscar's fingers, then jerked frantically back and forth across the cardboard. "F-I-N-D-H-E-R-B-O-N-E-S," Nigel read, then looked up. "Find her bones?"

"It's disappeared through the wall of the warehouse," Tina yelled.

The planchette bucked like a live thing, and this time it was easy to read what it spelled out.

S-H-E-S-H-E-R-E.

She's here.

The shadows seemed to race in, the candle flames dying to mere sparks in an instant. Nigel clamped his teeth together as the aging warehouse turned cold as a meat locker. The stink of blood mingled with damp earth filled the air, and Oscar jerked back, no doubt sensing it far more acutely than Nigel could.

Icy wind roared through the warehouse like a howl of fury, whipping dust and grit from the floor and making the rafters groan. Oscar yanked the planchette forcefully to GOODBYE.

“Goodbye!” he shouted. “Spirit, I release you—”

An unseen force hurled the board across the room, and the planchette cracked in half.

“Go!” Nigel yelled, scrambling to his feet.

The candles and standing light went out, plunging them into darkness. He groped for the button on his head lamp, but the battery was dead once again.

Damn it, where was Oscar? He reached blindly for his boyfriend, found a hand, and grasped it.

And immediately realized his mistake.

The hand in his was cold as the grave, the fingers hard bone covered with something soft that slipped and squelched beneath his grasp. He let out a cry of fear and disgust and tried to pull away, but the fingers wrapped tight around his own in an implacable grip.

“Get back!” Oscar yelled from somewhere in the darkness.

Something small and stinging hit him in the face; Nigel jerked back, only to realize it was salt. The dead hand let go of

his, and he staggered back so suddenly he tripped and hit the ground.

The camera light switched on, and Nigel flung up an arm against the unexpected light. Chris's face was pale with fear, and they gripped the camera as though it was the only thing keeping any of them safe.

“Nigel!” Oscar's shoes scuffed on the floor; then he was on his knees beside him. “Are you okay?”

Nigel blinked slowly. The furious energy in the warehouse had drained away; the space felt, if not quite empty, at least quiescent. Slickness covered his hand, and he held it up to the light. Gelatinous slime, its color a sickly green, was smeared across his palm and fingers.

“What the hell is that?” Oscar asked.

Nigel's hand shook, but he forced his voice to calm. “Ectoplasm. We need to get a sample—there are swabs and vials in the van.”

Oscar put a hand on Nigel's elbow and helped him up. “How did it get on you?”

“Not to make you jealous,” Nigel said, “but I was holding hands with a ghost.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE WINTER SUNRISE WAS BEAUTIFUL, painting glorious streaks of pink and gold across the eastern sky above the mountains. Oscar wished he wasn't too exhausted to appreciate it.

After the session with the talking board, he'd been too wound up to sleep. Instead, he let the others catch some rest while he monitored the cameras. Nothing moved that he could see; even Jeff seemed to have left off replaying his fatal fall.

Find her bones.

Sharon had been right—it was a vengeful ghost killing off the Corbetts and their descendants. But who? And why?

Whoever she was, she'd made sure to put a stop to the session before Ivan could tell them too much. If they'd just had a few more minutes, maybe he could have directed them to her grave, or at least given them a name.

They needed to find out who she was and where she was buried. And they didn't have much time to do it. The year was fast running out, only hours remaining before the clocks ticked over.

Why hadn't she made her move to kill him last night? Or had they simply been too prepared for her?

Unlike Mamaw, Oscar had come knowing they were in danger, armed with salt and with his talent on high alert. So far as he knew, he didn't have heart disease like Julie. He hadn't been on a catwalk he could be pushed from, or surrounded by dangerous barrels that would need only a weak bit of wood to

give way before they fell. Nor was he messing with electrical equipment that he probably shouldn't have touched in the first place.

Maybe it was as simple as that. If he could just convince Dad to go somewhere safe for the day, maybe stay in his bedroom and not go near anything that might topple over on him...

As soon as they got back into cell range on the drive back to town, Oscar's phone lit up, buzzing with a dozen text alerts.

Oh shit—what if something had happened to Dad, while Oscar was off running around the distillery?

He pulled half-off the road, not caring the van was partially blocking the lane. It took him two tries to type in his passcode correctly with a shaking hand.

“What's wrong?” Tina asked, and she and Chris both sat forward in alarm.

The first text was from Josh.

Your dad knows something is up. He called me, said he couldn't get ahold of you. I offered to give you a message, but he demanded to speak with you to prove you were really here. I had to confess—I'm sorry.

The rest of the texts were all from Dad.

I know you're not at Josh's house. Where are you?

This has something to do with your ghost-hunting show, doesn't it?

Answer me!

There was a voicemail as well, from Mom. “Hey, hon, sorry about your dad. I've convinced him to stop texting you every five minutes.” Her voice lowered. “I haven't told him

anything, but he's not stupid, despite the way he's acting now. You need to come clean." She paused, then added. "Hope you're staying safe, and I'll see you in the morning."

Nigel touched his arm. "What's wrong? Is Scott all right?"

"He's fine." Oscar silenced his phone and plugged it into the charger. "The jig is up—he figured out we haven't been hanging out with Josh or going on long drives through the mountains." He checked his mirrors, then pulled back onto the road. "Time for me to face the music."

Dad must have been watching for them, because he was out of the house almost before Oscar put the van in park.

Oscar bit back a sigh. "All right, just...just let me handle it. Stay in the van, this is going to be awkward."

Nigel opened his door. "At least let me be moral support."

Maybe Dad would keep a leash on his temper in front of a guest. "Thanks."

Nigel stayed near the van door, while Oscar went around to the walkway. "I know you're mad," he started.

"I raised you better than this." Dad glared up at him, his expression emphasizing the wrinkles that had creased his skin over the last decade. "I told you I didn't want any of this ghost crap under my roof."

"And it mostly hasn't been," Oscar replied calmly.

The scowl deepened. "Mostly?"

There was no point in dancing around the subject. "Did you know Mamaw left behind films? Of her doing a seance?"

Dad's face went white. "Where did you find them?"

He'd known. All along, he'd known.

"That doesn't matter," Oscar said, voice shaking now.

"Oscar—"

“I gave him the key to the storage place,” Mom said, emerging from the house.

Dad turned on her now. “You know how I feel about this!”

“I do, which is why I knew you’d never get around to sorting that junk out.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “At least Oscar could get some use out of it.”

“I don’t believe this.” Dad started to turn back to the house, but Oscar grabbed his arm.

“Dad, listen,” he said urgently. “You’re in danger.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You and I, we’re descended from the Corbett’s, the ones who founded Cloven Oak Distillery,” Oscar said in a rush. This was his chance, maybe his only chance, to convince his dad. “Something happened, we don’t know what yet, but there’s a-a vengeful ghost, probably? Anyway, it’s killing us off every twenty-five years. Ivan Corbett, his son Edwin, *his* son Jeff, then, well, Mamaw didn’t die but it hurt her in her mind. Then twenty-five years later, it got Julie when she hiked out there that Thanksgiving with her husband. The family’s down to just us, and this is the year, and we don’t have much time left—”

Dad yanked free, stopping the rush of words. “What sort of conspiracy-theory bullshit is this?” His face went red, and he pointed at Nigel. “Is your crackpot boyfriend filling your head with his crap?”

“Don’t you dare,” Oscar snapped. “Apologize, right now.”

“We have proof,” Nigel interjected, a bit desperately. “Mr. Fox, we can show you what we found, right now, if you’ll just give us a chance.”

“This is all bullshit,” Dad shouted.

Oscar’s hold on his temper broke. “Mamaw was a spirit worker! And so was her own mamaw! And I should have been too.” He thumped his chest with one hand. “Our family had a history. I had a heritage, but you cut me off from it. I deserved

to know, and instead you pretended it didn't exist, and hid any evidence that it did in a storage unit to rot!"

Dad's face darkened. "Don't you take that tone with me, boy."

"You cut me off from my roots, let me think I was crazy, and you're worried about my *tone*?" Oscar took a step back, his chest tight with hurt and anger. "We're done. You can be as mad at me as you want, but you're in danger, and we're going to do our damndest to save you before it's too late."

Oscar stormed back to the van. He half-expected Dad to call out to him—but he didn't.

Fine. Let the old goat stew if that was what he wanted. Once they were all strapped back in, Oscar threw the van into reverse, turned around and headed down the driveway without looking back.

"I'm sorry," Nigel said, after a few minutes of tense silence in the van. "If I made things worse—"

He'd truly expected Scott to calm down and listen. To be more like Oscar, ready to hear anyone out. But it seemed, despite inheriting Barbara's gift, Oscar took his personality from his mother's side of the family.

"You didn't." Oscar held out his right hand, the left still on the steering wheel, and Nigel took it. Oscar's phone pinged, and he sighed loudly. "Check that for me, will you?"

Nigel picked up the phone, still connected to the charger. "It's from your mom," he said. "She's trying to talk Scott down."

"Good luck with that," Oscar muttered.

"So, uh, what now?" Chris asked from the back.

Oscar's shoulders slumped. "Sorry about all of that. Family drama isn't fun, even when you're not a part of it."

“That was nothing,” Tina said, waving her hand. “Family fight, but we still love each other.”

“My family fights and then stops talking to one another for decades,” Nigel said.

“Mine just gives each other the cold shoulder,” Chris added.

Tina glared at them both. “You’re not helping.”

“Breakfast first,” Oscar said. “There’s a coffee shop down the way. It won’t be as good as Mom’s cooking, but, well...”

“It’ll be fine,” Nigel said. “And after that, I suggest we go to the library, look for the letters Julie’s husband donated.”

The sole coffee shop consisted of a counter and three cramped tables, so they ate their cold scones in the van. Once they were done, they drove to the library.

Mrs. Simpson was once again behind the desk; she brightened as soon as she saw Oscar. “Welcome back! Looking for more ghost stories?”

Oscar gave her his usual charming smile. “Actually, I just found out that there are some family letters in your collection. My cousin Julie’s husband, David Armstrong, donated them in her memory. I wondered if we could have a look?”

“Certainly.” She turned to the computer on her desk. “I assume they were of historical significance?”

“I’m told they were from the Corbetts, the ones who founded Cloven Oak Distillery.”

“Let’s see...Armstrong, Armstrong...ah, here we are.” Her smile brightened. “Good news, they were donated in 2002, so the flood of ’99 didn’t get them.”

She led them to the lower level, then to a door marked STAFF ONLY. “We keep this sort of thing out of general circulation, of course,” she said, unlocking the door. “Now where is that light switch...here we go.”

The florescent lights buzzed to life, revealing a windowless room filled with metal shelving units, each one

stacked haphazardly with cardboard bankers boxes. “The one you’re looking for should say Armstrong on the front,” she said cheerfully. “You’ll have to look at it in here; we have a policy about not taking anything out of the room, just to keep it from getting lost or misfiled, you know. Let me know when you’re done, so I can lock back up.”

Once she was gone, Nigel stared aghast around the dismal room. “No climate control...do you think they do anything to keep insects and mice out, at least?”

Chris opened the nearest box and peered at the papers stuffed inside. “That would be no. It’s silverfish central in here.”

“This is a tiny county library,” Oscar said with a touch of exasperation. “They don’t get much in the way of funding. You can’t judge them by the standards of Duke.”

Nigel winced. Oscar was right; he’d become a bit spoiled by doing most of his research at the university. “No, of course, I understand that. Let’s just hope the mice haven’t gotten too comfortable in your family’s letters.”

It took only a few minutes of searching to find the box with “Armstrong” scrawled across the front in black sharpie, high on one of the shelves. Oscar took it down, and Nigel held his breath as he removed the lid.

At least there was no explosion of mice or insects to greet them; perhaps its storage height had saved the box from most of their depredations. Inside was a large padded envelope with the library’s address on the front, and a return address from David Armstrong. Oscar picked it up, then slid out a cover letter and a packet of letters gone brown with age, held together with a rubber band.

Oscar squinted at the cover letter. “To whom it may concern, included are the letters I spoke to you about on the phone. They were the property of my wife Julie Armstrong, née Corbett. I haven’t read them myself, but she said they came from her great-great grandfather, Ivan, who opened Cloven Oak distillery. I understand it was an important source

of jobs for your town at one time, and so these letters may be of historical interest. Sincerely, David Armstrong.”

He picked up the packet; the rubber band was so old it came apart in pieces. “I don’t think anyone has looked at these since they were originally read,” he said, then carefully opened the first. “Never mind, I see why. This old-timey handwriting isn’t easy to read.”

“May I?” Nigel held out his hand.

“Please.”

He sat down cross-legged on the concrete floor, since there were no tables or chairs in the storage room. The paper was old, but of good quality, and had held up better than cheaper scrap would have. The handwriting wasn’t the most legible, but it was far from unreadable.

“I’ve looked at a lot of writing from the era,” he said. “I’m used to deciphering old journals and letters, so perhaps I should be the one to look through them?”

“Be my guest.” Oscar smothered a yawn. “I didn’t sleep last night, so if it’s okay with you, I’m going to nap in the van.”

“Go right ahead. The rest of you should, too; we have a long night ahead of us.”

“You’re not wrong.” Chris stifled a yawn of their own. “We’ll let Mrs. Simpson know you’re still here, so she doesn’t lock you in.”

“Or think you’re a donation.” Oscar winked at him. “Though it would be a good tax write-off...”

Nigel offered him a rude gesture. “You do know how to make a man feel appreciated.”

Once they were gone, Nigel reopened the letter.

A letter written by a long-dead man, whose ghost was only a few miles from here.

He looked around uneasily, then scooted until his back was against the wall. It wasn’t that he expected something to sneak

up behind him while he read....

No, who was he kidding? It was exactly that.

He tucked the letters under his arm and walked quickly to the door, which opened without any supernatural resistance. To hell with library policy; he was going to read these in the sunlight, with at least one other person within shouting distance.

Just in case.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

OSCAR SLEPT FITFULLY; the van wasn't the most comfortable place for a nap, and the biting cold didn't help with that. Chris and Tina had snuggled up together under a blanket for warmth, though whether they were sleeping or just resting their eyes he couldn't tell.

Eventually, they gave up and went back inside, to find Nigel coming up the stairs. His expression was grim, but he only said, "Let's tell Mrs. Simpson we're done and get some lunch. I'm starving."

When they entered the diner, despite the lunch rush, Josh hurried out of the kitchen. "Man, I'm really sorry," he began.

Oscar held up his hands. "No need to be. You shouldn't have had to lie for me to start with."

"Hey, are you Oscar Fox?" one of the men in line asked. "Can I have your autograph? My dad and I used to watch all your games back in the day!"

A few others wanted him to sign things as well, and one woman asked for a picture with him beneath his jersey on the wall. By the time he was done with them, Kayla was already serving the table where the others had settled.

"We ordered for you," Tina said, when he slid into the chair beside Nigel. "I didn't think you'd turn down a pepperoni roll."

"Never," he agreed, taking a big bite and chasing it with ice tea. "Nigel, did you find something in the letters?"

Nigel had been even quieter than usual on the ride from the library. Now he took a bite of his club sandwich, as though to buy time. “Not just the letters,” he said once he’d swallowed. “I ended up looking through a few newspaper articles, the birth and death records, and marriage licenses. Fortunately all of those are digitized, and I have subscriptions to various sites through the university, so it didn’t take too long.”

Chris narrowed their eyes. “Why do I get the feeling you’re beating around the bush here?”

Nigel glanced at Oscar. “I’m afraid some of this doesn’t, ah, reflect very well on your family.”

Oscar’s heart sank. “You mean the Corbetts? But I thought...that is, they helped create the town by founding the distillery.”

It sounded stupid—of course that didn’t mean they were good people. But the connection had seemed something to be proud of, something good his ancestors had done...

“We all contain multitudes,” Nigel said tactfully. “So, the letters. Most of them were from Ivan to his wife, who was in Pennsylvania. Apparently, Ivan had left his family behind and come to West Virginia alone, with the intention of establishing his business. Eventually, once it was up and running and he had built a house, they joined him here.”

Nigel paused to take another bite out of his sandwich, then wash it down with ice tea. “Their reunion was delayed by a number of months, however. Do you recall the spring house at the distillery?”

“Of course.”

“I got some beautiful shots of it,” Chris said. “Definitely putting those up for sale on the site once we get back.”

“The spring is why Ivan wanted to build his distillery there.” Nigel picked up a fry but only stared at it distractedly. “Apparently, it was believed to have some sort of healing properties.”

“Did it?” Tina asked.

“Well, it was pure, which didn’t hurt.” Nigel shrugged. “Look at it this way: people used to take ‘radium baths’ by sitting in caves with natural radiation. Humanity’s track record of identifying things as healthy or harmful is...spotty.”

Tina grimaced. “Good point.”

“The pertinent point is that Ivan, and others, believed it.” Nigel dropped his fry and pushed his plate to the side. “There was only one problem: he didn’t own the land it was on. That didn’t stop him from starting to build anyway.”

The heavy sensation in Oscar’s chest intensified. “Why do I have the feeling things are about to take a turn for the worse?”

“The land was owned by a woman named Agnes.” Nigel took out his notebook but didn’t open it. “It seems that her widowed grandmother had left it to her, though I couldn’t find any specific records. Agnes herself was unmarried, so she was the sole property owner at that point.”

“I bet that made her popular with the local men,” Tina said.

“I doubt it,” Oscar said. “We’ve seen the land, remember—you might be able to scrape out a tiny farm right on the bottomland, but most of it is too steep and wild to be worth much, at least at the time. The timber barons would have passed through long before Agnes’s time, and I assume there’s no sign of coal on the land to make it attractive to the mining companies.”

“You know the history of the area better than the rest of us,” Nigel said “From what I saw, there’s no mention of the property having much value other than the spring, which of course is what drew Ivan to it. Once he started to build, Agnes sued Ivan, and the courts put a temporary injunction on any construction until the case came to trial. Ivan was...not pleased.”

“Did he at least try to pay her for it?” Oscar asked without much hope.

“He says he made an offer in the letter, but,” he flipped open the notebook, “quote ‘the damned woman says the spring is too dear to sell.’”

“Oh yes, how dare she not just hand over her property to some man,” Tina muttered.

“And I doubt he was offering a fair price, even given the land was otherwise worthless,” Nigel said. “Here is where things get...a bit murky. In the next letter, Ivan says ‘The matter is taken care of, in my favor. Building will recommence as soon as the formalities have been concluded.’” He looked up from the notebook. “Keep in mind, he’s writing this *before* the court date. I had to do some digging in the newspaper archives, but managed to find a small article that says Agnes failed to appear before the judge, so the matter was decided in Ivan’s favor by default.”

Oh no. “He knew she wasn’t going to be there,” Oscar said numbly.

“Find her bones,” Chris said, eyes widening. “Oh fuck. He killed her and hid the body, didn’t he?”

“Or paid someone to do it for him.” Oscar pushed his plate aside, all appetite gone. “God damn it.”

“It does seem the most likely interpretation,” Nigel said apologetically. “I couldn’t find any record of her afterward. As for what her family thought...well, they were poor mountain folk, and Ivan Corbett was a rich man from Pennsylvania, building a business that would bring jobs and life to the area. Even if they went to the law to report her disappearance, I doubt there was much interest in finding her.”

Oscar sat back heavily. “So Ivan was an entitled dick who murdered a woman to get his way. Honestly, maybe he deserves to be stuck in that warehouse for all eternity.” He sighed. “I thought...I don’t know. I thought the fact his distillery helped create the town was a good thing, but the whole business was founded on blood.”

“That’s capitalism for you,” Chris said sympathetically.

“One more thing,” Nigel said. “I did manage to find birth records for Agnes. She was twenty-five years old when she vanished.”

“And every twenty-five years she kills, or tries to kill, whoever she perceives as the heir to the distillery,” Oscar concluded. “They get the same amount of time to enjoy it as she got during life. Fuck!”

“Is that all?” Tina asked Nigel.

“Not quite.” He bit his lip. “Agnes’s last name was Dillon. Virginia Dillon, Oscar’s great-great grandmother, was her younger sister.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BACK IN THE VAN, Oscar stared out the windshield. It was starting to snow: big, fluffy flakes that adhered to every surface they touched. There'd be power outages if this kept up for long.

Christ, no wonder Miss Virginia fell out with her daughter for marrying a Corbett. She knew the family was cursed, dogged by the vengeful ghost of her murdered sister.

Had the long-dead Agnes recognized Barbara as kin, even though she was a Corbett as well? It hadn't stopped her from ruining Mamaw's life, but maybe it had kept her from killing her outright?

Agnes inherited the spring from her widowed grandmother. How long had it been in the family? White colonizers came to the area in the mid-1700s. Did a long line of mountain grannies stretch back to those times, passing the spring down from guardian to guardian until it came to poor, doomed Agnes?

The rage she must have felt when an interloper from up north tried to take that heritage from her...and then to be murdered by said interloper...

No wonder she was out for blood.

"The weather's looking bad," Tina said, from where she bent over her phone in the back seat. "They're calling for six to eight inches and blizzard conditions. Widespread power outages are predicted; I imagine they already have trucks heading this way from other states to help out."

“I don’t see that we have any choice other than to head back to the distillery, no matter the weather,” Nigel said. “If we can find Agnes’s bones, perhaps we can give her a proper burial, or at least force her ghost to move on.”

“Great,” Chris said. “So where are they?”

Oscar started the van. “On the property somewhere, I’m guessing. Maybe we can get Ivan to tell us where he hid them.”

“She stopped him last night,” Tina said. “Maybe she doesn’t want them found.”

“I don’t care what she wants.” God, he was tired. “She killed Ivan, and that should have been the end of it. He was the one who cut her life short. But she didn’t stop there. She’s murdered people who didn’t have anything to do with her death, who weren’t even born until generations later. Cousin Julie just wanted to see the place her daddy used to own—she didn’t deserve to die for that!”

Nigel leaned over and squeezed his shoulder. “I know. I’m sorry.”

Oscar wiped away unexpected tears. “We were so sad when she died. And her poor husband...”

“I know.”

“And Mamaw...if she’d just been left alone, if she’d lived, if I’d had the chance to know her...”

He’d come back to Marrow to get closer to his family. But the more he learned about them, the more isolated he felt. He’d turned over a rock, hoping to find gold but only exposing all the wriggling, slimy things beneath.

A part of him wished they’d just stayed in North Carolina. He could have taken Nigel up to Asheville or Boone, had a relaxing post-holiday getaway. Maybe ring in the new year at the Grove Park Inn, toasting the Pink Lady who haunted its halls.

But if he had, would some power from beyond the wall of death have drawn Dad close enough for the ghost to attack? Or

hell, maybe she could find him anywhere. Maybe she just went for the easiest prey, the ones dumb enough to wander too close to her web.

“Fuck all of this,” Chris said. “It sucks, man, and we can’t fix what happened. But at least we can stop it from happening again.”

“What they said,” Tina added, glancing up from her phone.

Oscar blinked rapidly and smiled. “Thanks. I wouldn’t want to be doing this alone.”

“You could always show your appreciation with a raise,” Tina suggested. “Except wait, no one’s paying us to do this.”

“Mrs. Montague will,” Nigel said firmly. “She wants that footage.”

Chris leaned forward. “What do you think she’s doing with it?”

“I have no idea.” Nigel’s mouth pursed. “Dr. Lawson thinks we’ve made a deal with the devil, but clearly there’s a lot of personal history there.”

“We’ll worry about that later,” Oscar said. “For tonight, let’s just focus.”

The snow continued to come down, blanketing the landscape though it hadn’t yet started to build up on the roads. If it kept up like Tina was saying, they might not be able to get out on the distillery’s disused road tomorrow. Just in case, they stopped at the gas station, then the lone grocery store to stock up on food and water. With a full tank of gas and extra gas for the generator, they’d be set if they had to shelter in place for a couple of days.

The drive through the forest was beautiful, all white snow and gray trees. A herd of deer, possibly the same they’d seen on the night vision camera, bounded away gracefully as they approached. Even the distillery seemed transformed, some of its decay beginning to disappear under a fresh coat of white.

“Okay,” Tina said, climbing out of the van, “You get the generator going, and I’ll listen to the EVP from last night.”

“Sounds good.”

Soon the generator was up and running. Chris retreated to the tent. Nigel started to follow, but Oscar caught his arm. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Nigel looked surprised, but nodded. Snow speckled his knit cap and dusted the shoulders of his puffy jacket. “What is it?”

Oscar sighed; his breath turned to steam in the air. “I’m sorry my dad called you a crackpot.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve been called that.” Nigel smiled ruefully.

“That doesn’t make it okay.”

“It also doesn’t make it your fault.” Nigel took his hands and looked up at him seriously. “It’s not how I envisioned our stay with your parents, true, but they’re not the ones I’m in a relationship with. You are.” His grip tightened. “I want to support you, in this, with your family, with whatever. Just tell me what you need from me.”

Oscar’s chest ached. “You’re giving it to me.” He leaned down and kissed Nigel’s chilled lips. “I love you, you know that?”

“It had come to my notice. I love you, too.”

“I’ve enhanced the audio on the EVP session with Jeff Corbett,” Tina said. The rest of them crowded around her, Chris with their camera out and filming, and Oscar with a look of concentration on his face. Nigel rested his hands lightly on the back of her chair, careful not to block the shot.

He’d really wanted to like his boyfriend’s parents, and Lisa seemed like a good woman trying to do her best. But Scott had a black mark against him from the start for trying to suppress Oscar’s gift, no matter the reason. And now...

He truly didn't care if the man thought he was a crackpot, but the fact he wouldn't even listen to reason, wouldn't listen to his own son, wouldn't give Oscar a chance...

"Let's hear it," Oscar said, startling Nigel out of his reverie. He focused on the sound waves displayed on Tina's screen.

She pressed play. Oscar's voice issued from the laptop's speakers. "My name is Oscar. I'm your great-nephew, through my daddy's side. If you're here, can you say your name into the device in my hand?"

"Jeffrey Corbett," whispered the reply.

Even expecting it, a shiver went up Nigel's spine. "That's good evidence," he murmured. Multiple words were less likely to be a trick of either audio processing or the mind.

"The next bit was where I warned you he was standing behind you," Tina said, scrubbing through quickly. "Which was fucking creepy."

"You should have tried it from our perspective," Chris replied.

"No thanks. There's a reason this girl stays in command center." She stopped scrubbing and hit play.

"Can you tell me why you're still here?" Oscar's recorded voice asked.

"This is ours."

"Was your fall an accident, Jeff, or were you pushed?"

"She did it."

"Who killed you?"

"She did it; she did it; she did it; she did it; please help me..."

"And that's it." Tina cut the audio and sat back in her chair, her long hair brushing the backs of Nigel's hands. He pulled them away quickly.

“What does he want help with?” Nigel asked. Chris swung the camera his way, and he tried not to wince. “Help moving on? Help getting rid of Agnes?”

“Falling to his death over and over can’t be much of an afterlife,” Oscar said.

“Still, he hasn’t moved on. And they’re all very focused on the idea of the distillery belonging to them,” Nigel pointed out.

“I guess when you do murder to get something, you have to convince yourself it’s yours by right.” Oscar shook his head tiredly.

Nigel pursed his lips. Ivan could have given up and built his distillery just about anywhere in the state with a source of pure water. But no, he had to have this one, even if he had to kill another human being to get it. No wonder such a grasping man was still here, on this side of the veil. “I wonder if they knew? Edwin and Jeff, I mean. Would Ivan have shared the secret?”

“With his son, maybe. His grandson?” Oscar shrugged. “Who knows. I suppose it depends on the story they told themselves. Did Edwin believe his daddy had fought for what was rightly his, and Agnes was just some hick standing in the way of progress? A witch? Some other gendered slur that made her life of less value than their desires?”

There was a long moment of silence, then Chris asked, “So what now, boss?”

“Our priority has to be getting Agnes to move on.” Oscar glanced at his watch. “We only have eight hours until midnight, and the sun is going down fast. It’s not dark just yet, but as overcast as it is, we may be able to pick up some EMF readings. Besides, she killed Julie during the day, so...” He trailed off.

“But where are we going to look?” Chris asked.

“On the tapes, she came from the direction of the creek and the mountainside. Ivan wouldn’t have hidden her body on the actual site, where a worker might find it. And he probably wouldn’t want to lug her corpse too far, assuming he did his

own killing.” Oscar’s mouth twisted in disgust. “I say we take the EMF meters, fan out, and see what we can find.”

“It’s snowing harder every minute,” Nigel said, gesturing vaguely.

“I know, but it’s not deep yet. And we have our walkie-talkies, and we aren’t going to get too far from each other.”

Nigel bit his lip; he recognized the stubborn gleam in Oscar’s eye. And honestly, he didn’t have any better ideas.

Except for one, which Oscar wasn’t going to like at all. “Okay,” he said. “But I’d like for you to stay here.”



Oscar stared at Nigel, but before he could collect his wits to object, his boyfriend pressed on. “The Faraday tent is still packed in the van—I checked.”

After their failed attempt at the Matthews house to create their own Faraday cage with aluminum foil, Oscar had used some of their earnings to order a Faraday tent from an overseas vendor. According to the website, the tent was easy to set up, and designed for traveling. Specifically, it was touted to fit easily around a bed, though Oscar was less than convinced of that, since it would have meant picking up the bed and maneuvering it inside. A cot, maybe.

Why someone would want a Faraday tent around their bed, he could only guess. Mediums troubled by ghosts haunting their sleep? Conspiracy theorists who believed the government was embedding RFID chips in people? Paranoid types afraid of alien abduction?

Whatever the reason, the tent was perfect if they needed a Faraday cage at a location. It collapsed into a small bundle, set up fast and easy, and would serve to either keep ghosts out, or trap them inside as they’d hoped to do at the Matthews House.

What he was *not* going to do, was cower inside it while his friends faced down a vengeful spirit.

“Absolutely not,” he said, not bothering to hide his hurt. “Why would you think I’d do that?”

“I’m not trying to insult you.” Nigel held up his hands for peace. “But you’re the one Agnes is after. She has no reason to attack the rest of us.”

“Unless she sees you as in her way,” Oscar interjected. “Or lashes out because she can’t find a target. Or, hell, goes to find Dad because there’s no one more convenient!”

Nigel’s mouth tightened. “You don’t know for a fact that she’d pay any attention to the rest of us.”

“And I’m certainly not going to risk it!” Oscar exclaimed.

“And I’m not going to risk you!”

They stared at one another. Then Nigel took off his glasses and turned away. “I’m sorry. You have the right to make your own decisions; of course you do. I’m just...concerned.”

Oscar closed his hands on Nigel’s thin shoulders. “I know. But you can’t fight my battles for me. I’m not going into this blindly. And I’m going to be careful, I promise. Shields up and all that.”

Nigel’s shoulders slumped under his hands. “Please do.”

“You’d better get going before the snow gets too deep,” Tina said.

“Yeah.” He let go of Nigel. “All right, we’re going to want gloves, hats, and be sure to zip up your jackets to hold the heat in. We’re not going far, but if anyone gets disoriented, check in on the walkie-talkie and we’ll find you. Also if you get any hits on the EMF reader.”

Chris unzipped the tent enough to peer outside. “I’m not taking the camera—the snow is coming down so hard, it would cover the lens in seconds.”

“Makes sense. And it’s better you not get distracted and step in a hole. We don’t want any snapped ankles.”

“Way to motivate the team, boss.”

They pulled on their gloves and hats, and Oscar zipped up the coat he'd let hang open in the relative warmth of the tent. Once they were all ready, he opened the tent and stepped outside.

The wind scraped its teeth over the exposed skin of his face, and snow poured from the iron gray sky. These were no lazily drifting flakes, but a real snowstorm, and he felt a twinge of worry.

They trudged away from the tent in the direction of the creek and the hillside. "It's so quiet," Chris murmured once they were away from the generator.

The snow muffled all sound, seeming to encase the world in silence. It carpeted the ground in a blanket already a couple of inches thick and growing. The wet flakes clung to any surface they struck, coating one side of all the trees and their branches in white. Already, some limbs were beginning to bend beneath the weight.

An old stone bridge crossed the creek. "Let me test it out first," Oscar said, though it looked solid. The stones were slick with snow, making footing treacherous, but they held. "It's good, just be careful."

Oscar scanned the hillside while the others crossed. He felt as if he'd stepped across a line, from the decay wrought by human hands to something older. Wilder. The cloven oak loomed over all the other trees, ancient and implacable.

"How do you want to do this?" Nigel asked, coming up beside him.

Something was watching him from the hillside, Oscar felt sure of it. But from where, exactly, he wasn't sure. "Let's fan out from this point. Turn up the volume on your EMF meters so you can keep your eyes on the ground. Walk carefully, and check in every five minutes. If you start feeling too cold, let us know over the walkie-talkie, and head back to the tent immediately. We don't want to risk a case of hypothermia, okay?"

Nigel nodded. "Okay, but...please be careful."

“I will.”

Oscar made certain he was as grounded as he could be under the circumstances, and strengthened his vision of the protection of his old football equipment.

His job back then had been to be an obstacle, to use his mass to keep the opposing team away from the ball. It wasn't so different now, only he was using his gift to put himself between the vengeful ghost and anyone else she wanted to hurt. And hopefully keep himself from getting too knocked around in the process.

Snow crumpled under him as he started up the section of the slope closest to the massive oak. The wet snow clung to his boots, weighing them down and making the climb even more difficult. He strained his ears for any sound from the EMF meter clipped to his belt, but there was only the whisper of the falling snow.

“Five minute check in,” Chris said over the walkie talkie a few minutes later.

“I'm here,” Nigel replied. “Oscar?”

“Here. Nothing yet.”

He struggled higher, feet slipping as the slope became steeper. The light leaking through the storm faded even more; they didn't have too long before the sun dipped below the mountains on the other side of the valley.

It had to have been at least five minutes since the last check in. He lifted the walkie talkie. “Oscar here. Y'all okay?”

Silence. Not even the crackle of static.

All the hairs rose on the back of Oscar's neck. “Hello?” he said, making sure he was holding the transmit button down all the way. “Nigel, Chris, come in.”

His only answer was falling snow.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“CHRIS HERE AGAIN,” crackled Nigel’s walkie talkie.

Nigel paused, glad for the excuse to stop climbing the damn hill, or mountain, whatever it was at this point. Icy air excoriated his throat as he tried to catch his breath, and his heart drummed against his ribs. Fuck, he needed to get to the gym.

“Nigel here,” he replied, hoping he didn’t sound as out of shape as he was.

He let go of the transmit button and waited for Oscar to chime in.

There was only silence.

His pulse, which had started to slow down a bit, kicked back into high gear. “Oscar? Are you there?”

Nothing.

“Boss?” Chris chimed in. “Let us know you’re all right, over.”

The cold air was nothing compared to the chill that flooded Nigel’s veins. Abandoning use of the walkie talkie, he shouted, “Oscar!”

The snow deadened the sound; it fell flat against the shrouded landscape.

Fuck, he’d known this was a bad idea, he’d *known* it, but of course Oscar wouldn’t listen to reason. Of course he had to put himself out here, tempt a ghost who wanted him dead, all for the sake of keeping it away from his goddamned father.

Cursing every last one of Oscar's ancestors, Nigel began to thrash through the low-hanging branches in the direction he thought Oscar had been in. "Oscar!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "I'm coming! Just hold on!"

But no matter how loud he shouted, the snow devoured his words.

Oscar took a deep, calming breath and stood very still. He concentrated on his surroundings with every sense he had.

There was something coming.

The EMF meter at his waist blipped—then began to beep, faster and louder as the presence drew closer.

He swallowed, but kept his feet firmly planted. "Agnes Dillon," he called, keeping any tremors from his voice, "I'm Oscar Fox, your great grandnephew, descended from your little sister Virginia. I want to help you. Show me your bones, and I'll give them a proper burial."

A gust of wind blew the snow nearly sidewise, shaking the limbs of the trees so snow cascaded from them. He unhooked his EMF meter; it kept climbing, closer and closer to red.

"You need to cross over," he said. "I can help you do that."

The wind gusted again—then seemed to swirl oddly. For a moment, Oscar thought it was a small snow devil, until he realized the shape it was forming wasn't a simple whirlwind.

It was a woman.

His EMF meter screamed into the red, just as she lunged at him.

"Oscar!" Nigel shouted, though his voice was going hoarse.

“Answer us!” Chris yelled. They’d caught up with Nigel, snow caked on their coat and hat so they looked almost like a living snowperson. “Oscar!”

Nigel looked around wildly, squinting through the snow. It was coming down harder than ever, and the light fading fast. He clicked on his flashlight, hoping for a glimpse of Oscar’s bright orange coat, but the beam only reflected blinding white snowflakes.

Dread filled him, and tears pricked at the corners of his eyes. Damn it, why hadn’t he argued more? Why hadn’t he insisted they stick together?

“Are we going the right way?” Chris asked, scanning their surroundings.

Visibility was cut to a few feet in every direction, nothing but white snow and gray trees. “I think so,” Nigel said, though he honestly wasn’t sure. “But the ghost turned Julie’s husband around, separated them...”

Chris shook their head. “We can’t think like that. We have to keep going.” They cupped their hands around their mouth. “Oscar!”

Nigel trudged after them, adding his own voice to their calls. But in truth, he wanted to crumple to the ground, wanted to curl up in a ball, wanted to scream in frustration and anguish.

Oscar had such high hopes when they came here. But Scott Fox refused to let go of his own trauma long enough to listen to his son, to hear his only child practically beg for a chance to set things right. He’d locked himself away, forced Oscar into this position.

And Nigel hadn’t argued hard enough, or done enough. If he’d only known, maybe there was something he could have done; maybe he could have claimed Ms. Montague wouldn’t or couldn’t get them the supplies they needed.

Not that it would have stopped Oscar.

More than anything, Nigel wanted to be back in his apartment in Durham, cuddled up on the couch with Oscar.

Watching one of the romantic Christmas movies Oscar loved so much, drinking hot chocolate spiked with rum.

Instead, here he was, stumbling around a freezing mountainside, possibly lost. And Oscar was gone, maybe dying alone in the snow, with only a ghost for company.



Oscar jerked back instinctively as the ghost roared at him through the snow. His heel caught a root—and then he was falling, sliding down a steep slope. Tree branches whipped his back, and he grabbed futilely at them, but they evaded his grasping fingers as if pulled away by an unseen hand.

He hit the bottom of the slope, in a crunch of ice, EMF meter falling silent as it shattered on a rounded stone. A tiny stream, barely large enough to earn the word, trickled along the lowest point. Probably had carved the ravine it lay in over thousands, millions, of years, whatever expanse it took to wear away the very bones of the earth.

Oscar probably wasn't even going to be the first living thing to die here, on his back with his elbows soaking in its icy water.

As he stared up the slope, trying to catch the breath knocked out of him, the snow swirled into an ominous shape.

She was coming.

Oscar concentrated as hard as he could on the shield of his old uniform, the imagined white light pouring from above, down through the top of his head, filling him with psychic energy.

“Stop!” he ordered as firmly as he could. “Spirit of Agnes Dillon, leave this place! Your time is gone.”

She did pause, at least, a few feet away. The snow swirled, giving him a crude idea of features, long hair, a dress.

“Murdered,” said a cold, angry voice that was just as much inside his head as without.

Okay. She was talking to him—that had to be a good sign, right? “I know,” he said. “Ivan Corbett murdered you for your land. But you had your revenge on him over a century ago. The people you’ve hurt since had no part in his crime.” He hesitated, uncertain if he should risk pushing too far. “You hurt Barbara Fox, your own grandniece, when she came here.”

If he’d hoped for remorse, it didn’t come. “A Corbett,” she snarled, and the swirling snow grew more agitated.

Fuck. Oscar swallowed against a throat gone suddenly dry. “She had Corbett blood, yes, but she had your blood, too. She wasn’t responsible for Ivan’s crimes. Neither was Julie, or Jeff, or anyone but Ivan himself. You had your revenge; it’s time for you to move on!”

“Not while they’re still here.” Was she closer now, or was that a trick of her form and the fading light?

His heart pounded, and a metallic taste filled his mouth. “If I remove them, will you stop?”

She paused. The world was silent except for the susurrations of snow. Oscar clenched his teeth together to keep them from chattering.

“Remove every Corbett from my land by midnight,” said her whispery, cold voice, “and I will spare your life.”

Then the swirl of snow collapsed, and he was alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

OSCAR LEANED his head back and closed his eyes. Snow kissed his upturned face, melting against his skin. He needed to get up, to crawl out of the ravine, to get back to the tent.

But he was so cold. Agnes must have drawn on his energy to manifest; there was nothing else out here for her to feed on.

The last light was fading. Sunset was around five o'clock this time of year, a little faster here thanks to the surrounding mountains. Agnes's ultimatum gave him seven hours to remove three deeply entrenched ghosts from the land that had been hers.

One line of his murderous family wanted him to remove the other murderous line, or she'd kill him too. It didn't matter that he was descended from her sister, just that Ivan was also in his family tree.

Bitterness swept over him. No wonder Dad didn't want anything to do with their ancestors. How nice it must be to have the luxury of closing his eyes and stuffing his ears, pretending everything was all right in the world.

"Oscar?" Dad called. "Oscar, where are you?"

Oscar's eyes snapped open. He was imagining things. He'd been thinking about Dad, and now he was hearing his voice.

"Oscar!"

Oscar scrambled to his feet. "Here! I'm over here!"

A flashlight cut through the gloom, illuminating the drifting flakes of white. Then Dad's face appeared at the top of

the slope. “Are you all right? Do you need a hand up?”

“No, I can make it.” Oscar stumbled to his feet and started up, using trees to drag himself higher as the snow slid treacherously from under his boots. “What the hell are you doing here?”

There was a long moment, then Dad said, “Mama told me to come.”

Oscar reached the top of the ravine, stopping just a few feet below Dad and staring up. “What?”

“Lisa was so mad at me, she wouldn’t speak, just banged around the house. I was pretty mad, too, so I went and sat by myself in my office.” Dad looked...chagrined? Bewildered? A mix of both, maybe; Oscar wasn’t sure. “I’d been sitting there a while, fuming...and then there she was.”

“Mamaw?”

“Yeah.” Dad looked away, then back. “I’ve never seen anything before, but there were times I thought I smelled her perfume. But that was just my imagination...or maybe not, I don’t know any more. But there she was, clear as anything, and giving me the eye the way only a mother can. Then she reached out a hand and touched the picture of you on the wall, you know the one from your high school graduation? And it fell.”

The ghostly woman Oscar had seen throughout his childhood...could it have been Mamaw? Had she just been checking in from beyond the veil, making sure he was doing okay?

His chest felt suddenly warm, dispelling the cold that had seized him. He’d never met Barbara, she’d died long before he was born...but she’d still loved him enough to make that journey.

“And now you believe?”

He’d failed to keep the bitterness out of his voice, and Dad’s face crumpled. “Maybe I could have passed it off as a dream, but I was as awake as I’ve ever been. And the picture was there, on the floor. I checked the hook, and it hadn’t fallen

out of the wall—someone would've had to lift the picture off.” He swallowed convulsively. “I realized I'd let her down—I'd let you down. And now she was telling me clear as day I'd better find her grandbaby right now. Your mom agreed, so I set out here despite the roads. Made it in, and then Tina told me you'd gone into the woods, and no one could raise you on the walkie-talkie, and...”

Dad dashed tears out of his eyes. “I was scared to death. Scared I'd pushed you away, and you were going to die hating me...”

“I don't hate you,” Oscar objected. “You did some things that hurt me, but, well, this isn't the time to talk about them.”

“I know. I know.” Dad swallowed. “Just know I'm sorry. As sorry as I've ever been for anything in my life. I'm not going to ask for your forgiveness, just for the chance to make it up to you.” He held out a hand. “Deal?”

Oscar looked at the hand, then back at Dad. Something inside him seemed to thaw. “I never thought you didn't care,” he said. “You've spent most of your life thinking your mother was crazy, shamed for it by the community. Then you've spent my whole life afraid I'd end up in an institution like her. You didn't handle it well, but...I do understand.” He reached out and clasped the other man's hand. “And I forgive you.”

Dad's face beamed with relief, and he helped Oscar up the final few steps and into a hug.

Static crackled over the walkie-talkie. “I'm here,” Oscar said, and Nigel nearly collapsed with relief.

“Where the hell have you been?” he demanded, even as Chris asked, “Are you all right?”

Nigel wasn't sure both of them talking over their units at the same time would work, but Oscar answered, “I'm fine. Dad found me.”

“Scott?”

“He’s the only dad I’ve got, so far as I know.”

What the hell was he doing here...no, it didn’t matter now. “Where are you? We’ll come get you.”

“Meet us back at the tent; that’ll be easier. I think the snow is letting up, at least.”

They trudged back down the slope; Chris seemed to know the way, and Nigel followed them. The snow had indeed started to let up, at least for the moment, and soon the glow of the tent shone out through the last of the twilight.

Scott’s SUV was parked at an angle near the van, its tracks already filling in with snow. Nigel was amazed he’d been able to make it here through the storm; it must have four-wheel drive, or snow tires, or both.

They stumbled back into the tent, shaking off snow. Oscar zipped the tent up behind them to keep in the heat; the moment he was finished, Nigel threw his arms around him.

All the terror of the past half hour threatened to spill out, and Nigel took a big, gulping breath. Oscar folded his arms around him, gentle and strong. “I’m okay.”

“What the fuck happened?” Chris asked, stripping off their beanie and shaking off the lingering snow. “We were trying to raise you on the walkie talkies, but you didn’t answer. We must have spent fifteen, twenty minutes shouting for you.”

“I never heard you.” Oscar left an arm draped over Nigel’s shoulders as he turned to answer Chris.

Nigel glared at Scott, who stood quietly near Tina. “What are you doing here?”

The words came out with a hostile edge, and Scott winced. “I, uh. I saw a ghost.”

“And that was enough to, what, convince you we’re not all a bunch of liars?” Nigel scoffed.

“Mamaw’s been watching out for me.” Oscar’s arm tightened on Nigel’s shoulders. “Give Dad a chance.”

Scott glanced at them both, shame-faced. “I know I’ve been...but when the ghost of your dead mother appears right in front of your own two eyes and pulls a picture of your son off the wall...well, it changed my perspective real quick.”

“That’s not important right now,” Oscar said. “I saw Agnes.”

A chill went through Nigel. “Were you able to get her to move on?”

“No.” Oscar sighed. “She’s pissed that the Corbett’s are still on her land, after all this time. If I can get them out of here by midnight she’ll be satisfied.”

Nigel suspected Oscar was speaking circumspectly for Scott’s sake, but to hell with that. “And if we don’t, she’ll kill you, and possibly Scott as well.”

Oscar winced. “Yeah.”

Scott looked as though he wanted to object, but only said, “And she can do that?”

“She’s done it before.”

“Right.” He frowned. “Who is Agnes?”

“The woman our ancestor Ivan Corbett murdered to steal her land—this land. Mamaw was descended from both Ivan and Agnes’s sister Virginia, so we are too.”

For a moment, Scott seemed lost, and Nigel expected him to fall back on his skepticism. But instead he asked, “And she...you said...was she the one who hurt your Mamaw?”

“Yeah.”

“And now she wants to kill us.” Scott bit his lip. “Can’t we just leave?”

Oscar went to the tent flap and let it down a bit to peer out. “The snow’s coming down hard again. No way is the van going to make it out of here tonight.”

“If we could just get to the main road, it’ll be clear,” Chris said.

Scott snorted. “This ain’t the big city—the plows won’t be through until tomorrow morning at the earliest. But if we can get far enough, maybe...?”

“You go,” Oscar said. “I have to try to put an end to this.”

“No.” Scott looked him in the eye. “This place took my mama. I’m not just going to watch it take my son, too. Please, let’s just go.”

“Scott’s right,” Nigel said.

He felt a flash of irritation over how surprised Scott looked. Did he think Nigel didn’t care about losing Oscar? “You’ve been guessing this whole time that she can somehow draw her victims in, or reach out to them—but we don’t know that. And even if she can reach out, away from the property, we’d be dealing with one ghost, not four.”

“But,” Oscar started to protest.

Chris cut him off. “Look, you scared the shit out of us just now. We couldn’t get ahold of you—we thought the ghost had killed you, and we were going to stumble over your frozen corpse.”

“It was one thing when your dad wasn’t on board,” Tina said. “But now that he is, we have a shot at keeping him safe.”

Scott looked aghast. “I’m sorry...I didn’t know you were putting yourself in danger for me...I would never have...”

“I know, Dad,” Oscar said. He looked at the rest of them. “You all really want to try leaving?”

Nigel took his hand. “If we can get off this mountain, keep the two of you safe, we might break the cycle. Just a few more hours, and she’ll have missed her chance to kill every twenty-five years. She hurt Barbara, but your grandmother escaped, and no one else died. If the clock resets, we have plenty of time to figure out how to remove all of the ghosts here safely.”

Oscar hesitated...then nodded. “Okay. Let’s give it a try.”

Oscar couldn't shake the feeling they were making the wrong decision.

Even so, he quelled the sensation and helped everyone throw any equipment they thought they might need into the SUV. Extra batteries, flashlights, and of course salt. The tent and generator could stay behind, along with the van; it would take too long to break them down in the middle of a snow storm.

"This works?" Dad asked, eyeing the canisters of table salt suspiciously.

"Quite well," Nigel answered.

"Don't worry about it, Dad—you'll be driving," Oscar said. "I'll ride shotgun, and if anything tries to get in the car with us, I'll deal with it."

"And by anything you mean this ghost woman?"

"Yep." He grabbed the handle to the passenger door. "All right, if we're doing this, let's go before the snow gets any deeper."

As they piled into the vehicle, Dad glanced at the back seat, where Tina, Nigel, and Chris crowded together. "Um, Nigel?"

Nigel glanced at him coolly. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry I called you a crackpot."

"As I told Oscar, I've been called that before." He snapped his seatbelt in. "But apology accepted."

The snow was coming down so thick, the headlights reflected back on a curtain of white. "Here we go," Scott said, and put the SUV into gear. The tires slipped, then caught, and they began to crawl forward.

The road out was hard to find; smaller trees were bent beneath the weight of the heavy, wet snow, obscuring the track. Branches dragged along the sides of the car with loud, scraping sounds, dumping their load of snow onto the roof before springing free.

Tension continued to build in Oscar's nerves, and he poured some salt into his hand to be ready. Agnes surely wasn't going to just let them drive away. His pulse thudded in his throat, and a sense of impending doom inched up his spine.

The SUV rocked as it hit the snow-filled potholes, and Dad swore. "Hang on—I can't see any of the holes to avoid them."

Chris twisted around in their seat—then let out a yell. "Oh shit!"

Oscar snapped around. Gliding behind them, moving effortlessly through the snow, was a woman in a tattered dress.

"It's her," he said, gripping the salt tight.

"She's catching up," Chris called. "Drive faster!"

Dad stepped on the gas, his eyes darting between the rearview mirror and the windshield. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit," he whispered over and over again in a small voice.

"That's it—we're leaving her behind," Chris encouraged. "She's gone—I don't see her anymore."

Oscar knew at that moment they hadn't lost her at all. He turned sharply to the windshield—just as she loomed up directly in front of the car.

She was no longer just a blur of snow. He caught a glimpse of wet hair hanging in strings around a cadaverous face. Gray lichen clung to her skin like a disease, and her eyes burned with a century's worth of hate.

Dad shouted and stood on the brake. The vehicle skidded, then spun, flinging up a wall of snow before smashing directly into a tree.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

NIGEL HAD A MOMENT OF CONFUSION, the sound of airbags and the crunch of metal against unyielding wood.

Then silence. Stillness.

He blinked, reality setting in. “Is everyone all right?”

Chris’s eyes were wide, but they nodded.

“I’m okay,” Tina said. “But my glasses fell off.”

“I’m fine,” Oscar chimed in. “Dad?”

Scott stared fixedly at the cracked windshield. “That was a ghost,” he said hollowly.

No shit, Nigel wanted to say, but didn’t. The man was trying, at least.

“Yeah, Dad, it was,” Oscar soothed. “Are you all right?”

“I...I think so.”

Nigel clicked on his flashlight and unclipped his seatbelt. His chest ached where the belt had caught him, but there wasn’t much he could do about that now, so he tried to ignore it. “Hold on, Tina, I’ll find your glasses.” At least his had remained on his face.

“Does anyone have a cell signal?” Oscar asked.

Tina squinted at her phone. “No.”

“Me neither,” Chris said. “We didn’t get far enough out to call for rescue.”

“So we start walking?” Scott asked, voice shaking.

Nigel spotted Tina's glasses sticking out from under Oscar's seat and snagged them. "No," he said as he handed them back to her. "We aren't remotely prepared for a long hike in the snow. If we go back, we have the generator, the tent, and of course the shelter of the deserted buildings."

"But the ghost is back there!" Scott's voice held the edge of hysteria.

"She's out here, too, in case you didn't notice," Nigel snapped.

Oscar spoke in a soothing tone. "She doesn't want us to leave, but she also wants the Corbetts gone. This has cost us time, and the walk back won't be quick in these conditions, but if we can convince them to move on before midnight, hopefully she'll be satisfied and move on as well. At the very least, she promised not to kill me, and I believe her."

Nigel cursed himself silently. Why had he agreed to this plan? All they'd done was waste time, time Oscar *needed* to work.

But he knew the answer. He'd done it in the hopes of getting Oscar clear of the danger, of keeping him safe from a relentless ghost who had stalked the family for a hundred and fifty years.

He should have known she wouldn't give up that easily.

"Let's grab anything we might need," he said unhappily. "The sooner we get back to the distillery, the sooner we can get to work."

It took them nearly an hour to return to the tent. The snow had slacked off, thankfully, so they were able to follow the tire tracks back without worrying about getting lost in the woods on top of everything else.

Oscar's mind raced as they walked, trying to come up with a plan for dealing with each ghost. After about fifteen minutes,

he realized he didn't have to do it all on his own. "Hey, everyone?"

He looked behind him. Dad and Chris were next in line, then Tina and Nigel brought up the rear, both of them looking miserable in the cold. Even though they were walking in the tracks cutting through the deep snow, it wasn't an easy hike, and breath steamed in clouds through the bitter cold night.

"Yeah?" Chris asked.

"We need a plan for taking care of each ghost. I have some thoughts, but if anyone comes up with an idea, we'll discuss it back at the tent."

"I don't understand," Dad said. Maybe it was the lighting from their flashlights, or maybe it was the stress of the last few hours, but he looked old. As if he'd aged years since he arrived. "How can you fight something like...like *that*?"

Poor Dad—it was hard, even for people who believed, to be confronted with something as terrifying as Agnes.

"Her name is Agnes," Oscar said, hoping putting a name to her would help calm some of Dad's fears. "And yeah, she's scary. And so are the ghosts in the distillery, but we have equipment. We've done something similar before. We can do this."

"But what if you can't?" Dad asked. "Will they kill you? Us? Are we going to die here?"

"Mr. Fox." Nigel's voice floated out of the darkness at the end of the line, firm and a bit cold. "Oscar is a professional. He has gifts that neither you nor I possess. However, they rely heavily on his mental state, so undercutting him shortly before he has to face these ghosts isn't helpful."

Dad looked as though Nigel had slapped him. "Oscar is—"

"Not the traumatized child you remember."

"It's okay, Nigel," Oscar said, because the last thing they needed was an argument. He knew Nigel was only trying to stick up for him, but the way he was going about it wasn't

helping the situation either. “Dad, we’ve got this. We’re a team, okay? Just like when I was playing football.”

“Except now you’re the star quarterback,” Chris said, probably trying to lighten the mood.

Oscar shuddered theatrically. “No thanks.”

Football was the one thing he and Dad always had in common. “Heh, I bet you’ve showed Nigel videos of all your old plays, yeah?” Scott asked, joining in on the attempt at levity.

“No, Dad.”

“Why not?”

He didn’t want to say it was only ever a means to an end, not when it had meant so much to his father. “Because I didn’t peak in college.”

“I *have* seen a lot of spreadsheets,” Nigel called from the back. “So many spreadsheets.”

“Hey, spreadsheets are important for keeping track of income and expenses,” Oscar protested.

“You sit up late reading the tax code.”

“It’s interesting!”

Dad laughed weakly. “Did you know he offered to do our household budget when he was ten?”

“No one appreciates me,” Oscar muttered.

The beam of his flashlight showed the trees falling back, then caught on the tent and van. Thank god. He checked his watch and silently cursed. It was going on eight o’clock now.

Four hours to get everything together, go into the distillery, and remove three separate ghosts.

He pushed the thought aside. Fretting about the time wouldn’t change anything. Either they would get the job done before midnight, or Agnes would try to kill him.

Oscar's muscles ached as they left the tent behind and made for the distillery. The fall in the woods, combined with the car crash, had left him with an assortment of bruises and scrapes, all of which he had to ignore for a few more hours at least.

Dad had wanted to come with them, determined to help in any way he could. Which was an improvement...except that Oscar had to gently let him down. It was too dangerous to have an amateur in the mix tonight, so they left him behind with Tina and a canister of salt. The snow had dissolved the big circle around the tent, but if it got anywhere near midnight, or if Tina spotted anything suspicious on the outside camera, she could at least create a smaller one inside for just the two of them.

Snow clung to the old stone of the original building, like frosting on a cake. It would have been beautiful as a postcard, or as a print to sell on their website, but in the freezing night, under a deadline set by a vengeful ghost, it lost its charm.

They made their way to the main building and slipped through the rotting door. Oscar stamped the snow from his boots and shook it off his jacket.

"I don't know if the thermal is going to pick up anything in this weather," Chris said as they followed suit. "How much colder can a ghost make it?"

Nigel took off his glasses, fished a microfiber cloth from his pants pocket, and wiped off the clinging snowmelt. "It isn't something that's been studied. Presumably at some point there isn't enough ambient energy in the air for a ghost to draw on it effectively, but when?"

Oscar stepped from the hall to the distilling room and stopped. "It doesn't matter," he said quietly. "I see him."

Jeff Corbett stood on the uppermost catwalk, looking down. He had a thin, flat aspect to him, like an old black-and-white film strip projected onto mist. Even from a distance, Oscar could see the small, satisfied smile as he gazed down on

the ruined distilling room, perhaps seeing it not as it was, but as it had been.

Then Jeff's arms flew up, he stumbled—and plummeted over the side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“HOLY SHIT, I SAW IT!” Chris whispered, aiming the camera at the spot on the floor where Jeff’s broken body lay. “Like a mist?”

Oscar’s heart thumped, and he shook his head, though not in disagreement. “I see more. Stay here, both of you.”

“I have my salt ready,” Nigel said. “And the EMF reader.”

“Put it on silent, so it won’t interfere with an EVP,” Oscar instructed. “And wait here.”

The grime of years—dust, paint flecks, rust—ground under Oscar’s boots as he crossed the concrete floor. A trickle of snow came through a few broken panes in the skylights far above. He took a deep breath, tuned his awareness to the ground under his feet and the physicality of his own body.

“Jeff Corbett,” he said, thumbing on the digital recorder at his belt as he did so.

A flicker—and the figure was back on the catwalk.

“I’m Oscar—we spoke last night,” he said, unsure how much, if anything, a ghost remembered from day to day. “Can you speak to me?”

But words weren’t how Jeff chose to communicate with him.

A sensation swept over Oscar, so wildly different from anything he was feeling at the moment that he knew it came from outside of himself. A sense of covetous pride swelled within him. *This was his triumph, built by his family piece by painstaking piece. Everyone who worked here, the very*

lifeblood of the town, depended on him. He could do what he wanted—it wasn't as if the sheriff was going to haul in the man who employed half his family.

Then a wave of dizziness, a sharp blow, pain—

Oscar let out a sharp breath and envisioned his shielding, building a barrier between himself and Jeff's feelings. The broken body lay there again before him, before dissolving and returning to the catwalk above.

“Oscar?” Nigel asked.

He held out a staying hand, then returned his concentration to Jeff. “You used to be something in life,” he said, and managed not to add “*a privileged asshole*” on the end. “But that time is gone, has been for seventy-five years.”

Jeff fell again, and Oscar tried not to flinch. “This is no way to spend an afterlife,” he said. “You asked me to help you, and I want to do that. You don't have to stay here.”

The body on the ground flickered—then stood in front of him. Its skull was half-crushed from the impact, but its remaining eye watched him hopefully.

Oscar envisioned a silvery doorway in the air to one side, just as he had back at the Matthews house all those months ago. “Can you see the door?” he asked, pointing. “Go through it, and you'll be free. No more falling; no more pain.”

The ghost's face changed, from shattered to whole. His eyes fixed on the doorway, and a sense of relief washed over Oscar from him.

Then he stepped through and was gone.

“The EMF meter has dropped back into green,” Nigel murmured in a low voice.

Oscar nodded. “Yeah. He's crossed over.” He turned back to his friends. “One down, two to go.”

Dread crept up Nigel's spine as they neared the powerhouse.

Jeff Corbett had crossed over easily enough, though given his terrible afterlife and his earlier request for help, that was no real surprise. He certainly had never come across as a violent ghost.

Unlike his father, Edwin, in the powerhouse.

Edwin had menaced them earlier, drained every battery he could get his hands on, shocked Tina, and burned a hapless moth to ash. Their presence on the property would have only offered up more ambient energy to feed off in the meantime, coupled with what he'd grabbed from the batteries last night.

He was very angry and very dangerous. And that combination chilled Nigel to his core.

They paused in the turbine hall, close to the stairs. Oscar scanned the room, looking for something Nigel would never be able to see. "I think he's still in the switching room...for the moment."

"Let's set up here, then," Nigel said.

They unfolded the Faraday tent; thankfully, they'd practiced setting it up back when it first arrived, and were able to do so now in less than a minute. After what happened at the Matthews house, Nigel was paranoid about rips, and gave it a quick once-over to make sure it didn't need a patch from the extra netting crammed into his backpack. Satisfied, he stepped back so Oscar could unzip his own backpack and take out a dozen or so extra batteries, which he heaped in the center of the tent.

With luck, the electrical feast would get Edwin's attention, he'd slip through the open door of the tent and set off the EMF meter Oscar put beside the batteries. The moment that happened, Oscar would spring into action and zip up the tent, trapping Edwin inside. From there it would be a matter of convincing him to move on.

Nigel touched the side of the tent, then pulled off his own backpack. "I have an idea," he said, pulling out a length of the spare Faraday netting.

Oscar looked at him askance, but followed his instructions to tie one end to the metal railing surrounding the open stairwells, and another to a pipe running up the wall. “Are you going to share with the class?” Oscar asked when they were done.

“The silver thread in the netting will act as a conductor,” Nigel explained. “Since we tied it off to ground, if Edwin passes through it on his way to the tent, it will drain off some of his energy and hopefully make him more likely to go straight for the batteries to recharge.”

“Smart,” Oscar said. “I see they didn’t give you that PhD for nothing.”

Nigel’s cheeks warmed at the compliment. “Similar techniques of using grounding to drain spectral energy have been tried before. I’m just employing what we have on hand.”

Oscar turned toward the door to the switching room. “Okay, I’ll go in. You two wait here.”

“No.” Nigel held up his canister of salt when Oscar opened his mouth to object. “I agreed to split up when we were looking for Agnes’s bones, and she stalked and terrorized you. I’m not going to do so again.”

“This could be dangerous.”

“I know. That’s why I’m going with you.” He shook the salt canister for emphasis.

Oscar nodded. “Okay, then. Let’s go.”

Nigel’s nerves drew tight as they crossed the turbine hall. The door to the switching room seemed too small, a tight space meant to trap anyone inside.

No, no—he needed to be calm, damn it. His fear was just giving Edwin more energy to feed off, to use against them.

Oscar stepped through the doorway first, followed by Nigel. They didn’t go far inside, in case they needed a fast exit.

“Edwin Corbett,” Oscar said in an authoritative voice, “you’ve lingered on this side of the veil long enough. It’s time

to move on and finally be at peace.”

Even Nigel could feel what happened next. A static charge seemed to build in the air, prickling at the fine hairs of his arms. There was a brief scent of ozone, that gave way far too quickly to the smell of burning, rancid meat.

Oscar’s nostrils flared. “The distillery is gone, Edwin,” he said. “I’m the last of the family line, and I’m telling you to let go. You don’t need to suffer being trapped here anymore.”

An eerie blue glow appeared at every point of metal, dancing across the switches embedded in the wall.

Saint Elmo’s fire—the precursor to a lightning strike.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“LET’S GO!” Nigel yelled, grabbing Oscar’s arm and pulling him toward the door.

Electricity crackled and arced, and something popped, sending a shower of sparks out around them. The stink of burning insulation joined the smell of rotting meat, and every hair on Nigel’s head rose in warning.

“Go! Go, go, go!” he shouted, and kept shouting as Oscar hauled them through the door and broke into a run. Their boots pounded the concrete, slipping on the grit and detritus, but Nigel didn’t dare look back. He didn’t need to—he knew in his bones *something* was on his heels, a whirlwind of rage that meant to drag them into death to join it.

“Duck!” Oscar cried.

Nigel hit the floor and rolled, not caring about the flash of pain as his body struck the unyielding concrete. Praying that momentum would keep them just out of reach of the dead man pursuing them.

“It worked!” Chris’s voice was high and wild with fear and excitement. “It worked, doc!”

Nigel twisted around, still on his back on the floor. The net stretched between the rail and pipe crackled and flashed as its silver thread conducted energy away from Edwin and into the earth.

Oscar’s big hand closed on Nigel’s arm and hauled him to his feet. “Back, back, back!”

They stumbled back to join Chris, on the far side of the tent. With the spirit's energy drained so low, he couldn't sense anything of it, wasn't sure even Oscar would be able to.

But that was all right. They'd left a feast right in plain sight, just waiting for it.

The EMF meter in the Faraday tent went off, lighting up like a Christmas tree.

Oscar didn't waste any time. He scrambled to the front of the tent, grabbed the zipper, and closed it in one smooth motion.

Nigel joined him, eyes scanning the overlapping seams along the zipper to make sure nothing had bunched or jammed that might create a break in the cage. But the tent had worked as advertised.

The EMF meter continued to go off angrily. Oscar focused his attention on the tent and said, "Edwin Corbett, you have a choice now. Cross over and find peace, or we carry this tent, with you in it, off the property and leave you there for the rest of eternity. Either way, your days of haunting this place are over."

For a long moment, nothing seemed to happen, and Nigel's heart sank. They could try to carry the tent off the property, as Oscar had threatened, through the deep snow, and get back with enough time to deal with Ivan...but he didn't like their odds of success.

Assuming Agnes would let them leave, even to carry one of her hated enemies away.

The EMF reader flickered, high to medium, then back... then fell abruptly silent and dark.

"Is he gone?" Chris asked.

Oscar nodded. "Yeah. He's moved on."

It might have been Nigel's imagination, but the air felt somehow lighter. "Thank god."

"Yeah." Oscar pulled him into a hug. "That idea of yours, to put up the net and hope he'd pass through it, was a

lifesaver.”

“Yes, well, I have to earn my keep somehow,” Nigel said shakily. But it was too soon to give into the urge to collapse, so he took a step back. “That just leaves Ivan.” He checked his watch. “Shit. It’s eleven o’clock already.”

Oscar grabbed his backpack from the floor. “Then let’s fold up the tent and get moving.”

They trudged through the snow to the aging warehouse as quickly as possible, Oscar carrying the folded-up tent beneath his arm. The plan for Ivan was fairly simple, just a variation on what they’d used to trap and remove Edwin. There was no need to reinvent the wheel, after all, certainly not when the clock was ticking.

Nestled safely inside Nigel’s backpack was the old Cloven Oak Whiskey bottle filled with spring water that Mamaw had once set her lips to. Between the bottle and water from the spring that he’d done murder to own, Oscar figured it would be a powerful trigger object for Ivan.

They’d set up the tent, put the bottle inside, Ivan would take a closer look, the EMF meter would go off, they’d zip up the tent, and Oscar would convince him to move on. Agnes would be satisfied and move on as well.

They could do this.

The air of the aging warehouse felt like ice on Oscar’s skin when he stepped inside, and the thick shadows seemed to resist the beams of his headlamp and flashlight. The overwhelming sense of something watching and waiting pushed against him like a physical force, and he hurriedly strengthened his shielding.

“He’s definitely paying attention to us,” he said, stepping further inside and swinging the beam of his flashlight from side to side. “Let’s hurry and—”

A ghastly white face loomed up directly before him.

Like his son and grandson, Ivan still bore the marks of his violent death. The body beneath his severe black suit was distorted where the barrels had crushed him, with fragments of bone jutting through the fabric. Mold crawled across the blue-white skin of his face, and his withered lips drew back, exposing small, sharp teeth.

“Fuck!” Oscar jerked back instinctively and almost dropped his flashlight.

He might as well have; its light weakened, then went out altogether as darkness boiled around them.

“My offspring,” Ivan snarled in a deep voice like the rumble of falling barrels. “A weakling. A fool. I won’t fall for your tricks!”

All the lights went out at once.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

OSCAR FLUNG up his arms as a frigid blast of wind struck him. The old timbers of the aging warehouse groaned, and for a horrible moment he wondered if the whole structure was on the verge of collapse.

“This is *my* land!” Ivan roared, in his ear or his head, he couldn’t tell. “I paid for it in blood, and you won’t drive me off it.”

“*You* didn’t pay in blood!” Oscar stumbled, then found his footing. He called up his shields and dropped into a defensive stance. “Agnes is the one who paid for your greed. You started this cycle of hatred and revenge, and it’s long past time to end it.” He drew a breath and focused hard on creating an opening in the veil to the other side behind Ivan.

“Ivan Corbett, go through the veil!” he commanded. “Leave this place, and trouble it no more!”

He charged at Ivan—but the ghost slipped away.

Oscar’s foot caught on a piece of decaying wood, and he went sprawling. The dirty floor scraped the skin from his palms, and his chin clipped the ground, sending a flare of pain and the taste of blood from a bitten tongue.

“I don’t think so,” Ivan growled, and a heavy weight settled on Oscar’s back.

His fingers scrabbled on the floor as he tried to drag himself out from under it, but the weight was too great. His breath whooshed out of him—and when he tried to take

another breath, discovered he couldn't expand his lungs against the hideous pressure.

Animal panic set in, and he tried to thrash, but there was nothing he could do. Was this how Ivan had felt during his last moments, the implacable weight of the whiskey barrels crushing the life out of him? Spots flared in front of his eyes, and he tried to scream, but had no breath to do so—

“Over here!” Nigel shouted, and light flared, shockingly bright after the darkness.

Nigel crouched a short distance away, the contents of his backpack scattered. He must have managed to get a new battery in his flashlight, because he shone it now at what he held in his upraised hand.

The whiskey bottle filled with spring water.

The warehouse groaned again, and suddenly the weight was lifted from Oscar's back. He drew in great gasping breaths, found enough oxygen to wheeze, “Nigel, look out!”

Oscar didn't know what Nigel could see without a medium's talent, but in his vision, Ivan rushed across the room with a roar of fury. He struck Nigel a savage blow, sending him to the floor. The neck of the whiskey bottle caught on one of the discarded planks on the way down, and broke off, leaving the body of the bottle still in Nigel's hand.

Spring water splashed out in a wide arc. A few droplets struck Ivan's ghostly form—and he screamed.

Oscar heaved to his feet even as Ivan drew back, arms flung up. Ragged holes gaped in his ethereal form, as though he'd been hit by acid.

“The water—throw it on him!” Oscar yelled.

At the same moment, Chris appeared in the circle of light, canister of salt in their hand. “Fuck off!” they shouted and began pouring handful after handful of salt and hurling it at Ivan.

Ivan shrieked and began to retreat before the double assault. But Oscar wasn't about to let him slip away.

He envisioned a beam of white light pouring down into him, reinvigorating his mind. He took a centering breath, steadied his feet against the solidity of the earth.

“Ivan Corbett,” he said, as calmly as he could manage. “Your time of anger and suffering is at an end. Cross over, and be at peace forevermore.”

He held out his arms like an embrace and opened the gateway in the space between them. For a moment, he wasn't certain that Ivan would take the offered escape, even being pelted with salt and spring water.

Then the ghost turned to the gateway and fled through.

In the last second, Oscar caught a glimpse of his face. The marks of death vanished, leaving him whole. His eyes widened slightly, as if at an unexpected, but not unwelcome, surprise, and a smile of relief curved his lips.

Then he was gone.

“Oscar! Are you all right!” Scott shouted from outside the warehouse.

Nigel felt as though his legs might go from under him. He sat back, careful to avoid the broken-off neck of the whiskey bottle with its jagged edges.

“I'm fine, Dad!” Oscar called. “I told you to stay in the tent with Tina, didn't I?”

Scott came in, looking anxious. “I know, but the feed cut out! I was worried.”

Nigel turned the remainder of the bottle over in his hand. A few drops of spring water still clung to the interior. Chris switched out the battery in their camera, then crouched by him, aiming the lens at the bottle. “What happened? I mean, why did the water do that to him?”

“The spring was supposed to have special properties.” He looked up as Oscar approached, trailed by his father. “There is

some anecdotal evidence to suggest certain minerals or crystals can affect a medium's talent, and possibly ghosts as well. At a guess, something dissolved in the water acts to drain a ghost's power, the same way salt does."

Oscar stared at the bottle. "Mamaw drank from the spring, remember? Do you think...is that why she survived?"

"Perhaps."

Oscar extended a hand and helped Nigel to his feet. Uncertain what else to do with a broken, jagged bottle, Nigel set it on the floor and grabbed his backpack. "We've done what Agnes wanted. Should we go back to the tent?"

Oscar nodded. "Yeah, back to the tent. I could use an energy bar and a chance to sit down after that. Hopefully Agnes will move on by herself, now that the Corbetts are gone." He checked his watch. "With five minutes to spare."

"Happy New Year," Chris said with a shaky grin. "We should have brought champagne."

They made their way back across the snow-covered ground. The storm had blown away, and moonlight struggled through openings in the clouds. The purr of the generator outside the tent was the only sound nearby, possibly the only sound for miles.

"I wish we could've found her bones," Oscar said, breaking the silence unexpectedly. "Given her a proper burial."

Nigel turned to the slope. Whenever the moon peeked out, the snow reflected its light, allowing him to see more of the forest than he would have on an ordinary night. "There's a lot of mountain to search, especially if she's moved on and there's no EMF signal to guide a searcher."

Scott paused beside him and frowned at the mountain sweeping away above them. "I don't think anyone would want to lug a body very far through that. I bet we could find her, if there's anything left."

Oscar sighed. "That's a task for another day. Right now, we—"

The walkie-talkies crackled. “I’ve got movement,” Tina warned. “There’s a shape heading your way, coming from the direction of the mountain.”

“Is Agnes coming to make sure we got rid of them?” Chris asked nervously.

“Nigel, get out the spirit box, in case she wants to talk,” Oscar said calmly. He took out his EMF reader and held it ready in his hand.

Nigel shucked his backpack off into the snow and dug out the spirit box. Its static filled the air, the sound jarring in the otherwise peaceful night.

Chris shouldered their camera and started filming, first focusing on the spirit box, then swinging around to the EMF meter in Oscar’s hand. The meter blipped once, twice—then started a steady climb toward red.

Something was here.

“Look!” Scott gasped, pointing.

Impressions of slender, bare feet appeared in the fresh blanket of snow, one after the next as their unseen owner made her way toward them.

Nigel’s heart seemed to stutter in his chest, and he gripped the spirit box tighter. “A-Agnes?”

“That’s close enough,” Oscar warned. “Please stop right there.”

The footprints came to a halt, feet lined up and facing them. All the hair on the back of Nigel’s neck stood up, and part of his brain screamed at him to run, to get away from this unnatural thing.

“I did what you asked,” Oscar told her.

“No,” said the mechanical voice of the spirit box.

It was just a blip—single syllables could just be the result of a radio broadcast breaking through, or of their own minds finding a pattern that wasn’t really there.

But Oscar was frowning. “Ivan, Edwin, and Jeff are all gone, and they won’t be coming back. They left before midnight. That was our agreement—I remove the Corbetts, and you end your vendetta.”

“*Not all,*” the spirit box replied.

“What do you mean?” Oscar’s brows drew together—then his eyes widened in realization. “Oh shit. Dad, run!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SNOW ROARED up around them in a whirlwind. Oscar lunged, grabbed his dad's arm, trying to haul him away from the ghost.

Why hadn't he seen it? Agnes had offered to spare him so long as he removed all Corbetts from her land. Oscar knew she'd considered Mamaw a Corbett, *knew* it, but he'd assumed she'd be satisfied with the ghosts.

But of course she hadn't been, not when there was still someone other than Oscar who had Corbett blood in his veins, standing right there in front of her.

Then Tina was there, salt canister in one hand. She poured a constant stream out, throwing palmful after palmful in Agnes's direction.

It worked. Salt caught the ghost straight in the face, tearing a thousand tiny holes in the shimmering ectoplasm that had begun to form a body. Her scream seemed to pierce straight into Oscar's brain—then fell silent. The snow began to drift back down to the ground.

"You did it!" Chris exclaimed, and flung an arm around Tina, pulling her into a hug.

"I was watching over the cameras." She hugged them back, then turned to Oscar. "I'm glad you guys were close enough for me to help."

"Me too," Oscar said fervently. "Thanks, Tina, you saved our bacon."

"Is the ghost gone?" Dad asked shakily.

“No.” He could sense her watching, waiting. “Let’s get into the tent, pour a salt circle around ourselves, and wait out the rest of the night. Hopefully tomorrow it’ll be safe to try and walk out.”

“It’s past midnight,” Nigel said shakily. “She’s operating outside of her twenty-five year time frame.”

“I know.” Oscar ran a hand over his face. They’d been so close, damn it.

Unless she’d never really intended to let him leave. Maybe she’d lied, or had some other trick planned; they’d never know now.

“Chris and I will look for her bones as soon as it’s light,” Nigel said, starting toward the tent. “You and Scott will stay safely in the salt circle, along with Tina.”

“That’s what you were looking for when I found you, right?” Dad asked. “Up on the hill near that big old tree?”

“The cloven oak,” Oscar confirmed. “Ivan named the distillery after it...” He trailed off, a horrible thought suddenly occurring to him. “That’s where he put her body.”

Nigel’s lips parted in surprise, and he slowly swung around to face the hillside. “If there’s a hollow formed where the trunk originally split, you could put a body down in it and no one would ever know.”

“Yes,” said the spirit box, causing them all to jump. Then: “*Too late for you.*”

The lights in the tent began to dim.

Tina’s head snapped around, eyes going wide behind the lenses of her glasses. “Is the generator dying?”

The light dimmed, then brightened—then went out, leaving them with only the glow of the flashlights and the intermittent moon. But the generator was still running, still sounded normal.

“Oh no.” Nigel took a step back. “She’s feeding off the electricity!”

The wind began to swirl around them, and Oscar's ears popped as the barometric pressure dropped. The cold intensified, until it hurt to breathe in the icy air. The tent flapped wildly, the snow on top of it whipping off in streams in the breeze.

Swirling. Forming a figure.

"The spring!" Nigel shouted. "The water will give some protection! I'll get her bones!"

"It's too dangerous—" Oscar began, but Nigel was already running for the bridge over the creek.

"You're the ones she's after!" he yelled back over his shoulder. "Stay alive until I get back. I love you!"

Then the gale rising around them swallowed him up, and he was gone.

Nigel's chest ached, from a combination of the frosty air and unaccustomed exertion, by the time he reached the little bridge. The snow dragged at his feet, slowing him to a stumbling walk, and he swore at it.

The sound of heavy breathing came from behind him, and he spun, heart hammering somehow even harder. Chris flung up their hand as Nigel's flashlight beam caught them in the eyes, and Nigel hastily lowered it. "What are you doing?"

"I thought...you might...need help," Chris panted. "Fuck this...snow."

"We can't rest," Nigel said, though he wanted nothing more than to sit down and catch his breath. Oscar's life—and Scott's of course—hung on his ability to get to the tree, find the bones, and get back before the ghost slaughtered them. Possibly Tina's, too; Agnes had never shown any hostility toward those not of the Corbett blood before, but he had the feeling all bets were off now.

"I know," Chris said. "Let's go."

The clouds had closed back up, and a light snow began to fall again. Breath puffing into steam, Nigel swung his flashlight back and forth, searching the dark slope for the great oak.

There: it stood apart from the lesser, younger trees, a sprawling monster black against the snow. Tortured limbs sagged beneath their burden of snow, and the size of it inspired awe even in these circumstances. How long had it stood here, how many centuries had passed since some accident—a lightning strike, perhaps—had split the trunk into three?

A human lifetime was just a blink to it, utterly insignificant, and even the century and a half since Agnes's bones had come to rest in it was only a chapter of its existence.

Nigel struggled up the slope to the tree. Boulders jutted out, the bones of the mountain breaking through dirt skin, and he gripped them as his feet threatened to slide out from under him in the snow.

Finally, he was at the base of the tree. The wind picked up, scattering snow, and the eerie groan of laden branches rubbing together filled the air. Somewhere farther up the mountain, a limb broke under its burden, the crack like a gunshot in the silence.

The cleft in the oak was too high for Nigel to reach. He tried jumping, then turned to Chris. "Can you reach inside?"

Chris was taller, but even a jump wasn't enough for them to reach either. They shook their head. "I'm going to have to boost you up. Or you can climb on my back—that might be better."

Nigel wasn't certain...but they didn't have time for a better plan. "Okay."

Chris went to their hands and knees, like a stepping stool, the top of their head pressed against the bark. "Put your feet on my shoulders."

Nigel knocked his boot against the trunk, shaking off as much snow as possible, then gingerly stepped onto Chris's shoulder. They grunted, but said, "I'm good; keep going."

Nigel stepped fully onto Chris's shoulders; neither of them were steady, but he could put his hand against the trunk to help. The cavity was in reach now; he stretched as high as he could and thrust his hand between the split of the three trunks.

His fingers met snow; pushing it aside, he encountered last fall's dead leaves. "I'm going to need to get up into the tree," he called down.

"Hold on." Chris became even more wobbly beneath him; then their hands closed on his ankles. With a grunt, they got their knees up under them, shoving Nigel higher.

There was no hope of looping an arm around one of the enormous trunks emerging from the split, but he managed to get enough purchase to haul himself onto the nearest one. Scattering snow everywhere, he threw a leg awkwardly across, then maneuvered into a half-sitting position.

The cleft in the tree had been filled in with year after year of fallen leaves, pollen, and dust. He dug into it with both hands, quickly uncovering a layer of rich, damp earth created by the decay. Gritting his teeth, he kept digging through the loose soil, tossing it aside so it lay black against the white snow. She had to be here; he couldn't be on the wrong track, Oscar's life might depend on it...

His fingers encountered something hard. He dug more frantically, hooking his fingers in and trying to drag it free.

A moment later, it came loose. Tannins from the rotting oak leaves had stained it a rich brown, but what leered up at him was unmistakably a human skull.

Snow stung Oscar's face, and he grabbed onto his dad's arm, dragging him along as he ran.

All around them, the old buildings creaked and groaned as the wind of Agnes's fury rose. "Go to the powerhouse," he called to Tina. "The place is solid, and it's us she wants!"

Tina didn't argue, peeling off and racing in the direction of the powerhouse. Oscar risked a glance over his shoulder. In the midst of the howling wind and swirling snow, he glimpsed the figure of a woman, her burning eyes fixed on him with a look of deepest hatred.

"How far?" Dad gasped, already out of breath.

"Not far," Oscar lied. "Just run!"

As they passed the most deteriorated of the buildings, the buffeting wind caught the ancient, rotting timbers. The nearest structure let out a tortured howl, nails tearing free of wood—and began to come down.

Oscar jerked his dad hard to one side; vicious nails protruding from a board came within inches of impaling him. Snow billowed around them, and a roof tile hit Oscar hard on the shoulder.

"This is crazy!" Dad yelled.

Oscar didn't have the breath to agree. He put his head down and plowed ahead, imagining white light pouring down on them both. He didn't know if Dad carried any of the gift, or if it had skipped a generation, and there was no time to find out now.

The huge metal grain silo groaned threateningly, but stood against the storm. Branches broke from the lashing trees, pelting against their backs. Snow lifted from the ground, forming a huge whirlwind, until Oscar was no longer sure he was running in the right direction.

Finally the spring house loomed out of the darkness in front of them. Relief swamped Oscar as he stumbled to the door and wrenched it open. Dad ran through, and Oscar followed, slamming the door behind them.

With the sound of the wind blocked out, the calming silence of the springhouse enveloped them. Dad leaned against the wall, staring at the pool of water. "Are we safe now?"

"Not yet." Oscar dropped his backpack and dug out the salt. "I'm going to put a line of salt across the door, then—"

An unseen force slammed into the door. On instinct, Oscar dropped the salt and braced his shoulder against the wood to keep it shut.

He realized his mistake a second later, when the door smashed inward, the old planks coming apart before Agnes's rage. He staggered back, foot connecting with the salt canister and sending it flying into the shadows.

Agnes stood before him, the cold fire of the dead burning in the sockets where her eyes had once been. After feasting on the generator's electricity, she was more solid than he'd ever seen her—and more terrifying. Slick skin clung to her bones, and her hair hung in wet strings. Her simple homespun dress was ragged and soaked through, dripping water onto the concrete floor.

“Wait!” he cried, holding up his hands. “You can find peace! You don't have to—”

A blast of force slammed into him, hurling him away from her. His back connected with the metal railing around the spring, and for a moment he thought it would hold.

But a combination of the blow and his weight proved too much for the rusting iron and crumbling concrete. There came a loud *snap*—then he was falling backward, and the icy water of the spring closed over his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE COLD WAS SO intense it shocked the breath out of Oscar. His boots, coat, and layers of clothes dragged him down, into the crystalline depths.

Then a figure cut through the water and grabbed his hand, tugging him upwards.

Dad had jumped in to save him, and if they didn't both get back out fast, the cold would kill them.

Oscar managed to shuck his coat, letting go of Dad's hand to free himself of its weight. He kicked hard, forcing his muscles to move even when they wanted to lock into place in the freezing water. It was easier without the waterlogged coat, and within seconds his head broke the surface.

He took a heaving gasp, the frigid air searing his lungs. Dad came up beside him, gasping and sputtering.

"We need to get out," Oscar said through chattering teeth. The water was leaching the warmth from his body fast; already his fingers and toes were going numb and his movements slowing. He struck out for the side, grabbed ahold of the iron railing—then froze.

Agnes circled toward him. If he climbed out, she'd be ready to push him back in.

The water. They had to try the water on her.

Oscar scooped up water in his palm and threw it in her direction. She jittered back, too fast for him to track the movement, and as far as he could tell none of the drops actually reached her.

“Sp-splash her,” he said through lips going numb.

Dad tried, flailing his arms, but had no better luck.

They were going to die here, succumb to the cold and drown, and all Agnes had to do was stand back and watch.

“T-Take me!” Dad said. “I’ll climb out, you can do whatever you want to me, but leave Oscar alone.”

Oscar reached for him. “Dad, no!”

But Dad had already hoisted himself up and over the railing. He stood shivering in front of Agnes, facing her with a look of mixed fear and determination on his face. “You took my mama from me, you damned haint, but you’re not getting my son.”

Agnes floated closer, her mouth twisting into an inhuman grin. “How do you mean to stop me?”

“Like this!” Chris yelled from the broken doorway, and hurled a handful of salt through her back.

Several things happened at once. Her attention broken, Agnes turned to the new threat in the doorway. Oscar reached up, out of the water, and Dad helped haul him over the railing.

And Nigel darted past Chris, a dirty bundle clutched to his chest.

He flung the bundle in an arc, high over the water. It came apart in the air: old bones caked with dirt and fragments of rotting cloth. They struck the water, sending up splashes high into the air, then sank immediately to the bottom.

Agnes recoiled toward the door, a ghastly shriek erupting from her rotting throat. Chris flung more salt at her back, and she cried out again. For a moment, she hovered between the twin threats of water and salt.

Then she began to advance into the springhouse again. For a terrible moment, Oscar thought the bones had made no difference, that Nigel had simply thrown away the only talisman they might be able to use to control her.

But with every footstep closer, she changed. Her flesh filled out, her dress went from tattered to whole, and her hair no longer dripped with water. Eyes that carried more confusion than anger sought his gaze.

Oscar was shaking from the cold, but he nevertheless took a step toward her. Dad grabbed his arm. "Don't!"

"It's okay," he said, gently pulling free. "I have a job to do."

He faced Agnes, taking her in. She looked heartbreakingly young, her life cut so short.

"I'm sorry for what happened to you," he said. "But it's over now."

Her gaze drifted to the spring. "He found me here, when this was mine. His hands were so strong. 'If you want this spring, then have it.' The water burned when it filled my lungs."

"Ivan Corbett was a monster," Oscar agreed. "But you've had your revenge many times over. It's time for you to go." He took a deep breath and said, "Agnes Dillon, be at peace. Leave this place, and trouble the living no more."

Between one moment and the next, she vanished, leaving behind only a sigh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE DILLON FAMILY cemetery lay at the end of a long dirt road, far back in what Oscar and Scott referred to as “the holler.” The winter sun shone down brightly as Oscar parked the van near a low stone wall encircling a number of weathered headstones. From the dead grass poking up through the snow, Nigel guessed that no one came here much anymore. Though sad, the abandonment was perfect for an illicit burial.

“I haven’t been here in years,” Scott said as he climbed out of the van. “I must have just been a kid at the time.”

Once Agnes was gone, they’d hurried to get Scott and Oscar back to the van, out of their wet clothing, and wrapped up in blankets with the heat blasting. Early the next morning, emergency responders showed up to get them out; when Scott didn’t come back the night before, Lisa had sounded the alarm.

Nigel expected to get in trouble with the police for trespassing, since they had no official permission to be on the property. But the sheriff clearly knew Scott—not surprising, given the town only had eight-hundred people in it—and only said she hoped they’d all learned a lesson and wouldn’t be wasting the time of emergency services in the future.

The snow thawed over the next couple of days, until it was possible to go back for the van and have the SUV towed out. While they were there, they used a pool skimmer to carefully scoop Agnes’s remains from the bottom of the spring.

Oscar grabbed a shovel and followed his father. Nigel and the others hung back while Scott searched the graveyard,

brushing snow away and trying to read the weathered inscriptions. Finally, he stood back and called, "Here she is!"

"Let's take a look," Lisa said, and Nigel, Chris, and Tina trailed after her.

The headstone had been eaten away by rain and wind, but the words carved into it could still be made out.

Virginia Leigh Dillon

B. 1867

D. 1966

Beloved mother and grandmother.

"Do you remember her at all?" Oscar asked.

Scott shook his head. "No. I wish I did, but I was too young when she passed."

Oscar nodded sadly. "Yeah, it sounds like she was something else. Where do you want to put Agnes?"

Scott surveyed the area, then pointed to an open patch of ground to one side. "There. She and her baby sister can finally be together again."

Lisa folded her arms over her ample chest. "Would Virginia even want that? Agnes hurt your mother something awful, and then tried to kill you and Oscar. And did kill other people. I don't get why you didn't just leave her in the spring."

"For one thing, we didn't want someone to find her later, and end up being questioned by the authorities," Nigel said, pushing his glasses higher on his nose.

Oscar cast him an amused glance. "Nigel isn't wrong, but...I don't know." His expression shifted into something more thoughtful. "She did terrible things...but she was suffering, too. Trapped in anger, in the desire to make someone pay for her death. But there's no price in the world that could give her back what she lost, so she just kept lashing out." He shook his head. "It's not for me to judge. My duty is just to give peace to the dead who can't find it on their own."

Lisa looked abashed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Judge not lest ye be judged, and all that.”

Oscar took the shovel and started in on the spot Scott had selected. Though cold, the ground wasn’t frozen solid, and he dug with minimal difficulty. Scott took over toward the end, and Oscar went back to the van and opened the back. A minute later, he returned, carefully carrying one of his mother’s handmade quilts. Wrapped inside was all that remained of Agnes.

Nigel felt as though he ought to say something as Oscar lowered the quilt into the hole, but couldn’t think of anything appropriate. Tina whispered something that might have been a prayer in Spanish as Scott began to fill the hole in again, but otherwise they were all silent.

Once the earth was tamped down, they scooped some snow on top, so there wouldn’t be an obvious disturbance. Not that anyone was likely to come here outside of hunting season, but there was no reason to court trouble.

When they were done, Oscar said, “I’d like a moment, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” Chris said. “I’m going to get back in the van and get warm.”

Nigel hesitated. “Can I stay with you?”

The smile Oscar gave him warmed him to his toes. “Absolutely.”

The two of them stood in silence for a while, staring down at the grave that was the culmination of over a century of injustice. Then Oscar sighed and took Nigel’s hand. “Well, that wasn’t the way I hoped you’d meet my parents.”

“I don’t know, I think Scott’s come around.”

Oscar snorted. “Yeah, after Mamaw practically smacked him upside the head.” He sighed again. “I haven’t felt her again in the house, since we came back.”

Nigel squeezed his hand. “I suppose she’d done what she set out to do. Protect you as best she could, while you settled

her unfinished business.”

“And Dad.”

“And your dad helped, yes.” Nigel glanced up at him. “Do you think your relationship will be better now?”

“Definitely. I mean, I wouldn’t have said it was bad...but it couldn’t be good, either, not with me hiding things from him, and him refusing to believe me. Now we’ll have a real chance to connect, I think.” Oscar turned to face him. “But for now, I can’t wait to get out of here and back home to North Carolina.”

Nigel swallowed against unexpected nerves. “About that... ah, well, I...”

Oscar arched a brow at him, grinning.

“One thing this trip did was drive home the fact I don’t want to be without you.” Nigel straightened his shoulders, though he didn’t quite meet Oscar’s eyes. “I thought maybe... you’d like to move in together? If it’s too soon, I understand, I know we haven’t been dating that long, and—”

“I’d love to make a home together.”

Nigel blinked, then smiled. “You would?”

“I would,” Oscar confirmed, and kissed him beneath the winter sun.

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END NOTES

Big thanks to all of my Patreon patrons, especially Cindy S., Robin F., Noelle D., Amanda D., Erin, Dusk T., LB F., and Robin H. I couldn't do it without you!

Enormous thanks to patron Dave K., who suggested the name Cloven Oak for the distillery. "Cloven Oak" immediately brought to mind the true-crime mystery "Who Put Bella in the Wych Elm?" The idea of Ivan hiding a woman's body inside a tree filled in a great deal of the plot, and the book would have been very different without it.

Cloven Oak Distillery is loosely inspired by the Old Crow Distillery in Kentucky. Check out abandonedonline.net for some truly gorgeous photography of the site.

Back when I was writing *The Forgotten Dead*, I wondered if anyone made portable Faraday cages. As it turned out, you can buy everything from Faraday tents and netting to "EMF-shielding" hats, hoodies, sweatpants, scarves, bedsheets, and more. The internet is truly a fascinating place.

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Guardian Spirits

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jordan L. Hawk writes queer fiction with a helping of eldritch monsters and things that go bump in the night. His best-selling *Whyborne & Griffin* series was voted Favorite All-Time M/M Series in 2015 by the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. He spends his free time making video game characters fall in love in the Sims.

If you're interested in receiving Jordan's newsletter and being the first to know when new books are released, please sign up at his website: <http://www.jordanlhawk.com>. Or join his Facebook reader group, [Widdershins Knows Its Own](#).

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