

The Red Velvet Suite
By
Molly Wens

“You don’t believe in this ‘ghost’ crap, do you?” Geoff asked me as we strolled to my car.

“I don’t know, Geoff. I’ve seen a lot of weird things out there,” I answered non-committally. I put my bedroll and overnight case in the trunk and took the camera equipment from him. “I just like to keep an open mind.”

“And in the meantime I’m heating up left-overs while you’re out ghost-busting. That’s just great. I hope a really big ghost scares the shit out of you.” He shoved the remaining equipment at me and stalked back to the house in disgust.

“You’ll live,” I called over my shoulder as I slammed the trunk lid down.

I was starting to feel a touch of excitement and refused to allow his little tantrum to strain my mood. He was always behaving like a spoiled mama’s boy and when I didn’t give in to his whims he held out on me—sexually; and he’d been angry with me a lot recently. I realized just how sick of him I was becoming as I climbed behind the wheel of my prized, classic, candy-apple red 1965 Ford Mustang 2+2 Fastback with the 289ci V8 engine and fired her up.

I shoved all thoughts of dousing Geoff with honey and staking him out on an anthill to the back of my mind to feast upon later. If I didn’t hurry I was going to be late picking up Ted. I wondered what kind of clothing he would be wearing today. The last time I took him somewhere he was decked out in a black fishnet wife-beater tank, a hot pink jacket, and pink and black tiger-striped spandex pants. I rolled my eyes at the thought.

Ted was the research assistant for Professor Grable in the parapsychology department at the local university. When the professor had announced this little project to his team, Ted had suggested inviting me. I was squeamish at first. Frightening thoughts and disturbing childhood memories tickled at the corners of my mind. But the more excited Ted got, the more he wheedled me into accepting. So there I was, packing my things into my car for a weekend of ghost hunting. I had to laugh at myself. It was all too funny.

Ted was sitting on the steps of his apartment building when I arrived. He was elegantly dressed all in black with just a touch of mascara and lip-gloss, his things stacked around him. He peered over the top of the book he was reading when I pulled up. His face split into a wide grin as he stood and waved.

“You’re right on time, girlfriend,” he called when I opened my door. “I can’t wait to get started.” He gathered his things and loaded them into the trunk. “How’s Geoff taking it?”

“With his usual amount of exultation,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “He’ll get over it. Ready?”

Ted ran to the passenger side of the car and opened the door. “Baby, I was born ready.” He waggled his hips in a funny little dance. “Let’s go!” Ted sat down and slammed the car door a bit too hard for my liking. “Just what’s going on between you two anyway. Is the honeymoon over?”

“What honeymoon? You have to get married to have a honeymoon and, if I ever get married, it won’t be to him. I think he’s getting ready to move out anyway. He’ll

probably be gone by the time we get back on Sunday. If not, I'll toss him out on his lazy ass."

"It's about time, girlfriend. I never could stand that colossal prick." Ted was being all too pleased with himself as he adjusted and smoothed his outfit.

"Well, if it's any consolation, he can't stand you either. He hates all queers." I shot him my sweetest smile.

"Hey, do me a favor after you dump the homophobe, tell him I'm hot for his bod and wanna suck his dick." Ted laugh maniacally at his own joke. "Man, I can't wait to get there. This is so cool. Hit the gas, will ya? Let's see what this hotrod can do." His voice ended the sentence in an enthusiastic squeak.

It was hard not to be infected with his enthusiasm. This was the kind of hands-on research he loved doing. He and I had been friends for most of our lives and he loved to put me in situations that would make people stand back and scratch their heads. It all started when we were kids and his cousin, Martha, was babysitting us. Martha decided with it being so close to Halloween that we needed a good scare so she conducted a séance. I suppose it really wasn't much of a séance since she had absolutely no idea what the hell she was doing, but the end result was pretty bizarre. I had ended up on the floor convulsing in a fit of some kind.

Four doctors and two CT scans later no one could find a thing wrong with me and Martha was never allowed to sit with us again. To this day I have never talked about what happened to me that night and just thinking of it now gives me the heebie-jeebies.

But I digress. Anyway, there I was returning to the jaws of whatever was out there, driving through the open countryside. It was a brilliant fall day with just enough

autumn spice in the air to set the mood. The sun was shining brightly and the birds were singing joyously in the change of seasons. Little did those misguided little birdies know but the weekend was about to get a little freaky.

I decided to distract my thoughts from my memories. “So why you all decked out? I thought this was a working weekend. You look like you have a hot date.”

“Grable told me he’s bringing the new psych prof with him. I heard he’s a real hotty. A girl’s got to look her best, you know.” Ted pulled down the visor and preened in the mirror. He fluffed his lanky hair with his fingertips and turned back to me. “You look like you could use a little touching up yourself, sweetie. That man of yours is really dragging you down.”

My wounded woman’s pride demanded retribution. “Fuck you, sista! At least I don’t have shitty-looking stringy hair hanging in my eyes.”

“No, yours is frizzy and could use some hot oil.” He laughed at the expression on my face as I snapped my jaw shut.

It seemed to take forever before Ted told me to slow down. He was looking for the turn we were to take. His directions had taken us down a gravel road in the middle of nowhere. It hardly seemed like a road. There was barely enough room for two cars on its narrow expanse. The brush on both sides was overgrown and seemed intent upon reclaiming the ground that man had carved out of the wilderness.

“There it is,” he screeched as he impulsively aimed his extended arm across my vision.

I swatted at his hand as it hit me in the face. “Are you trying to kill us? I’m driving here,” I complained as I rubbed my injured eye.

‘Sorry,’ he grinned. ‘That’s the turn.’

I looked to my left and didn’t see a place to turn. I stopped the car. ‘Where? I don’t see a turn. All I see are woods and brush!’

‘Right there,’ he chirped as he stabbed out with his pointer again.

This time I ducked. I shot him another dirty look before craning my neck to study the area again. There was nothing there but brambles and brush. But, squinting my watering eyes, I finally saw what looked like it might just be a broken spot in the overgrowth of brush. ‘Are you shitting me? You want me to drive *my* baby through there? Are you insane? It’s bad enough just taking the gravel road but now you want me to drive through the middle of a bramble patch?’

‘Well, it’s either that or we carry all our stuff more than five miles over steep hills and rocks.’ He grinned again knowing that I was nearly fit to be tied.

‘You asshole. You might have warned me. I could have gotten Geoff’s crappy old Blazer for this trip. Do you realize just exactly what kind of car you are sitting in?’ My grandfather had given me that classic candy-apple red 1965 Ford Mustang 2+2 Fastback with the 289ci V8 engine as a high school graduation gift fifteen years earlier, just to piss off my mom. She had nearly had an apoplexy when she saw it, stating that it was far too expensive. Beside that, she thought it was too dangerous for a kid my age. Gramps just laughed at her and handed me the keys. That’s the way with wealthy Irish grandfathers. They love to do sweet things for their only granddaughters, especially if it annoys their own children. It’s the game they play.

We sat there for a few minutes as I white-knuckled the steering wheel. Without looking at him I knew he was grinning at me. "You carry the heavy stuff," I said. I shut off the engine and opened my door.

"Okay," he said with an exaggerated sigh. "If you feel safe leaving it here. I hope someone doesn't come along and steal it." He started to get out of the car.

The sound that came out of my throat next was similar to that of a rabid wolf. "I hate you," I said quietly as I closed my door and cranked the ignition round.

He was laughing when he got back in. The lump in my throat threatened to choke me as I meticulously squared my car into the narrow opening of the thicket. With excruciating slowness, I gradually eased my beloved show car along what could only be described as a narrow footpath. With each screech and squeal of woodland branches against her flawless paint, I came up with a new and more creative expletive to hurl at Ted's head. He laughed his ass off.

"You love me and you know it," he said between gasps.

"You are going to buff out every inch of this vehicle when this weekend is over, you brat. You just better hope those scratches don't go too deep. I will draw a pint of blood out of you for every one of them that needs repainting."

Ted laughed so hard he had tears running out of his twinkling eyes. "You don't scare me," he chirped and stuck his tongue out.

The path we were on was not only over-grown but also pocked with chuck-holes big enough to swallow a dump truck. A couple of times I was forced into the clawing brush to avoid tearing up my suspension as we crawled up one steep hill after another. After about two miles the wilderness seemed to take pity on me and open up a bit as the

path got a little wider. I breathed a sigh of relief as I was able to ease my poor classic, candy-apple red 1965 Ford Mustang 2+2 Fastback with the 289ci V8 engine away from danger.

‘That wasn’t so bad,’ Ted intoned quietly.

I slammed on the brakes. ‘Out! Get out of my car and walk, you flaming asshole!’

‘Come on, Allinson. It’s just a car.’

I was incredulous. As I tried to speak I could feel myself becoming rigid with rage. All that came out was an impotent sputter. ‘You. I. aaa. prick!’ I cleared my throat and tried again. ‘What do you drive? Oh, yeah, that’s right. You don’t have a car. When the bank came to repo it, all that was left was a twisted piece of junk. I think that pretty much says it all. Get out and walk.’

He was laughing when he got out. He was like both the little brother and the little sister I was glad my parents never saw fit to grace our family with. He lived to annoy me to the point of committing a felony. Then, every time I got that angry with him and swore I never wanted to see him again, he would show up just at the moment when I most needed a friend. He was like that proverbial bad penny.

I drove for about another mile before I began feeling guilty. Berating myself for being too easy, I stopped the car and got out, lighting a cigarette. Practicing my smoke rings, I walked around the car inspecting the damage. Sure enough, she was covered in a fine mesh of criss-crossing scuffs and scratches. I swore at Ted, even though he was still too far behind to hear me and began rubbing the paint with my fingers. I put a silent curse on him, hoping his dick would fall off and his balls would shrivel up by the next full moon. And I took great delight in thinking that some would argue he didn’t need

them anyway. Fortunately it didn't look like any of the scratches would be permanent but Ted was going to be busy for a couple of days buffing them out. Then I thought that maybe I would let him keep his cock and balls after all.

He was still laughing when he topped the hill behind me and I had cause to rethink my inclination to recant that curse. He started jogging and called out, "I knew you wouldn't leave me," as he drew near.

"Just shut up and get in," I muttered.

The rest of the way to our destination was pretty uneventful. I maintained a stony silence as Ted giggled for no apparent reason from time to time. Suddenly the thicket opened up and a massive structure appeared before us. The car halted as I mashed my foot down on the brake pedal, causing Ted to slide forward on the genuine black vinyl bucket seat, smacking his chin on the hard dash.

I had never seen anything like it. "This is the place?" I asked, ignoring his pained whines. I was staring in awe at something that looked like it came out of one of those campy Hollywood B movies. I half expected ghoulish zombies to come shambling out of the doors and windows any minute, or Vincent Price to glide out in a blood red velvet robe. "What the hell is this place? This is straight out of Edgar Allan Poe."

What had obviously once been a grand and glorious mansion now stood in quiet and sinister condemnation over the neglect to which it had been subjected. I stared at the Moorish Revival style house that was better suited to Europe than the back roads of the mid-western United States. The windows and huge front doors were ensconced under imposing archways. The massive structure stretched to the sky as commanding towers

topped with grotesque bulbous domes implied that we were insignificant and inferior in their presence.

“It’s the Lovejoy Mansion,” Ted said with a wink. “Drive around back. That’s where Kyle should be waiting.”

“And just what the hell is the significance of ‘The Lovejoy Mansion’?” I demanded as the car rolled forward. I had never heard the name, much less the fact that the mansion stood less than two hours outside town.

“You’ll see,” he returned cryptically.

The cracked and decayed driveway curved upward along a gradual slope to disappear behind the east end of the depressed building. I was becoming increasingly agitated as we followed it. I knew it to be my imagination, but I could have sworn that the overgrowth of trees and brush that lined the drive was lunging out, like ominous grasping arms, to snare us. As we neared the end of the drive I asked myself why I didn’t turn tail and run—I had no answer.

We pulled to a stop under a sprawling oak. The tree looked to be older than Methuselah, with gnarled branches that seemed to reach out for us. “There’s no one here,” I pointed out the obvious.

“That damned Grable, he’s probably lost again. He’ll be here. Let’s unload.”

So we unloaded the car. As the autumn breezes stirred, the branches overhead made a groaning sound that left my hair on end. I didn’t like the place. It seemed to me that even the sun shone a little less brightly there. I felt a prickly sensation at the back of my neck, like you get when you feel someone watching you. I turned more than once to look at the house with its dingy red brick and broken shutters. It was very unsettling. I

was reminded of Arthur Hunnicutt as Bull Harris in that old John Wayne movie, “El Dorado.” That character had put it succinctly when he had said, “I got a itch on the back of my neck like there’s a injun around and I cain’t see ‘im.”

Ted carried his bags straight up to the back door. He set his stuff down to push aside the over-grown ivy that clung abhorrently to the structure. As he grabbed the doorknob he discovered the door was stuck.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“I’m going in.” Ted grinned that clownish grin of his and I wanted to slap him.

“Shouldn’t we wait for the others?”

“What the hell for? We get first dibs on the rooms. Come on.” He motioned to me like we were going to a holiday picnic.

He struggled and pushed his bony frame against the old wooden door. It finally gave way under his assault and he let go of it. The door kept moving, opening slowly, creaking and groaning harshly.

A shiver ran down my spine. Every one of my good senses was telling me to get back in that classic candy-apple red 1965 Ford Mustang 2+2 Fastback with the 289ci V8 engine and get my ass out of there. “I don’t feel good about this,” I muttered and wrapped my arms around myself. “Something’s wrong here.”

Ted laughed. “Cool. You’re having a reaction already. Wait till Kyle sees you. He’s gonna freak.” He walked into the dark interior and disappeared from my sight.

I decided to wait outside. The uneasiness in me was increasing by the minute and I just wanted to get the hell out of there. Then there was a blood-curdling scream inside. I raced up the steps, banging my shin and nearly crashing my face on a stone column. I

limped to the doorway and grabbed hold of the frame. Peering inside, I couldn't see anything.

"Ted?" I called out. There was no answer. "Ted, where are you?"

I didn't know what to do. The interior felt as cold as a walk-in cooler. There was a mood to the place that made me want to turn and run. Sticking my head in again, I felt as if something was trying to push me back out. There still was no answer from Ted. What could have happened to him? So I took my first step into the interior of the house. My legs felt wobbly, as if I were standing on a suspension bridge. I felt as if I couldn't hold my balance. The second step was a little steadier and the third put me back on solid ground.

"Ted?" I whispered this time for some unknown reason. Something grabbed me from behind and the door slammed shut. I screamed and whirled around. And there was Ted, laughing like a hyena and pointing his finger at me. I punched him in the gut.

Stepping over Ted's prone and gasping body, I moved a little farther into the room. It appeared to be an entranceway of sorts. The floor was lined in marble and the walls were covered in cracked plaster. Chunks of it had crumbled to lie in dusty piles on the marble.

I turned back around when I heard the sound of a vehicle outside the door. I tried to leave but nearly tripped over the wheezing Ted. He grunted in response.

"Get your ass up, drama queen," I told him flatly. "You ain't hurt?"

He stopped his ridiculous pantomime and got to his feet, pulling the door open.

"Oh, looky," he chimed. "They're here."

He flounced out the entrance and left me standing alone in the chilling hallway. I wrapped arms around myself and backed out the doorway. Once outside I turned and fairly ran to meet the others. The air wasn't quite so oppressive in the yard.

I saw three people getting out of the car as Ted moved to my side and wrapped his arm through mine. He leaned over and whispered into my ear. "Look at that guy, what a hunk," he hissed as he dug his manicured nails into my arm. "You just know he has to be gay."

"You wish," I told him. The man had his back to us. He had a great set of shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist. He had the most excellent set of buns I had ever seen.

Watching his buttocks flex as he moved made me want to reach out and get a handful. I mean, damn! Then he turned around. I was a goner. He was an absolute dream with dark, curling hair, cobalt eyes and a smile that could melt a glacier. If this was a college professor I was going in first thing Monday to sign up for another four years. Yeah, he was a hotty all right.

Professor Grable stepped forward first. He had the strangest expression on his face as he studied me like a scientist studies the hamster he has just injected with a mysterious poison. His eyes were wide and his mouth was hanging open like he was surprised. He reached out his hand as the drama queen made the introductions.

"Professor Kyle Grable, this is Allinson, the one with the magic. Allinson, the professor. And this," Ted left a pregnant pause and indicated the somewhat older woman behind the professor, "is his wife, Maryanne." I shook her hand as Ted quietly hummed the

theme song from Gilligan's Island. I kept a polite smile on my face as I covertly jabbed my elbow into his ribs. He rewarded me with a very unladylike grunt.

"And, I don't believe I know your new friend." Ted offered his hand to the new guy as if he were the Grand Duchess offering her hand to the king.

Grable turned to his companion. "Bruce, this is my assistant Ted Randolph. Ted, this is Professor Mulvanes."

"Charmed, I'm sure." I rolled my eyes at Ted's simpering. "This is my friend, Allinson Jeffers."

I shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, Professor."

"Bruce will do." His smile was incredible. I caught him ogling my boobs, an impressive rack, if the drunks in the pubs were to be believed.

"Then you can call me Teddy Bear," interjected Ted with a giggle. I rolled my eyes again.

"Okay, boys and girls," Grable instructed as he rubbed his hands together. "We're here for a purpose this weekend. Now, the caretaker was supposed to have delivered food and supplies for us."

"This place has a caretaker?" I whispered behind my hand to Ted.

"So we should have everything we need for a two-day stay," the professor continued. "Now, does anyone know the history of this house?"

"Yes, I do." Ted had a smug look on his face.

"Okay, Ted. But did you tell anyone else?"

"No." He turned to me with a grin.

"Good. As Allinson is going to be our resident psychic."

‘Excuse me? I wasn’t told anything about that. I’m not a psychic.’

Ted waved his hand down at me. ‘Denial. don’t listen to her, Professor. I’ve seen her do her thing with my own eyes.’

I was flabbergasted. ‘What thing? I don’t do a thing’

‘Oh, shut up. You do too and you know it.’

‘Okay,’ Grable held up his hand. ‘Let’s just try to focus on the reason for being here.’

‘Which is?’ I demanded. ‘I think I have been lured here under false pretenses.’

‘Don’t mind her, Kyle, just go on.’ Ted poked my arm.

‘*Anyway*,’ Grable said, somewhat frustrated. ‘We want to see if we can determine if the rumors about this place are true. We will use electronic equipment and your impressions, Allinson,’ he paused a beat then added, ‘if you have any—to try to ascertain the validity of the statements of the witnesses.’

‘What statements? What witnesses?’ I blurted. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that Bruce was stifling his amusement.

Grable sighed. ‘We have been given statements from those that have visited here. The witnesses allege that the Lovejoy Mansion is haunted. We are here to determine if this is true.’

‘Great.’ I threw my hands into the air. I had been led to believe that they were going to do a few experiments while I roasted marshmallows over a campfire. I wasn’t told that *I* was the experiment. I couldn’t wait to get Ted alone.

‘Are you all right, dear?’ Maryanne asked while surveying my obviously flushed face.

‘Oh, I’m great,’ I answered. ‘I’m *just* fine.’ I gave Ted my most withering look. He pretended to be studying his manicure.

‘Well, anyway,’ Grable continued. ‘Let’s get our things inside and get set up. Ted, you’ve just been elected to go find the electrical box and turn the lights on. I think you’ll find it in the basement.’ He handed Ted a flashlight.

I smiled maliciously as Ted whined something about spiders and dragged his feet back up the steps. I turned to pick up my bags when Bruce reached down to help.

‘Let me get those for you,’ he said with that super-nova smile.

How could I refuse? He picked up my cameras and my overnight case while I retrieved my bedroll. Together the four of us headed for the house. Grable entered first, followed by his wife. Bruce stood back and waited for me to go through the door. I felt all three of them watching me as I hesitantly made my approach.

I stopped. ‘Is this how it’s going to be all weekend, you guys watching my every move?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ Grable said without an ounce of shame. ‘We will need to know everything you feel or see or sense in any way.’

I let out a snort and stomped through the entrance. I knew my mistake immediately. I had that same sensation of being off-balance and dropped my sleeping bag. The floor seemed to wobble so that I had to extend my arms to find my equilibrium and keep from smacking my face on the marble floor. I took a few running steps until it felt solid again.

‘What just happened there?’ the professor asked as he sat his bags down and dug a small notebook out of his pocket.

‘Nothing, I just sort of lost my balance.’ I hoped that would end his questioning. I could have sworn I heard a game show buzzer go off and the announcer say, ‘Wrong answer.’

‘How did you lose your balance? Was it a matter of feeling dizzy?’

‘Not really.’ I just knew that this man was going to think I was a lunatic if I told him the truth.

‘Please describe it for me.’

I sighed and reached for my bedroll. ‘When I walk through it feels like the floor starts to wobble. Almost as if it’s not really solid. It’s hard to explain.’

He was jotting down notes with the stub of a pencil. Then he flipped the little book shut, returned it to his pocket and retrieved his luggage. ‘Let’s get settled in our rooms.’ He started to lead the way. ‘Now the house is fully furnished. You will want to be careful of the furniture though. Be sure to test it before putting your weight on it. Some of it is pretty rickety. The house has three stories, a basement, a sub-basement and two wings. Maryanne and I will take what is called the Blue Suite on the second floor. Bruce, I think I’ll put you in the Yellow Suite in the west wing and Allinson, I want you to take the master suite in the east wing. It’s also called the Red Velvet Suite.’

I figured Ted would be jealous of my sleeping someplace called the Red Velvet Suite and I wondered if he was to sleep in the west wing with Bruce. The thought almost made me laugh out loud.

‘Professor Grable,’ I said.

‘Call me Kyle, please. If we’re going to live together for the next couple of days I want us on first-name terms.’

‘Okay, Kyle. Where will Ted be sleeping?’

‘I’m going to put him in the room next to ours. I may be working late and will need his assistance. No need to disturb everyone else’s rest.’

As if anyone was going to get any rest in this place, I thought.

As we wound around from the back of the house to the front, I was amazed by what I saw. The kitchens (yes, that’s right, plural, more than one) were massive. There was a formal dining room that could have seated an army, and a breakfast room that was nearly as big. We passed by, and through, so many rooms that I lost track of what they were and what possible uses they could have had. There was a thick coating of dust on everything and cobwebs hanging everywhere. Drapes in the windows were filthy and tattered, and it appeared that one of the massive chandeliers had given way at one time to crash on the in-laid flooring. I felt as if I were walking through a bad TV script.

‘Why was the house allowed to fall into such a state?’ I asked no one in particular.

Maryanne clucked her tongue. ‘It looks like it used to be such a beautiful place.’

‘No one seemed to be able to stay here long enough to take care of it,’ Kyle said.

‘It’s still owned by the Lovejoy estate. They pay a caretaker to look after things, but no one has lived here in more than forty years. Those that lived here before that didn’t stay long. Not even the caretaker will come here after dark.’

A shiver prickled my spine. ‘Thanks. That’s reassuring.’

I followed the little group to the stairway. I felt another urge to turn and run. I heard a sigh behind me and turned, looking for Ted. There was no one to the rear, only the three people in front of me. The tiny hairs on my arms stood on end.

‘You all right?’ Bruce asked from two steps above me.

“Yeah, this place gives me the creeps. Where the hell is Ted?” At that moment I heard a buzzing noise and the grand chandelier in the main hall flickered to life. Ah, Ted was still in the basement with the spiders. I smiled spitefully at the thought of the pantywaist trapped in the dark with the objects of his worst phobia. It served him right.

From the back of the house came a terrible and horrified screaming. It started somewhere in the bowels of the structure and drew quickly nearer. My smile broadened. I knew that girlish scream. Within just a few moments, Ted came flying around the corner swatting at something that no one else could see. His immaculate black suit was covered in a fine netting of cobwebs.

“Ugh,” he grunted as he swiped at the offending strands of spider silk. “This is disgusting. You can’t make me go down there again. I won’t do it.” He pouted at the professor and I rolled my eyes. What a wimp.

“Get your things, Ted. You’re taking the room next to mine.” Grable turned his back and continued his climb.

Ted stomped a foot. I knew what he was thinking. He had intended to choose the room he wanted and he wanted to be close to Bruce. I nearly laughed at the comical way his face twisted in disappointment. But he didn’t say a word as he turned to go find his belongings. We continued without him.

At the top of the first floor, Kyle opened a door and ushered his wife inside. “This is our room.” He put his things down and returned to the hall. “If you follow me, Bruce, I’ll show you the way to your room.”

I followed as well. There was no way I was staying behind with the wife in the Blue Suite. We walked along the corridors until Grable stopped and opened a door.

‘Here you are. All the comforts of home.’ I peeked in to see a sunny room designed for sitting. The room itself was massive with large sets of double doors at either end. ‘You’ll find the bed through there. Get yourself settled in.’ He turned his keen eyes on me while taking my bags from Bruce. ‘Follow me, Allinson. I think you will find the Red Velvet Suite to be to your liking.’

I had my doubts but I followed him just the same. As we crossed back by Grable’s room, Ted was just topping the stairs with his arms loaded. ‘Where do you want me, Kyle?’ he whined.

Grable sighed with the patience of Job and pointed at a door. ‘In there. The Green Suite adjoins the sitting room next to my bedroom. I want you to go in and set up a workspace. Get my laptop out and clean up some of the dust.’

Ted turned and dropped his things on the hall floor. He shoved the door open and moaned just enough to voice his displeasure at the sleeping arrangements. I stuck my tongue out and said, ‘Nanee-nanee.’ He was not amused.

Grable then led me down the long hall to another door. ‘In here,’ he said as he opened it, ‘is the master suite.’

‘Is this where Lovejoy slept?’

‘Yes. Go on in. I think you will find it comfortable.’

I could feel him watching me as I peered through the doorway. It was easy to tell that he expected something from me. I didn’t like the room I saw one bit. It took me a moment to figure out what was wrong with it. The room was *clean*. The furnishings looked new. Everything in the large sitting room was done in blood-red velvet. Red

velvet drapes lined one wall. I studied the drapes and hugged my sleeping bag tightly. There didn't seem to be a reason to have drapes hanging there. It was an interior wall.

'What do you feel?' the professor asked.

'Like I'm going to puke,' I muttered. I couldn't seem to make my feet move as I stood in the doorway. 'I don't think this is a good idea. I don't like it here and I want to go home.'

'No one is forcing you to stay. If you feel that you need to leave then, by all means, go. But I think something important can be discovered here and I think you are a vital part of that.'

Oh, sure. Make me feel guilty. 'What's wrong with this place?'

'That, my dear, is what we are here to discover. So, will you stay?'

I closed my eyes and stepped into the room. I heard a woman scream and my eyes flew open. I whirled around to see the professor looking at me questioningly. Had he not heard her? 'What was that?' I demanded.

Grable started digging once again for his notebook. 'What? Did you hear something? Did you see something?' He started scribbling notes.

I shook my head. I was coming unhinged. 'Nothing. I think I would like to get unpacked now.'

'Of course.' He flipped his notebook shut. 'I'll be just down the hall if you need me.'

'Kyle,' I said as he turned to leave. 'Why is this room clean? All the others are filthy and worn out but this one looks new.'

'That, Allinson, is one of the mysteries we are here to solve.' He walked out and closed the door.

The minute the door was closed, I felt the walls caving in on me. There was tremendous pressure in my head and the room seemed to be spinning. It became a roiling sea of blood-red fuzz, and I felt sick. I heard a voice whispering and a giggle. Tossing the bedroll down, I ran for the door and pulled it open. Horror of horrors, there, on the other side of the threshold was Ted. His sudden appearance nearly wrenched a scream out of me. I slugged him in the arm.

“You asshole,” I yelled. “You scared the crap out of me.”

He made a great show of walking around me, looking at the floor under me and at my slacks. “No, I don’t see any crap. I think you’re exaggerating.” I slugged him again.

“I am going to pound you for dragging me here. Why didn’t you tell me that I’m the professor’s guinea pig?”

“Ooo, how do you rate a clean room?” He flopped down in a crimson velvet-covered chair. “My room looks like the maid was cleaning in reverse. Can I sleep with you? I promise not to steal the blanky?”

“Ted, I hate you. I want to go home. This house.” I looked around from my vantage-point at the room’s threshold. “Something really strange is happening here. I don’t want to be here.”

Ted sat upright. “Don’t tell me you’re scared?” He leaned forward resting his chin on his hand. He had a gleam in his eye that reminded me of a gossipy old woman. “Did you see any spooks? What do they look like?”

“Ted, be serious.” I was in no mood for games. “Something is wrong with this place.”

True to Ted form, Ted sobered up and quick-changed into my friend. He trotted over and wrapped his skinny arms around me. "There, now. Don't you worry. The bogey man doesn't live here."

I pushed him away. "I'm not so sure about that." There was a sudden cacophony of voices echoing throughout the room. Clamping my hands over my ears I stepped back into the hallway.

"Allinson, what is it?" Ted was taking one step forward for every step I took back. He looked startled. "Honey, you're scaring me. What's wrong?"

The chaotic noise halted and I dropped my hands. "Nothing. I don't know. Everything?" I turned on my heels and walked up the hallway.

Ted ran after me. "Girlfriend, you're starting to weird me out. Where are you going?"

"Away from that room." I quickened my pace. When I reached Grable's room I kicked the door open. "What happened in the Red Velvet Suite?" I yelled at him.

"I rather hoped *you* would tell *me*," he answered, completely unperturbed. Maryanne looked startled.

"You know what happened. Tell me."

Ted seemed fascinated with the exchange. He cocked a hand on his hip and shifted his weight to one foot. The good professor continued unpacking his books. Maryanne looked at all three of us in turn as she tried to fathom what this crazy woman was doing in her room screaming at her husband.

"Allinson, for reasons of maintaining the purity of this study I won't tell you anything about this house. I wish to see if you can discover it on your own."

“You pious dick,” I muttered as I headed for the stairs with Ted on my heels. He was laughing when we reached the bottom.

“I can’t believe you said that to him. No one ever talks to Grable like that. I would have paid money to see it. High five, sister.” He raised his hand in the air.

I left it hanging and turned from him in disgust. I tried to open the front door but it wouldn’t budge. I walked toward the back of the house. Ted was still following me as I tried to find my way out of that accursed mansion. I finally found the kitchens but stopped short when I saw Bruce.

“Hey, where you going in such a hurry?” he asked as he rifled through a box.

“Oh, she’s bailing,” Ted crooned. “I guess it’s just us now.” He smiled sweetly at the psychology professor.

Bruce merely smiled in return and continued speaking to me. “I hope that’s not true. I thought it might be fun to get to know you a little.” All memories of my experiences in the room upstairs faded in the face of his brilliant smile.

“Oh, she has a boyfriend, but I’m available,” Ted simpered.

I rolled my eyes and stepped closer to the box of supplies Bruce was digging through. “What are you looking for?”

“I was hoping Kyle saw fit to throw in a couple of beers but I’m not having any luck. I thought I would fix myself a snack. You hungry?”

“Oh, Ted, there you are.” Maryanne walked into the room. “Kyle’s looking for you. You better hurry.”

“Oh, pooh,” Ted pouted and stalked off to do his master’s bidding. Maryanne followed, chastising him for disappearing.

“Ah, alone at last.” Bruce flashed that grin at me once again. My poor little heart went pitty-pat. “How about some PB&J?”

My stomach was still a little annoyed with the world. “No, thanks. So, just what is your interest in all this?”

Bruce began smearing peanut butter onto a slice of white bread. “I’m just here as an observer. I was intrigued when Kyle told me of his experiment. Doesn’t sound like you’re too happy about it, though.”

He reached for the jar of grape jelly. I was treated to a tasty view of his arms flexing as he cranked the seal open. I wasn’t sure what was happening to me. It was like I was in a trance or something, but everything about the man screamed sex. I just couldn’t seem to stop staring at his body.

“I’m not. I have to remember to give Ted the beating of his life if I ever escape this mess. I thought this was going to be a campout. You know, with sing-a-longs and hot chocolate? I didn’t know I was gonna be the pet lab rat.” I watched as he sucked a bit of jelly off his thumb.

Bruce nodded his understanding as he squashed both sides of his sandwich together. “I can see where that would upset you. Tell me about your abilities. I’m really curious about it.”

I scoffed loudly. “I think Ted gave everyone the wrong impression. He’s just like that, always exaggerating everything.” I smiled as I tried to change the subject. “You better watch your ass, Doc. He’s got the hots for you.”

He laughed around the bite he had taken. “So I noticed. Is he always so.?”

‘Flamboyant?’ I finished for him. ‘Yeah, that’s my little Teddy, a flaming gayrod. He’s a good guy though. And, don’t worry, he’s mostly harmless.’

‘Getting back to you. How long have you known about your special talents?’

I sighed. He had a one-track mind. ‘Here I was hoping you wanted me for my body and all you care about is my brain.’

The good Professor Mulvanes choked on his peanut butter. With nothing to drink he had to struggle to clear the food out of his windpipe. I smiled innocently at him and waited.

‘Ahem,’ he sputtered. ‘Well, it’s a truly magnificent body, and I didn’t mean to minimize the significance of it in this conversation, but I really am interested in how you do what you do.’ His sapphire eyes did a sweep of my body.

I was starting to enjoy myself, maybe a little too much. I moved a step closer to him. ‘And just what is it that I do?’ I had the sudden urge to reach out and run my hand down his chest. Something was wrong with me.

He set his sandwich down and dusted his hands off. ‘Are you deliberately evading the subject?’ he asked, warming to the game.

‘Could be. Maybe I just don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Fair enough, but if you ever do I would really like to hear what you have to say.’

I took another step closer, amused as he tensed up a little more. ‘Why are you so interested?’

‘It’s an extraordinary ability. When I meet a true psychic I’m always amazed. The way they can sense what the rest of us aren’t even aware of is enchanting.’

‘Enchanting?’ I lifted my left eyebrow. ‘Interesting choice of words. Do you find me enchanting?’

My inner critic was telling me to shut the hell up. I moved a little closer. We were standing just inches apart. I looked up into eyes of the deepest blue I had ever seen. I could feel the heat of his body and smell his masculine scent. This man was absolutely sexy and I wanted him. I was starting to feel a little frightened of the thoughts burning trails in my head.

Bruce cleared his throat again. “You’re enchanting the hell out of me right now.”

He was drawing nearer to me, leaning in without even realizing it. Our lips were so close they were almost touching and I could smell the fresh peanut butter on his breath.

‘Cool, I’m flattered,’ I said as I turned and walked away.

I walked out into the entranceway and left the building. I could only imagine what was going through his mind at that point and I had to laugh. It was going to be fun teasing him all weekend, even though I didn’t understand what was making me do it. Unless, of course, you counted the fact that he was one hell of a man.

The farther I walked from the house the lighter I began to feel. I decided to do a little outside exploration and walked around to the west end of the yard. The grass was so tall that it came up to my waist. The seed tops were dry and the chaff clung to my clothing. I discovered some over-grown roses with a few late blossoms still clinging tenuously to life. I picked one and was just inhaling its fragrance when the hair on the back of my neck began to stand on end. I could feel my entire body tense. Slowly, as if I

had no choice, I turned my head toward the house. Someone—or something—was watching me. I cast my gaze around but could see no one.

I turned away to continue my walk, but I just could not shake that uneasy feeling. I looked at the house again. Then I saw her. Up in the window of the Red Velvet Suite was a woman. She looked young, but it was difficult to tell from that distance. I couldn't make out her features, nor did I have time to contemplate the situation. At that particular moment there was a terrible sound. It started, it seemed, in the bowels of the house and rumbled upward to exit in the form of a terrible feral-sounding growl. No, not actually a growl. More like a groan.

It's hard to describe the feeling I had at that moment. A sense of urgency, the likes of which I had never known, came over me. I knew that someone, maybe everyone in that house, was in terrible danger. I ran back to the rear of the structure. Just as I rounded the corner I saw Bruce dashing out of the back door covering his head with both arms.

“What the fuck?” I yelled as I ran toward him. “What happened?”

He stopped running and dropped to his knees. He was gasping for breath and rubbing the back of his head. “I think something just attacked me.”

“Give me a break. I think your imagination is running away with you.”

“If you don't believe me, go look for yourself. The kitchen is a mess. Things started flying off the walls and tables and bouncing off my head. Go see.” The man actually appeared to be angry with me.

I was hesitant about returning to the house, but something was drawing me in. It seemed to beckon to me and I just could not resist. As if in a stupor, I let my feet carry

me back up the steps and across the unstable threshold. I heard the excited voices of my other companions and followed the sound as it led me to the kitchens. The sight I observed through the doorway amazed me. Pictures and cookbooks, pots and pans, all manner of inanimate objects hovered motionless overhead. The minute I walked into the room, however, all these items simultaneously dropped to the floor. The room became absolutely still.

Then there was a rush of voices as Grable barked orders and the others ran to carry them out. He walked in from the butler's pantry carrying a bizarre object that looked like a Geiger counter. He was picking his way across the floor passing the object over the things that were strewn about. I heard Bruce behind me.

'Told you. Whatever it is, it doesn't like me much.'

Kyle spoke up. 'It all stopped when Allinson walked in the room.'

'Makes sense,' Bruce said. 'It all started the minute she left.'

I snapped my head around at him. He was eyeing me with suspicion. 'What do you mean?'

'The minute you left the first thing hit me. Then, when I looked up, something else was coming at my head.'

I noticed a smear of something on the side of his face. 'What was the first thing that hit you?'

He graced me with a goofy grin. 'My sandwich.'

I stared at him for a moment before bursting into laughter. 'A slapstick ghost,' I yelled. I conjured a mental image of his sandwich suddenly taking flight and slapping

him in the face. As Ted returned to the room with equipment in hand he demanded to know what was so funny.

‘Bruce was attacked by the spirits of The Three Stooges.’ I nearly fell over as Ted began to feed off my boisterous mirth and join me in laughter. Bruce did not look amused, nor did Kyle. But I saw Maryanne hide her giggle behind her hand.

‘I might have gotten a concussion,’ Bruce muttered. ‘I suppose you would have laughed yourself into a stroke for that.’

I sobered up immediately. ‘You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s not funny.’ I looked at Ted who was trying to calm down. ‘Nope, I was wrong. It’s fucking hysterical.’ We were both seized with fits of giggles again and Bruce stalked out of the room.

‘Aw,’ I said with a pout. ‘I think I hurt his feelings.’

That was Ted’s undoing as he fell into a chair. The chair creaked and collapsed under his slight weight. That’s when I discovered that Kyle had a sense of humor after all. His wife stopped trying to hide it and guffawed loudly.

I gasped for breath and wiped the tears off my face. ‘I better go check on him,’ I said as I stepped over Ted’s cackling body.

I took the same path down which Bruce had disappeared. I looked in every room that I passed and decided he must have returned upstairs. As I climbed the steps, I heard him yell. I ran as fast as I could and threw open his door. Running through the sitting room to the bedroom, I found him pinned under a huge armoire. The top corner of the wooden cabinet was lying on the edge of the bed while the bottom had one of his legs held fast.

‘Dear God,’ I hissed. ‘What happened? Are you all right?’

“Yeah,” he grunted. “See if you can get some help, will ya?”

I snorted my disgust at him and wedged my shoulder under one corner. I put my back into it and it lifted just enough for him to pull his leg out. As soon as he was clear I let it fall back down. There was a loud cracking sound as the dry wood broke and splintered.

“You okay? How’s the leg?”

“It hurts, thank you,” he said as he rubbed his bruised shinbone.

“Let me take a look at it.” When he hesitated I snorted again. “I won’t bite. Lift your pant leg.”

He tugged at the stiff cloth but his jeans would not allow access. “It’s fine,” he said as he jerked the fabric back in place.

“Slip ‘em off.” He looked at me like a virgin at a frat party. “What’s the matter? Don’t tell me you’re shy? I’m trying to render first aid here. Get ‘em off.”

He complied reluctantly. Once he had his shoes and his jeans off I poked around on his injured leg. It was going to be sore as hell for a few days but it didn’t look to be anything too serious. “I think you’ll live,” I told him as I stared at his muscular thighs. Then I had the sudden realization that my mouth was watering. I wondered if he could tell what I was thinking. Putting my hand on his knee I raised myself off the floor.

“I’m sorry I made fun of you downstairs. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“You didn’t,” he stated testily as he reached for his jeans.

“Oh, my, you’re blushing. How cute?”

My statement only served to make his color climb a little higher. I started to laugh again. Why was I acting this way? I didn’t even know this man.

‘Don’t start that shit again,’ he grumbled and tossed his jeans aside.

I cleared my throat and sobered up. ‘Sorry,’ I offered. ‘You gonna stay mad at me all night?’

He smiled finally and shook his head. ‘How can I stay mad at you?’

I smiled back. ‘I’m glad to hear it. I really am sorry, you know?’

‘Oh, yeah? Prove it.’ He had a wicked gleam in his eye, and I liked it.

‘All right, just tell me how?’

‘How about a kiss?’

I had to cock an eyebrow at that one. But what the hell else does a soon-to-be-single-again, pseudo-psychic, thirty-something female with an unappeased over-active libido have better to do? I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around his neck. I reached up on my toes and still was not tall enough so I pulled his head down to mine. I kissed him softly and let it end naturally. Damn, he tasted good. I settled back down to the flats of my feet.

‘How was that?’ I asked. It occurred to me, yet again, that I was not behaving like myself.

‘Pretty disappointing.’

I was a bit taken aback but I was always one to rise to the challenge so I kissed him again. This time I put a little oomph into it, even using my tongue. I felt his arms snake around my waist and press me closer. The heat from his body was scrumptious. It had been too long since a man had touched me and this was the sexiest man I had ever met. I wanted more.

The kiss ended with both of us trying to catch our breath. “Wow,” he said as he pressed his forehead to mine. “You’re forgiven.”

I smiled at his chest and tried to come up with another way to piss him off. He released me just then and strode out of the room. Now where the hell was he going? I heard the outer door close and the unmistakable click of a lock snapping in place. Then he returned to the bedroom and closed that door. He turned to me and wrapped his arms around me again. This time when the kiss ended his mouth traveled lower to caress my throat. I moaned a little as his hands slipped into my jacket and smoothed it off my shoulders. It landed on the floor around my feet. Next I felt his fingers starting to unbutton my shirt as his mouth wandered lower. He stopped suddenly and turned away from me.

For the briefest moment in time, I was afraid that he had changed his mind. Imagine how thrilled I was when he kicked aside the broken remnants of the armoire and peeled the dusty blankets off the bed. Without speaking he grabbed me around the ribs and fairly tossed me on the bed. Bruce had the look of a man possessed as he tore my shoes off and peeled away my socks. He pulled my jeans and panties off in one swoop and popped a couple of buttons off my shirt before he had it removed. My bra disappeared and I was lying completely naked trying to get my hands on him.

He removed the rest of his own clothing with the same enthusiasm before landing on me. His hands and mouth covered my entire body with fire. I heard myself moaning loudly and begging him for more. I nearly fainted again when his mouth burrowed into my mound and took hold of my clit. He stopped just short of giving me what I knew was meant to be a blinding orgasm, and I cried out in desperation. He silenced my wail with

his mouth as he nearly smothered me with another kiss. His tongue danced against mine until I dug my claws into his back.

He rammed his manhood into my sex in one thunderous stroke. The shock of it caused me to scream again while I dug my heels into the mattress to shove my pelvis up against him. His cock pounded into me furiously sending me climbing higher and higher. His cries joined my own in a savage chorus of animal sex. Over and over he thrust into me, moving faster and harder. I felt the explosion building in me and climbing higher. All sound was suddenly blocked out as time stood still. Then I heard the rush of blood in my ears and saw pin-points of light detonate within my vision. I arched my back and with primal groans gave myself over to the most incredible orgasm of my life.

Bruce bucked wildly against me, growling as I had never heard a man growl. Then his body tensed and he slammed into me once more. I felt the blast of hot liquid against my womb. He grunted like a wild man, falling on top of me. We stayed joined together in throbbing ecstasy, struggling for life-sustaining oxygen.

When I felt him start to shift his weight I clung to him tighter. "No," I said as I held him still.

Then I heard him chuckle against the side of my head. "Well, that was interesting," he said and I laughed too.

"I'm not sure how that just happened but..." I said.

Bruce stopped laughing and rolled off me. He sat up on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry, Allinson." He sounded upset. "I don't know what came over me. I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

I looked at his back in confusion. "No, I'm fine. Really. It's okay."

He didn't seem convinced as he stood and gathered his clothing. "I feel like a real ass. I've never done anything like that before."

"Well," I said as I pulled a gritty sheet over my nudity, "if it's any consolation, neither have I." I got off the bed to stand behind him.

My statement only seemed to upset him further. "Jesus. I don't know what happened. I behaved like an animal. Are you sure you're all right?"

He still hadn't looked at me. I reached out a hand and touched him, but he flinched and moved away. "Okay, I'm going out on a limb here, but couldn't you tell that I wasn't resisting?"

He snapped his head around as he zipped his jeans. "That doesn't excuse my behavior. I don't do things like this." He was yelling at this point.

"Well, neither do I," I yelled back. "You think this is normal for me? Everything I've done since walking into this creepy hellhole has been completely out of character for me."

This seemed to settle him down a little as he gathered up my clothes. He handed them to me and looked me in the eye. "I'm sorry," he said yet again. "Let's never speak of this again. We can just forget it happened."

I was hurt, and I mean really hurt. I wanted to kick him. "Thanks a lot. Don't sugar-coat it or anything. Tell me how you really feel." I turned my back on him and started getting dressed.

"Damn it," he hissed behind me. "I didn't mean it like that. Any guy with half a brain would. God damn it." He grabbed my shoulders and turned me to face him. "I like you. I do. I think you're gorgeous and sexy and smart. I was hoping to get a chance to ask you out once this weekend was ended. And I was even hoping you would say yes."

But what just happened here is not normal. I don't know how it happened and I don't know why?"

I wasn't convinced. "I don't need you to patronize me."

"I wasn't patronizing you, dammit. I'm trying to tell you something."

"Fine," I said as I buttoned all but the two missing bottom buttons on my shirt. "You told me." I took my jacket and headed for the door.

"Allinson." He sounded exasperated and I didn't give a crap. "Allinson, stop. Let me talk to you, will you?" He caught up to me and grabbed my arm.

I looked pointedly at his hand and back at his face. He released me and I went on my way, seething and ready to lash out at whoever made the mistake of crossing my path.

I walked up the hall and past the staircase as the others were ascending. I continued along until I arrived at the Red Velvet Suite. It took me a minute before I had the nerve to push the door open. I stood another minute before entering. There was a sadness inside this room that drained my self-righteous anger. It was oppressive and it was uncomfortable. I picked up my bags from the floor and carried them to the bedroom. That room was even worse. As I drew near the bed I heard a woman sigh. I smelled the fragrance of roses. Incoherent whispers rose up, getting louder the closer I got to the bed. There was a giggle and then a scream. I gasped and dropped my bags. I heard an explosion, like a gunshot, and another scream. I ran for the door.

Half-way across the sitting room I stopped. I had ten thousand dollars worth of camera equipment in those bags and I wasn't about to leave them. I retrieved the cameras and my overnight case but when I reached for my bedroll I distinctly heard a woman's voice pleading, "No, Jacob, please, I'll do anything."

I figured the house could keep my sleeping bag.

I ran out and was fairly flying as I passed Ted and ran down the stairs. My feet never stopped moving until I was standing next to my car. I was shaking and gasping for breath as I fumbled with my keys. The sun had begun to set and under the shade of the giant oak, the light was almost too dim to see by. I had just gotten the door open and tossed my things inside when I heard an upstairs window slam open.

“Allinson! Get up here now!” Ted screamed at me.

“Fuck you, I’m going home,” I hurled back.

“Get up here before Bruce gets killed!” He was whining horribly.

I stood for a moment with my keys in my hand trying to convince myself that Bruce deserved whatever he got. Finally I let out a primitive scream, shoving the keys in my pocket, and ran back to the house. I moved quickly without looking into the rooms I passed. Finally, breathless and sweating, I was in Bruce’s rooms. I was both appalled and amazed. All the furniture in the room was piled haphazardly in the far corner. All I could see of Bruce was an arm sticking out of the pile. Kyle was busily snapping photos as Maryanne aimed some sort of electronic gizmo at the mess.

“Fucking scientists,” I yelled as I ran to the corner to dig Bruce out.

After a few moments the others joined in. It took several minutes but we were finally able to free him from the mess. He was bleeding from the nose and the side of his head, but he was walking and he was talking. Well, more like he was yelling. Kyle was dancing around in excitement, as if he had discovered a cure for cancer. Ted was just being Ted.

“Well,” I said. “That settles it. You got bad karma.” I played at dusting him off until he grabbed my wrist.

He dragged me into the hall and pinned me to the wall. “Just what the hell kind of game are you playing here?”

I was at a loss. Was he really blaming me for what had just happened? “What are you talking about?”

“Somehow this is all connected to you. I want to know what’s going on. I’m under attack here.”

“It would certainly seem so, Bruce.” I remained impassive—not an easy trick for me—until he calmed down a bit.

Finally he released me. “If I find out you had anything to do with any of this, you’re going to be sorry,” he stated impotently.

I reached up and placed a hand on his arm. Looking at his bruised face I suddenly felt sorry for the way I had acted. “Bruce, all I know is that someone died in the master suite and died violently. I’m getting the hell out of here. Why don’t you come with me before you get killed?”

“Good idea,” he said. He went back to his rooms and gathered his things.

Grable was still snapping pictures and taking notes as Bruce passed by. Finally alerted to the mutiny afoot Kyle raised his head. “Where are you going?” he demanded.

“We’re leaving this place, and if you’re smart you’ll do the same.” Bruce grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the stairway.

“Wait for me,” Ted screeched as he ran for his bags. But when we didn’t slow down he yelled, “Fuck it,” and ran after us.

We hurried through the rooms toward the back of the house. As we neared the kitchens a loud banging noise started overhead. I looked up as Bruce pulled me along faster. Ted was whining behind us. We traveled through the dining room at a good clip but pulled up short as the door to the butler's pantry that led to the kitchens slammed in our faces. Bruce tried to ram it open but it wouldn't budge.

We turned and headed for the breakfast room but that door slammed shut too. Every doorway that led to the back entranceway was blocked before we could get to it. I heard Bruce cursing as he turned around, not knowing what to do. Grable appeared from behind us. "It looks like no one's going anywhere," he said smugly.

Ted immediately stepped between us. He put his hands on my shoulders. "Now, Allinson, try to remember that I need my job." So I tried to control my anger, another thing I'm not very good at.

Bruce had both his fists clenched. "Just what do you suggest we do?" he demanded of Kyle.

"I suggest we all try to get some sleep and sort it out in the morning. But first let's get something to eat. Who's hungry?"

"Is this guy serious?" I asked the air in front of me.

"There's only one thing wrong with your plan, Kyle." Bruce was nearly in a rage. "We can't get to the fucking kitchen."

I sat down carefully in a chair near a window. A small puff of dust rose around me. Voices were on every side of me. They had become so loud that I could barely hear what the rest of our little party was saying. I felt my stomach lurch and I feared that I might vomit. I wanted to run. I wanted to scream. I wanted to tell everyone to shut the

hell up and make the voices go away. Was I losing my mind? The room was spinning out of control at that point. I was afraid that I was going to die. And one voice spoke louder than the rest, desperate in its pleading, 'No, Jacob, please, I'll do anything.' Then there was the sound of a door slamming and fists pounding against it. Other sounds followed and then there was blackness.

Whispering. Whispering voices touched me from far away. 'She's coming around now,' I heard one say. Something cold and wet touched my forehead and I opened my eyes to a sea of cobalt blue.

'Do you mind? She's my friend,' Ted's unmistakable, effeminate voice lashed out. Then I saw him. He was smiling at me as if everything was perfectly normal.

I sneezed.

'You fainted, baby-doll,' Ted told me. 'Are you ill?'

I sat up. When I saw Grable's face I wanted to punch his lights out. 'Hey, asshole, he killed her lover and locked her away, didn't he?'

'Yes,' the asshole answered.

'Then she killed herself. She couldn't stand it when he came to visit her night after night. Couldn't stand to have him touch her, could she? And when he found her dead he killed himself, right?'

'Yes.'

'For years he kept her locked away in those rooms, the Red Velvet Suite, the rooms you put *me* in. You unbelievable prick. You knew this would happen.'

'No, I didn't.'

'Why does this house want me?'

Grable didn't answer me but I could see he knew the solution to the riddle. I grabbed Ted's arm and used his body as leverage to climb to my unsteady feet.

"Why does it want me and why does it want Bruce dead? Answer me or I swear there will be another murder in this house." I was absolutely livid.

"The answer is in the master suite." He couldn't quite meet my eyes.

Bruce, glaring at Grable, took hold of my arm again. He ushered me quickly upstairs with the others fairly running to keep up. When we got to the master suite Bruce whirled around to face Kyle. "Show me," he demanded of his former friend.

I clamped my hands over my ears to shut out the screams of the poor woman who pleaded with her husband for mercy. The sound of the door slamming played over and over in my head. It was unbearable. I couldn't believe that the others weren't hearing it.

"There," Grable said as he pointed at the draped wall. "Behind those curtains."

Bruce stalked over and grabbed a handful of crimson velvet. He gave it a vicious tug that brought the drapes tumbling down, rod and all. The sounds in my head suddenly halted. The entire room was silent except for my own gasp of horror. A life-size portrait of a woman was hanging on the wall. It was like looking in a mirror. Except for the woman's nineteenth century gown and her blond hair I would have sworn that it was me.

"Is this some kind of joke?" I said as I rounded on Professor Grable. "This is like something out of Stephen King."

"I am so freaked out!" Ted screeched.

"I think we should all just calm down now," Maryanne chided.

But it was Bruce who took charge of the situation. "Kyle, what the hell is going on here? This is pretty sick, even for you. What are you trying to pull?"

Grable put his hands in the air. ‘I swear I didn’t know until I got here today and saw Allinson. She’s the spitting image of Emily Lovejoy. Maybe she was meant to come here and find this.’

‘Bullshit. You could have told us when we first got here. It was wrong and you know it.’

‘He was afraid of polluting his little experiment.’ At that moment I wanted to tear the good professor’s heart out. ‘Did it ever occur to you that this might put us all in danger?’

Some deep inner voice, long silent, started droning in my head. I knew instinctively that Jacob Lovejoy would never willingly let me leave his house. I was his and he intended to keep me. I realized just why things were happening now, why I had acted like such a slut with Bruce and why he had attacked me so wildly. I knew it all as the pictures and voices in my head fell into place.

‘Old Jacob has been having a great time,’ I told my companions. ‘He’s been having us all act out the scene just the way he remembered it. Emily had a lover. He caught them together in the east wing, in the Yellow Suite where you put Bruce. He killed the man savagely and locked his wife away. He kept her here for months and years, visiting her nightly and forcing her to submit to him. It was her punishment for betraying him. He tortured her mind. He kept her like a prized possession and didn’t allow her visitors. Her life was lived in this gilded cage without hope and without love. She never left the Red Velvet Suite. She stayed there until she couldn’t take it anymore. She had to find a way to escape. She begged him to let her out. But she found an escape, didn’t she, Grable?’

“Yes,” he said. “She finally got out.”

“I’m not acting,” whined Ted. “I think I really shit myself.”

I turned without another word and ran to the bedroom. I could hear the footsteps behind me as the rest followed. I snagged a chair from the floor and lifted it over my head.

“What are you doing?” Bruce demanded as he grabbed the leg of the chair, held it motionless.

“This is how Emily got out and it’s how I’m getting out, too.” I yanked the Queen Anne style piece free and hurled it through the panes of the massive window where I had seen Emily die in my visions. The glass exploded outward into the gathering darkness.

I ran for the window but Bruce stopped me. “I thought you said Emily died,” he said somewhat uncertainly.

Turning toward the others in the room I fixed Grable with a damning stare. “She did die, didn’t she, Professor?” I looked at Bruce. “She threw herself at the window and crashed through the glass. Her throat was cut. She didn’t care how she got out. She just wanted out. And so do I.” I headed for the window again but then stopped to think about what I was about to do. I turned then and pulled the blankets off the bed. As I tugged at the feather mattress I saw a hand reach out to help me. It was Bruce. He grabbed up the heavy bedding and carried it to the window. The house started to groan and items on the walls and tables began to clink and clatter. “We better hurry,” I said as I looked up at the ceiling.

Bruce gave the mattress a pitch and it landed on the ground below. “Take hold of my hand and I’ll swing you down,” he told me.

As I slipped my hand into his, I tossed my leg over the edge. ‘NOOOOOOO,’ a voice boomed through the house. The others heard it this time.

‘Hurry,’ I told Bruce as I lowered myself out the window. The last thing I heard before I dropped two stories was Ted’s voice, ‘But you know I hate heights. I’ll just take the stairs.’ Then I was falling. Satin skirts billowed up around my head. Blood spurted from my face and throat to stain the fabric. And still, I fell. Ever downward my body hurdled through time and space and darkness—and that voice, full of rage and pain screamed, ‘Emily, no!’

My feet hit bottom at last and I rolled head over heels off the mattress and onto the grass. I struggled to my feet and turned to look. The scene on the ground before me was ghastly. Emily lay in a broken heap, her throat cut so deeply that she was nearly decapitated. Pools of blood soaked into the earth around her and her face was a gruesome mask of open wounds. I turned away from the corpse. Pain coursed through my left hand and up my arm. I saw a large chunk of glass sticking out of my palm.

A moment later I heard the unmistakable thump of a body landing behind me. ‘Oh, I think I broke my coccyx,’ I heard Ted cry.

I turned to see that my whining friend had replaced the apparition. Looking up, I saw Maryanne lowering her legs out as the house shuddered and shook. ‘Get up,’ I yelled as I bent to grab his arm with my good hand. ‘Move your ass!’

Maryanne landed just as Ted got off the mattress. A silver-handled hairbrush soon followed. Other objects flew out the window as I saw Bruce trying to protect his head with his arms. Broken chunks of brick started to fall off the side of the old mansion

as the violent shaking became more intense. ‘Hurry up,’ I yelled at the window as Ted helped Maryanne.

Kyle climbed out next, swinging down and letting go. A large piece of crumbling brick struck and shattered against his head. Maryanne ran to his aid and Ted yelled, ‘look out!’ Just then a piece of furniture hit Bruce as he leaned out the window. He was knocked off balance and fell forward.

‘Bruce!’ I screamed as I ran forward. I guess I thought I could catch his large frame and protect it from injury. I saw him snag the edge of the windowsill and hang on for dear life. He pushed his body away from the wall and let go just as another piece of furniture came crashing down where his fingers used to be. He landed in a heap in front of me.

I didn’t wait to see if he was all right. I grabbed at his arm and screamed, ‘Move!’

The five of us ran as if the hounds of hell were out for our blood. The house was in a rage as it shook and groaned. I fished in the pocket of my jeans as we neared our vehicles. Pulling out the keys I didn’t miss a beat as I threw myself through the open driver’s door of my car.

‘I got shotgun,’ Ted squealed as he grabbed the passenger door with Bruce right behind him. The tree overhead began to dance wildly, its massive branches hitting and clawing at the top of my precious car.

I saw Ted land in the back seat as Bruce shoved him through the door. ‘Drive,’ he yelled as he jumped into the passenger seat, tossing my previously-deposited bags into the back. I heard Maryanne scream and turned to see her close the door of her car as a

branch hit the window. Kyle got behind the wheel and fired up his engine just after my car roared to life.

I got out onto the driveway first, flooring the gas pedal and gasping for breath as the massive oak tree reached out for us. I drove with my right hand and kept my left hugged to my body, making it difficult to escape the overgrowth as it bent forward, lunging at us while the car sped out onto the long driveway. At last we were on the extended lane that would take us out of there and to safety. The house behind us raged in a crescendo of rumblings, hisses and howls.

The rough road buffeted my car as the big block under the hood propelled us forward. We topped hills like ramps and flew into the air, landing with our heads slammed into the headliner. I didn't slow even when the road narrowed, barely dodging the craters in the center of the path. A mirror went flying off the car as I swerved up against the clawing brush. Branches smacked the windshield and chiseled the paint of my classic candy-apple red 1965 Ford Mustang 2+2 Fastback with the 289ci V8 engine, but still I didn't slow down. Finally we shot through the edge of the thicket and flew out onto the narrow roadway, nearly careening off into the ditch as I struggled with my one good hand to turn the steering wheel in time. I looked in the rearview and saw the professor and Maryanne exiting just behind us.

"We're clear," Bruce stated the obvious.

"Really. Ya think?" I retorted and squashed the accelerator again.

"Will you slow down? My ass is killing me," Ted whined. "And I have a date next week too."

‘Shut up, you fag,’ I screamed at the back seat. I wanted to toss him out of the car again but didn’t want to slow down for anything.

‘My, aren’t we all just so touchy,’ Ted huffed. Seeing the look in my eye as I glared at him in the rearview he decided to clam up.

We all breathed a sigh of relief as the lights of our fair city came into view. My hand was throbbing and when I looked down, I could see the blood soaking through my shirt. It reminded me of the rooms covered in blood-colored velvet and I shuddered outwardly.

‘How bad is it?’ Bruce asked. ‘Why don’t you pull over and let me drive?’

‘No, thanks. No one drives my baby but me,’ I declared in my disgust as I looked at the cracked windshield.

No one else said a word as we drove through city streets. We reached Ted’s apartment first and Bruce got out and pulled the seat up for him. ‘I’m going to have a hot bubble bath and throw up, in that order,’ Ted announced. ‘If you want to come up, you can wash my back,’ he invited Bruce.

Bruce, to his credit, merely smiled and declined politely. He got back in the car and let his head fall back against the seat with a heavy sigh. ‘Take me home, will ya?’

‘Sure,’ I said as I put my car in gear. I nearly climbed onto the dash when I heard a rap on my window. It was Ted. I cranked the window open.

‘You take care of yourself, kitten,’ he said as he leaned in to kiss my cheek. ‘You’ve been through a lot.’

I smiled at him. I watched in my mirror as he bounced up the steps to the building. ‘Where do you live?’ I asked the guy next to me.

‘Six sixty-six Belial Avenue,’ he said with a smirk.

The car skidded to a stop in the middle of the parking lot. ‘You’ve got to be joking. Please, tell me you’re joking.’ The man actually lived in a house bearing ‘the number of the beast’ on a street named after Satan himself. I screamed with laughter as my foot slipped off the brake and my beat-up classic candy-apple red 1965 Ford Mustang 2+2 Fastback with the 289ci V8 engine rolled forward. We found ourselves creeping into the road before I managed to get hold of myself. A passing car swerved sharply, just missing us.

The drive to Bruce’s house was relatively quiet with intermittent fits of giggles. He pointed out his house as I turned down his street. ‘Home,’ he said. ‘Man, it’s good to be here. Wonder if Kyle and Maryanne are okay?’

‘Who gives a shit?’ I intoned sourly. They could have driven off the face of the earth, for all I cared. We pulled into the drive and I put the car in park.

‘I want you to come in with me so I can have a look at that hand,’ he said as he opened his door.

I was tired and wanted to go home but my hand was throbbing and it still had a hunk of glass imbedded in it, so I shut off the ignition. He was already around to my door and opened it for me. When I got a good look at what was left of my precious vehicle I nearly cried. It was going to need a good body shop.

‘Mind if I use your phone?’ I asked.

He opened the house and led me in. It smelled clean and masculine and was furnished as one would expect of a bachelor. He led me to the kitchen and seated me at the table, handing me his telephone before leaving the room.

I dialed my house to let Geoff know that I would be home soon but there was no answer. So I called his cell. He answered on the third ring. The minute he heard my voice he cut me off by saying that he had moved out and he didn't give a damn where I was. He hung up on me and I looked at the dead phone in my hand. Well, that was one worry I no longer had.

Bruce returned with the dried blood and grime washed off his bruised face and a first aid kit in his hands. He gingerly took my injured hand and stretched my arm out on the table.

'Everything all right at home?'

'Geoff has moved out,' I said with a sigh.

'Is that good or bad?' he asked.

'Let's just say that it's one less problem in my life.'

'This needs a couple of stitches,' he told me as he prodded my flesh. 'Allinson, I think we need to talk about what happened at the mansion.'

I wrinkled up my nose and grimaced as he removed the large shard of glass. 'I really don't want to talk about ghosts right now, if you don't mind.'

'I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the other thing.'

'Oh,' I said inarticulately. Thoughts of wild fucking gave me a shiver even as he applied antiseptic that made my wound burn with the fires of hell.

'I think that we can chalk that up to whatever was influencing us in that house.' He didn't look up from his task. 'I think it's safe to say that we were behaving irrationally.'

My feelings were hurt again. I was hoping for a little more than a clinical assessment of the situation. I couldn't think of anything appropriately caustic to say.

“Will you be too offended if I tell you that I really want to get to know you and maybe even show you that I’m not such an animal in the bedroom?” he asked. “I know you just broke up with your boyfriend and all, but I think that detail is pretty much a non-issue at this point.”

A slow smile crept across my face. I started to laugh but I couldn’t really tell if it was amusement or just plain relief. “I don’t know what you’re worried about,” I said. “Animal is good.”

He finished wrapping my hand and looked up at me. “It was good, wasn’t it?” His eyes were glittering with a lust that brought heat racing to my face.

“I guess we could say that Old Jacob gave us quite a gift. The least he could do for trying to kill us.” I was grinning foolishly, hoping he would kiss me. He didn’t disappoint.

“Let’s see if we can improve on it.” He took my good hand and pulled me out of the chair. “Take a shower with me?”

“A shower sounds marvelous.” I could feel the grit of the dusty old house clinging to my skin. My body was already reacting before he even turned to me in the bathroom and started to disrobe. I followed suit, removing my filthy clothing unashamedly. I was discovering a new facet of myself.

He dragged my naked body against his. Grit or no grit, he felt good. His body was hot and hard, and fit against me like we were made for each other. He ran his hands down the curve of my back and took my lips in a tender kiss. After releasing me he reached for the faucet and took some bath linens out of a cabinet, setting them on the vanity.

Bruce stepped into the steaming shower and held his hand out to me. With a carnal smile on my lips, I took that hand, stepping into the stream of water. It felt so luscious that I moaned and tilted my head back to let the water wash over my face and breasts. He got behind me then and ran a slippery bar of soap down my back. His hands worked up a lather, massaging their way around to my front, pulling me backward into him. His hard shaft pressed into the small of my back sending shudders up and down my spine. His soapy hands slid over my breasts causing ripples of pleasure that hardened my nipples under his touch.

‘I want you so bad,’ his lips said against my ear.

Then his hands wandered lower, caressing in soapy orbits across my flesh and around my belly button. I moaned as they worked ever lower, touching my mound, deliberately slowing their caressing motion. My arm drifted upward, sliding behind my neck to encircle his. I turned my head as I pulled his face toward mine, giving him a kiss and feeling his hot breath on my lips. He reached over and took a bottle of shampoo off a shelf and applied it to my hair. He massaged the lather down the length of the tresses. I reached behind me, capturing the streaming suds and sliding the fingers of my good hand along the length of his lance. God, it felt good to touch. I heard him moan as he pushed against my hand.

I stepped under the water again to rinse my hair, turning so I could look at him. He lathered his own hair, then joined me under the raining shower. I helped him by spreading soap all over his body, going down on my knees to wash his legs. When I looked up, I saw his proud cock standing erect in front of me. I couldn't resist and ran my

tongue down the length of him. His body quivered under my touch and I heard him suck air in between his teeth.

He pulled me to my feet and crushed my mouth with his. "My God," he said. "I think I'm bewitched."

Bruce released me and reached for the faucet. Once the flow of water stopped, he pulled me out of the shower. We dripped water down the hall as he led the way to his bedroom; the towels lay forgotten on the vanity. He turned to put his hands on my hips.

"I want you to know something," he said as he looked into my eyes. "I don't want this to be just a quick one-time thing for us. I want to spend time with you. I want to get to know you better. I want you to want that too."

"I would love that, Bruce," I said. "But you know what else I would love?" I ran my hands over his wet shoulders, not caring that my wet bandage was stained pink with blood.

"I can guess," he said with that liquefying smile. He kissed me and sat me on the edge of the bed. He slowly sank to his knees in front of me and ran his hands over my thighs, pushing them apart. "Lie back, I want to give you something."

My body fell back until I was resting on my elbows. He lifted my feet and propped my heels on the edge of the bed, urging me to let my knees fall wide to the sides. Once he had me thoroughly exposed he ran his fingers over my sex and separated my labia. I moaned at the mere touch of his hand and shivered with expectation.

"As I recall," he said as he grinned up at me. "Earlier tonight you were a little upset when I didn't finish something that my mouth had started."

I laughed. "I think you already took care of that."

“But I’d like to try again,” he said as he lowered his mouth to where his hand played.

My hips instinctively rose to meet Bruce’s tongue. He ran the tip around my clit, never touching, always promising more. I whimpered and let my head fall back. His finger entered me then, seeking and finding that tender hidden spot. His mouth sucked my clit in and massaged it, drawing on it as if it gave milk. I whined and moaned and finally screamed as his mouth drove onward, relentless in his pursuit of my pleasure. I felt the orgasm building. I cried his name. I told him I was going to come.

This only inflamed him more. He slipped in a second finger as his tongue went into overdrive. I began to buck wildly into his face. My body went rigid and my thighs clamped together against his head. I screamed his name one more time as the waves of pleasure crashed over me. I fell back off my elbows and convulsed as his mouth continued to draw out my orgasm. When I could finally take no more I grabbed at his head and pulled him away from the sensitive ball of nerves. I dropped back onto the mattress again.

He moved up to the bed and propped himself on his elbow beside me. His hand lazily caressed my breasts as he waited for my breathing to slow. He leaned down and took a nipple into his mouth, stroking it lightly with his teeth. I gasped and moaned and giggled; it felt so good. He raised his head and smiled down at me.

“You’re looking mighty proud of yourself,” I said.

“I accomplished my goal, I think.”

He grinned at me again as he lowered his lips to mine. I could smell myself on him, taste myself, and I found it strangely erotic. We both laughed until he rolled on top

of me and rubbed his cock head against my swollen and wet sex, causing my giggles to turn to moans again.

‘Last time was fast and rough. This time will be gentle and slow,’ he announced.

His shaft slid through my opening excruciatingly slowly. He used his feet on the floor as leverage to control his range and I felt every fraction of an inch as it entered and filled me. I was enraptured. He adopted a slow rhythm as he plunged into me again and again.

‘Bruce,’ I moaned. ‘Bruce, oh.’

‘Yes, baby, what is it you want?’ His glittering eyes held mine spellbound.

‘I want.’ my voice was stammering and broken. ‘Oh God, I’m coming again.’

He drove into me again as my muscles clenched around him and I heard him growl, calling out my name. He collapsed on top of me and panted as he spilled himself into me, shuddering and lunging. We crashed to earth together and clung to each other in the fog.

At long last, as our breathing slowed, he shifted to a more comfortable position beside me. He kissed me once more and smiled that baffling grin. ‘So this is what it’s like to have sex after a psychic experience, huh?’

I laughed. ‘I suppose. I certainly don’t recall it ever being this good.’

He kissed me again and laughed back. ‘Wanna go ghost-hunting again tomorrow?’

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