

Chapter One

She shouldn't have taken the money. In the back of her head, she'd known from the very minute she was offered the deal that she should walk away and never look back. In fact, if she actually allowed herself to remember, she'd had a very strong intuition that something was going to happen when she'd woken up the morning she received the call.

Sweaty, heart racing, frightened, and something else she couldn't put her finger on, she sat bolt upright, still trembling from dreams she couldn't remember. Murky fears lurked in the back of her mind throughout the morning as she got up and prepared for her work shift. Jumping at shadows and having to constantly pull back the shower curtain to make sure she was alone in the bathroom wasn't the best way to start her day.

And pieces of her dream kept interrupting her, prodding her to try to remember more. She knew there was something important in it that she had to know, but the dream had been very different from her usual. There were strong overtones of sex, and every time she tried to hold an image in her mind, her body reacted with arousal that made concentrating hard. She finally forced herself to put it aside so she could work; whatever she needed to learn from it would have to wait.

Despite the anxiety that plagued her throughout the morning and afternoon, nothing momentous had happened, either good or bad. It was a normal day. It confused her because she'd learned to trust those feelings. All the women in her family had them, and most of the time they were deadly accurate. She'd lost friendships over predicting things a little *too* accurately. They'd called her creepy, among other things.

If they'd had any idea that there were other skills, which she did her very best to block out and ignore completely, they'd have said worse. Her grandmother had told her it was a mistake and that she'd regret not learning how to use those other talents eventually, but she just wanted to be normal like everyone else. So if sometimes she answered the phone before it rang or knew to avoid a certain area because of traffic, she could live with it, but the rest—no.

So an uneventful day was a confusing surprise but not an unwelcome one. Maybe, just that once, it had been a misfire. Nothing was coming to shake up her normal little life, and everything was fine. She'd *almost* managed to convince herself of that by the time she got home in the evening, but as she dropped her things on the counter, she noticed that she'd missed a call on her cell. It was blinking to let her know a voicemail was waiting, and the feeling suddenly came rushing back. Something was coming.

Her hands shook as she settled on the couch and hit the voicemail button. She wasn't good at checking her messages, and there were a couple of old ones there that she had to play through. They were nothing important or relevant, but after the third beep, everything changed.

"Ms. Cassidy, my name is Charles Bruebeker. I'm calling on behalf of my client to offer you a contract that I think you might be interested in. There's a significant amount of money involved. Please call me at 216-201-7666 at your earliest convenience."

Well, that wasn't what she was expecting at all. A family member sick or dying was more in line with what she'd dreaded. Though when those premonitions came, she was

never sure if they were indicating something bad was going to happen. A notification that she'd won a contest wouldn't have surprised her, either. But a lawyer? A contract?

The money part made it even more intriguing. She'd recently been informed that the company she worked for was planning to close at an unspecified time in the future. The head office had decided that there were better tax breaks in another state and a chance for a higher profit margin. Some staff had been offered the chance to move with them, but as there would be no money for moving expenses allotted, it put her in an awkward position—come up with the money to follow her job cross country or look for a new one.

The message left her extremely curious but also very nervous. Looking at the clock, she decided to put it off until the next day; it was likely too late to call him back, anyway. Opting to settle on the couch with a quick dinner and the television remote, she tried to concentrate on the news, but her mind kept flashing back to the lingering dream fragments that had been bouncing around her head all day.

Something—something about a creepy house and—her cheeks heated as a vivid picture of herself with a man popped up. It wasn't a G-rated picture. Had she actually been dreaming that or had her mind just created it after the fact? Either way, it wasn't her usual sort of fantasy. In fact, it—well. There hadn't been enough to tell, but the very brief flash she'd remembered had been shockingly kinky.

There was a man, shirtless, with long dark hair curling to his shoulders. He was holding her across his lap with one hand underneath, between her thighs, cupping her sex. His finger pressed between swollen lips to stroke that bud of pleasure, while his other hand slapped down across her bare ass, landing firm spanks that quickly turned her skin pink.

Her nipples tightened to hard nubs that pressed against her cotton nightshirt, and she felt a sudden slick wetness between her thighs in an indication of how affected her body was by that one image. She'd never really thought of herself as kinky, but then she'd never really had a chance to explore any facet of her sexuality. At twenty-two, April Cassidy was still a virgin.

She never admitted that to anyone. It seemed embarrassing somehow, as though there were something wrong with her, since no man had been attracted enough to have sex with her. But that wasn't it at all. She'd had plenty of men hit on her and a few boyfriends who'd definitely expressed an interest in moving to the next level. It was just that none of them seemed to want to wait until *she* was ready.

And the one who *was* patient about waiting for sex, well—she'd scared him off by doing one of her *creepy psychic things*. It wasn't *her* fault that she always guessed his surprises and secrets before he told her, but when she'd consoled him about the death of his grandmother before his mother had called to give him the bad news, well, that was it.

"I can't handle this creepy shit anymore, April. It was cute when you would guess who was on the phone before we answered it. It was funny when you'd warn me that the waiter was going to mess up our meal, but this is too much. I'm sorry; I'm done," he had said as he walked out of her life.

He'd been the only one that she'd thought maybe—in retrospect, of course, she'd been glad she'd held out. How much more would it have hurt if they'd slept together before he dumped her? It was pretty much determined that she was meant to be alone and as far as physical needs—well, she knew how to masturbate.

But suddenly, after one dream, her body was aching for someone to touch her. Her breasts felt full and sensitive. The crotch of her panties was damp, and she put her dinner

aside, no longer hungry. She always thought she had a fairly low sex drive because she rarely touched herself, but *that* night she caressed every inch of her body, imagining the man from her dream doing it. She even rolled over on her belly and raised her ass so she could give it a firm slap, picturing his hand flashing down the way it had in that one brief glimpse.

For the first time in her life, she experienced multiple orgasms with the one small vibrator she owned. She exhausted herself bringing her body to a fever pitch over and over before she finally fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The next morning when she woke up, she felt well-rested and sated. She was halfway through her shower before she remembered the odd phone message and decided that since she didn't have to work, she should probably take care of it. Whatever it was, she could always say no.

She should have said no, she thought as she hung up the phone a half hour later. She'd had every intention of it, in fact. So why did she find herself agreeing to the most bizarre job offer she'd ever received in her life? One that would force her to do the very things she tried so hard to avoid doing?

Those were questions she couldn't answer, but a week later she found herself making the long drive to Cleveland, Ohio, to be part of a psychic experiment taking place in one of the most infamous haunted houses in the country. The name of the property implied it was a castle, but it wasn't—not quite. It was built like one, though, with the stone walls and turret-shaped rooms.

The tall iron fences that surrounded it added to the overall effect, but as she drove through the hefty gates, she shivered. It crossed her mind to wonder if they were to keep trespassers out or something else in. There was a thick aura of *something*—not evil exactly, but otherworldly, and it had every hair on her body standing at attention by the time she parked.

She stayed in the car calming herself with long, slow, deep breaths for almost fifteen minutes before the front door opened and a well dressed gentleman hurried down the steps towards her. She forced her hands to relax their death grip on the wheel. The smile she flashed him looked forced and sickly, but it was the best she could do as she opened the door and got out.

"Hi, I'm—"

"April, right? Yes, you're right on time. I'm Charles. Please, leave your things for right now. I'd like to get the preliminaries taken care of. I need to leave soon, and there's some paperwork we have to go through," he explained as he moved hastily in the direction of the house.

He kept looking back over his shoulder to make sure she was following him, and it wasn't doing anything to dispel the cold knot of fear in her stomach. Neither was the way he kept looking at his watch. Maybe it was a lawyer thing, but she got the idea he desperately wanted out of there.

As she stepped inside the house, she stopped short, and her eyes widened. After she'd agreed to accept the gig, she'd hopped on the Internet to do a little research. The back of her car was currently packed with camping materials because all the info she could find on the house said it was badly in need of repairs, that it had been abandoned and left in neglect for years. There were numerous pictures of the vandalized interior posted on various websites.

She'd even brought Mace because she'd read that the house had once been damaged from a fire set by a vagrant. Nothing in the articles she'd read, many of them focusing on the bizarre history of the house, had prepared her for what she saw.

In the days following the call, she'd come to realize that she hadn't even known the right questions to ask before she'd agreed, and she had made a number of frantic phone calls to Mr. Bruebeker for more information. Each time, he'd assured her that she would be safe, that everything would be explained when she arrived, and that she would be comfortable *physically*. The emphasis on that last word had given her heart palpitations. And she hadn't believed him, anyway, so she'd brought sleeping bags, lanterns, flashlights, everything she could think of that would make a week in the house bearable.

But she'd been wrong. The place was incredible. She was awestruck by the complete renovations that must have cost a fortune. The owner had to have poured millions into it. Every detail looked authentic, to her admittedly inexperienced eye, from the molding on the walls to the heavy dark furniture that filled the entryway and the parlor. She let out a long low whistle as she slowly turned on her heel to take it all in.

"It's— This is beautiful," she said. Her voice was pitched low because the gleaming polished wood inspired reverence, and because the lack of carpeting made every sound echo.

"Yes, yes, it is," Charles agreed shortly. "Please, follow me to the library where I've laid everything out for you."

He moved down the hallway quickly, shoes tapping on the hardwood floors, while she followed at a leisurely pace, taking in the decor hungrily. She'd never had access to the kind of wealth that would expose her to a house like that or the antiques that filled it. She felt overwhelmed by the beauty and age.

And occasionally she felt more when she let her fingers run across the surfaces of the furnishings she was passing. That lamp belonged to a woman named Martha. She'd commissioned it in her youth and kept it until the day she died, leaving so many impressions of her life clinging to it. The mirror with the ornate gilded frame had been a wedding gift to a young couple, and they'd hung it with pride. But after she'd lost one child after another, she'd come to hate the sight of herself and—

"Are you *coming*, Ms. Cassidy?" Charles snapped.

She snatched her fingers away, swallowing hard. There was darkness in the house. It wasn't *evil*, but there were remnants of despair, hatred, anger—so much negativity was clouding her mind, and she had to slam the door shut on those emotions so that she could proceed.

He seemed miffed that she was keeping him waiting, so she cut short her examinations. She'd have plenty of time for that later, anyway.

"You seem like you're in an awful hurry," she commented as she sat down across from him at an elegant oversized desk that was probably worth more than everything she owned. The sheer size of it made it seem more like a permanent fixture than a piece of furniture, and she couldn't resist running her hands over the gleaming wood.

He ignored the question, pushing a pile of paperwork towards her. A ballpoint pen rested on the top of the stack, and every line she needed to sign or initial was highlighted bright yellow for accuracy. She started off reading the contract carefully, making sure it covered all the details they'd discussed. But his constant sighing and huffing pressured her to go faster. In the end, she was signing and flipping to mark each yellow line without a

clue as to what she was agreeing to. She'd have to hope he'd written out the terms honestly, because, otherwise, she'd be screwed. When she was finished, she dropped the pen but left the papers sitting right in front of her, just to annoy him.

The desk was so wide that he was forced to stand and stretch to grab them from her side, and she had to hide a smile. Maybe it was petty of her, but she enjoyed the small power play. He went through each page and, with a satisfied nod, he divided the papers, stuffing one packet into his briefcase while leaving the copies for her.

Now he was ready to answer her questions, now that she was locked in legally. Backing out would cause her too many problems at that point, so he felt it was safe enough to give her the whole truth.

"I'm in a hurry because I have no intention of being in this wretched house after dark. In fact, I plan to be well away from here when the sun goes down. Before that time, I need to go over a good many details with you, as well as give you a tour of the place. I would, if I were you, do your best not to delay things because I assure you I *will* leave whether we're done or not."

The look he fixed on her was sternly determined, and she tilted her head.

"Are you really that afraid of this place?" she asked, confused.

She certainly was apprehensive, but that was because she tended to see things no one else did. And so often, all spirits could do was scare you. Very few had the power to do anything more.

He gave her a look and ignored the question, instead moving on to the next detail. "You'll be wanting this," he said, half under his breath as he dug around in his briefcase. He dropped a thick manila folder on the desk. "A complete history of the house, with all known residents, deaths, and supernatural incidents. Once you've read it I think you'll understand my—*hesitation* to be here after dark. There have never been any reported *occurrences* of consequence during the day, but the nights are—a different story."

The look he gave her then was almost pitying.

"I still don't understand what my purpose is. Why am I here? How did you even find me?" she asked. All were questions he'd left unanswered before.

"Your name was suggested to us, and that's all I'm permitted to say about that. Your job or *purpose*, as you put it, is to help a team of researchers prove that this house is haunted. As I explained to you on the phone, every room in the house has been equipped with cameras that automatically film when they detect motion. Heat sensors, EVP recorders, all kinds of equipment whose purpose I don't even know, will be recording your stay."

"E-every room? Even the bathroom and bedroom?" she asked incredulously. Her cheeks flushed as she realized she'd have no privacy at all during her stay.

"The master bathroom will be unmonitored. I suggest you dress in there, since that will be the only room not filmed. All the cameras are equipped with tamper-proof security, and any attempts to interfere with them will void your contract. I *will* say that the *entities* in this house have been known to shut the equipment down when they choose, so there have been periodic outages noted. That's one reason they want someone in the house as a witness," he explained.

One reason, he said, which meant there were others, but he quickly changed the subject before she could press for details. "As agreed, you are not allowed to leave the grounds for any reason. All utilities are functional, including TV cable, and the kitchen is

fully stocked. Members of the research team will be here every day to collect data and record any events you witness. Make a list of any items you need or want, and they will bring them. We want you to be comfortable here for as long as you stay," he said, with the air of someone bestowing a great favor.

"And the money—" she asked delicately.

"Oh, yes, almost forgot." He slid a certified check for a thousand dollars across the desk. "Yours just for showing up, as I promised. If you stay a full week, you'll get another for twenty-five thousand dollars. Each week you stay in this house, you'll be paid the same amount for a total of four weeks. *If* you should manage to last an entire month, cooperating fully with the investigation, my client will, as stipulated, sign this house over to you, free and clear."

Darkness or no darkness, the house was worth millions. She had expected some excuse to avoid giving her the money, but she had a certified check in her hand. It would cover three weeks worth of work, alone, and if he gave her a bigger one in a week—

"But why? Why would anyone give away a house like this?" She had to know, needed a reason to believe this wasn't an elaborate joke.

He sat back in the chair, folding his arms across his chest. "Let me be frank with you, April. My client had no idea what she was getting into when she bought this house. She intended to restore its former glory and then live here. She was only able to last three months in this house before she was compelled to move out by circumstances of which she has shared only the briefest details with me. Afterwards, there were some problems with vandals and a fire. The reputation of the haunting increased until she found she would be unable to even sell it for her initial investment.

"At this point, she has entered into a deal with a parapsychology department to do some serious investigation of the phenomena that have been witnessed here. They are paying a nominal fee for access to the house, but they have to share all footage and data with her. My employer designs games for a living, and I believe she intends to use all of it for a realistic virtual reality haunting experience. It will be the first of its kind to use actual footage shot in a haunted house. You have, of course, signed a non-disclosure, so all of this is privileged information. You've also given permission for any recorded data that includes you to be used," he added.

She hadn't realized that, and she'd have to think about whether or not that bothered her. But later; for now she'd focus on getting as much information as she could before he left her alone.

"But why do you need someone here for that?"

"Because nothing much seems to happen here when the house is empty. We've tried. The equipment picks up very few readings during the day when people are on the property, and at night when it's empty, it's been the same, except when the equipment suddenly malfunctions, and the whole system shuts down, and that happens frequently. They hope that having someone here will spur some actual spectral manifestations," he said calmly.

His eyes, though, weren't calm at all. They flickered around the room like he was waiting to be jumped, and she could hear the nervous tapping of his foot under the desk, too.

All those big words he was using, he said them well, but they felt stiff and rote, as though he were reading a script. Maybe he was, for all she knew. At the very least, she

suspected he'd memorized a report made by the researchers. She wondered if he even knew half of what those terms meant.

"So I'm bait, basically," she mused.

She had no idea if she'd be able to last a month or even the night. For the money and a chance to own a home of her own, she'd try, but she had no idea if her abilities would make things better for her or worse.

"In a way. Well paid bait," he reminded her. He got to his feet, briefcase in hand. "It's getting late. You'll want the tour before I go." He waved an arm at the room they were in. "The library, obviously. I doubt you'll find anything on the bestseller list here, but through that arch is the media room. TV, cable, DVD player—a you won't have any trouble entertaining yourself, I'm sure."

The library, with its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with old leather-bound books, looked completely appropriate for the house. The media room, when she peeked in, seemed anachronistic, being far too modern for the setting. But it would be a welcome distraction over the next week; she was worried about feeling trapped, with the restriction to the grounds.

Every room seemed to be a window into the past. The only thing missing was the staff of maids and footmen moving around quietly to keep things orderly. She wondered who kept everything clean, if people were so afraid of the house. There wasn't a speck of dust to be seen

"Who cleans around here?" she asked curiously as she ran her fingers over the polished banister.

"I don't know. Hurry up, please," he snapped, looking uncomfortable as he strode up the back staircase.

There were, he'd said, several sets, with the wide main stairs being reserved for special occasions, normally. There was an implication that she probably shouldn't use them. She planned to ignore that; how often would she get the chance to make a grand entrance on a magnificent staircase like that?

"Bedroom, bedroom, bedroom. There are twelve bedrooms on this floor, use any you like, sleep in a different one each night if you prefer. They are all clean and wired, however I thought this one—" He grabbed the handles of a pair of double doors at the end of the hall, and swung them open wide. He stepped back out of the way to allow her to enter first. "Would probably suit you best."

She moved past him, stopping short and looking around with a little gasp of wonder. The bedroom, for the most part, maintained the historical feel of the rest of the house but added graceful touches of modern technology here and there. The four-poster bed, however, was straight out of the Middle Ages. So tall it had steps to reach it, and thick brocade curtains of a deep burgundy were tied back with heavy golden ropes.

"I love it," she said in an awed tone.

"Thought you would," he said smugly. "The bathroom is totally modern. Complete with a Jacuzzi tub and a separate shower. *That* is the only room in the house that isn't under video or sound surveillance. So if I were you, I'd do your personal business there. Unless you enjoy being filmed of course," he said with a hint of a smirk on his lips. He gave her a look that said he was undressing her in his mind, eyes roving down over her body and taking on a certain heat.

She resisted the urge to cross her arms over her chest. She was used to seeing that look in men's eyes, at least before they got to know her, but this was the first hint of it that *he'd* shown. It was completely at odds with the professional demeanor he'd cultivated since they'd met, and she wondered what was so exciting about her that it had broken through the veneer. She'd never thought of herself as especially pretty, though men seemed attracted to her body. Despite her short stature of five-two, she was round in all the right places to attract their, sometimes unwanted, attention.

The rest of her, though, never seemed to fit the beauty *ideal* she saw in magazines. Her long raven hair was completely straight, refusing to hold a curl no matter what she did, and the muddy hazel color of eyes was certainly never written about in romance novels. Her skin was the desirable tan shade that some women seemed to strive for, but when they noticed she kept it through the dead of winter, it led to a lot of awkwardness.

What possessed people to tell her they were jealous of her skin tone because "You're so lucky you don't have to lay out to tan!" or demand to know what country she was from, despite her complete lack of any accent but Midwestern? As if she'd had any say over how she looked. Truthfully, she was a mixed bag of genetics; Italian and Irish on her father's side, Native American on her mother's, but she was told she favored her mother the most and not just physically.

As a child, she just remembered not feeling white enough when every baby doll was blond and blue-eyed. Or too white when they went to visit her maternal family in Oklahoma. Her mother's people were Chickasaw and they'd been forced to move there in the 1800's. They were just one of many tribes who'd lost their land and identity when shoved onto a reservation and forbidden their own ways.

It had made them protective of their culture and heritage, so there was a certain disdain for mixed children and people they felt were trying to live *white*, and she'd felt her outcast status keenly. Her mother, she'd heard whispered, was a great disappointment. She'd gone off to college, the first of her family, and on a full academic scholarship, too. But she'd fallen in love and dropped out to marry a white man. And then there'd been April.

Her grandmother had told her not to mind the sneers and side-talking. "You're exactly what you're meant to be, April. Beautiful and clever, and I love you!"

That unwavering love had made the visits bearable, but it could never make her believe she was beautiful.

She frowned, pushing away those memories to focus on the present. She ignored the predatory look in his flat blue eyes and turned away from him.

"Surprised you gave me any privacy at all," she said with a nervous laugh.

"Well, between you and me, I doubt you'd have gotten even that, except that ever since the original fixtures were ripped out and replaced, the room's been declared a dead zone as far as supernatural activity." He shrugged; it was the truth, though no one knew why.

"Odd, but this isn't the only room with modern stuff. The media room—"

"The media room had things added, but nothing was removed. My client wanted to keep as much of the original design as possible. She even tracked down fixtures that had been sold off years ago and replaced them. A little bit obsessed about it, actually," he said. His tone expressed a certain level of frustration that made her think he'd been tasked with a lot of the work involved in the renovation.

He showed her around the room, pointing out the features in a bored way, and then he checked his watch pointedly. "I think that's about it. Anything I left out I'm sure you can find on your own. Here are your keys," He handed her a large ring with a mixture of old iron keys and the more modern type she was used to. "These open everything, including the gates, in case you choose to leave. Of course, your departure will be recorded and the contract will be nullified." As he passed her the ring, his hand touched hers in a way that seemed less than accidental, and it lingered until she was uncomfortable.

"Yeah, I get the idea," she said, rolling her eyes as she took the keys hurriedly.

His eyes lingered on her for a second, and he seemed like he was going to say something, but then suddenly his professional demeanor was back in place. "The research team will be here between ten AM and three PM most days. The rest of the time is your own. Good luck."

With that, he turned and left the room without another word. She could hear him clattering down the uncarpeted back stairs, and a couple of minutes later, the front door slammed, and he was gone.

"Well, *that* was interesting," she said to herself.

There had been something about the lawyer that had made her skin crawl, and she was almost glad to have him gone, but now that she was alone, the oppressive aura of the house seemed to increase exponentially. It could have been the solitude or it could have been that the sun was beginning to set. Either way, the feeling of dread was back, and even the gorgeous bed couldn't calm her down when she spent some time examining it.

She wondered if she could pull the curtains shut around the bed as she slept. She didn't like the idea of being filmed as she slept, even if they couldn't see much in the dark. A tug at the curtains, however, left her disappointed. The bed might have been—probably was—the real thing, but the curtains looked authentic only at first glance. The heavy drapes had been designed to look like they were merely pulled back and tied, but closer inspection showed that the careful pleats were sewn together. Her hand dropped away with a sigh.

But there were things to do before dark, and first she needed to unload the car. She might not need the camping supplies, but she still needed her suitcases. Unpacking killed an hour or so, and by the time she went to investigate the contents of the kitchen with an eye towards dinner, it was fully dark. She'd entered the house knowing its reputation was at least partly true. The house *was* filled with unresolved trauma and unhappiness; ghosts, basically.

What she wasn't sure of was how active they really were. Stories claimed a lot of things, occurrences that were highly unusual and not terribly likely. The presence of spirits didn't mean they'd do anything, and physical manifestations were rare. Even though she preferred to forget about her extra *gifts*, she'd gone through a period of time where she'd researched those abilities heavily. She'd had to in order to convince herself she wasn't going insane. She might not know as much as the team of researchers she'd meet the next morning, but she knew enough.

She was mulling over a few of the legends as she pulled a can of Coke from the fridge, but as she turned around, it fell from her hand, crashing to the tiled floor with a metallic clatter.

"Who—who the fuck are you?" she demanded when she could catch her breath a second later.

There was a man standing in the doorway, frowning. He looked familiar somehow, though she was sure she'd never met him, and she found herself studying him intently.

"Your language is inappropriate," he said sternly.

He was handsome in a rough way, with hair longer than most men would feel comfortable wearing. It was as black as her own, but she could never coax *her* hair to curl like his did, in those long loose coils that looked natural.

His face was scruffy with a day's beard growth shadowing the hard line of jaw, and it looked good on him. He was one of those men who could skip the shaving and end up looking sexier for it. His skin, though, caught her attention. The pale coloring with an olive undertone reminded her of her father's Italian relatives, but despite his sturdy, muscular body, there was an odd sallowness to the complexion that made her think of illness.

She realized she was staring and pulled out of it. "Yeah, well English is the only language I know, sorry," she snapped.

She backed slowly towards the counter without looking in that direction. She'd remembered seeing a wooden block that held a set of large kitchen knives. Whoever he was, she was positive he didn't belong there, and stories of vagrants and vandals went through her head. Handsome or not, he was a trespasser and possibly dangerous.

"I was referring to your use of profanity/" His frown deepened to a glower, and he moved towards her. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

She ignored the question, lunged to the side, and snatched up a butcher knife. She held it in front of her, waving it in a vaguely threatening manner.

"You better get out. I'm not afraid to use this!" she said. Her shaking hands probably made *that* an obvious lie.

"Put that down before you hurt yourself, girl," he warned her as he took another step closer. He didn't seem concerned about the knife at all.

"You don't belong here. You better leave now," she insisted, voice wavering.

"Of course I belong here. This is *my* house, you silly girl. Now put that knife down before you regret it!"

His voice rang with authority and she wavered.

Was he the client? The owner of the house? The attorney hadn't told her he'd be visiting. No, wait, that wasn't possible. He'd definitely said *she* and *her* when referring to the owner.

"Liar! A woman owns this house," she said.

"You dare call me a liar?" Both eyebrows went up, and before she knew what had happened, he was yanking the knife out of her hands and throwing it across the room. It bounced off the wall with a clatter and skidded into a corner. "You are a most ill-behaved woman, and I won't have you waving a knife around," he exclaimed angrily, fighting off her wild attempts to hit him. He pinned her arms to her sides and then turned her around and shoved her chest down to the countertop, holding her there.

"Stop! What are you doing! Let me go!" she shouted, putting all her strength into the struggle. "If you hurt me, you'll be sorry. There are cameras recording this right now," she added desperately. "The police will come!" The last part was a lie, of course, but she hoped he'd believe it and be scared off before he could hurt her.

"Hurt you? What exactly do you think I'm planning to do with you, miss?" He laughed in pure amusement as she wore herself out struggling against his iron grip.

"I—I don't know. You're a trespasser. Probably a thief. For all I know, you could be planning to rape and murder me," she said in an accusing tone.

He seemed taken aback at this, remaining silent for a few long moments. Then, in a deadly serious tone, he replied, "I have no interest in rape or murder. I was merely restraining you to keep you from attacking me or hurting yourself, but thrashing you is sounding like a grand idea just now."

He grabbed her comfortable yoga pants at the back and yanked them down, exposing her bare ass. She suddenly regretted changing out of her jeans before coming down to look for dinner. At least they would have given him a struggle.

She cringed, crying out in a panic as she found herself naked from the waist down. She fought him with everything in her, but his grip was too strong. She was left with her mouth as her only defense, and a stream of profanity poured out of it. Whatever she was expecting was *not* what she received, though. His hand slammed down across her left cheek in a full-arm swing that knocked the air out of her lungs and left her gaping in silence for a long moment.

Before she could recover, he slapped again on the same spot, raising a blistering heat that brought tears to her eyes.

"What are you doing?" she shrieked. "You can't just come in here and—and spank me!" If she'd thought that would stop him, she was quickly disappointed.

He didn't pause for so much as a second before the next, and the next. And his hand, which felt hard enough to bruise concrete, was large enough to cover half her ass with each swat. She'd never been spanked in her life, and this bore zero resemblance to the erotic spanking she'd dreamed of just a few days ago. There was nothing at all sexy about the severe punishment she was receiving.

In all her imaginings about what she might run into in this house, this was the one thing she'd never expected. Ghosts, supernatural activities, all of that was terrifying, but this—*this* was painfully real.

The kitchen echoed with the sounds of flesh hitting flesh, and cries of pain continued nonstop for a full five minutes before he stopped and released his grip on her so she could stagger away from the counter and yank her pants back up. Her face was flushed with shame and outrage, and despite the agonizing pain in her rump, her first concern was for her nudity, and that seemed to entertain him greatly.

She snuck a glance at him to see an amused tilt to his lips.

"Had you been dressed properly, I would have left your—" He waved vaguely at the yoga pants. "Undergarments in place to preserve your modesty, but since you'd forgotten your skirts, I assumed it was of no concern to you," he explained as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Both hands had flown back to rub her ass frantically through the thin pants, and she paused to give him a confused and tearful look.

"W-what?"

He spoke oddly; his wording was strangely old-fashioned, but also the inflections were reminiscent of another time. She wondered if English was his second language, but if so, he'd worked hard to lose the accent, because she could detect none.

"Your attire is— You shouldn't be dressed so provocatively. I can clearly see the outline of your—" He interrupted himself and then continued. "Though given your behavior, I am not at all surprised that you seem unaware of how to dress yourself

properly," he said. His frown was back in place. "The profanity, accusing me unjustly, impugning my honor, and threatening me with a weapon— If you were *my* wife, you can be sure you'd behave better," he said firmly.

"I don't understand what you're talking about!" she whined in a confused tone. She wasn't even scared anymore; she just wanted to know what was going on. The extremely painful experience he'd put her through had left her muddled and unsure of how to react. "They told me I'd be alone in the house. I wasn't expecting anyone, and then you popped up and scared me."

The look on his face softened. "Ah. I *am* sorry about that. I didn't mean to frighten you, girl. I always come to the kitchen at this time. It's a habit I find myself unable to break." He paused, watching intently as though studying an interesting specimen. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Time is an odd thing in this house. I didn't realize you were the one," he said finally.

And that didn't make any more sense than anything else he'd said. She just continued to stare while he looked her over curiously, afraid if she spoke she'd end up being rude and he'd punish her all over again. Her ass burned like she'd accidentally sat on a nest of fire ants, so the last thing she wanted was more of *that*. She'd have made an ice pack from the freezer, if it wouldn't have been so embarrassing. She'd feel like an overreacting child to do that in front of him.

"I'd have gone easier on you, had I realized. Still, you did earn that punishment, and since your husband wasn't here to give it to you, it was my duty to stand in his place."

He seemed so firm in his belief that it was his right to spank her, and she found that annoying.

"I don't *have* a husband," she said frostily, biting off each word.

"Father, then," he said, waving a hand as if that were not the point, but a certain light of interest appeared in his eye. He'd been all business when doling out the spanking, perhaps considering, in some silly old-fashioned way, that she was someone else's property but after that—

"I haven't had one of those in a long time either," she snapped.

Her father was a good man, but when her parents had divorced and he'd remarried, he'd eventually vanished from her life. Every so often, he'd turn up with gifts, and they'd catch up, but she'd stopped considering him her parent a long time before. A stranger reminding her of that sore spot would have put her off, but they were long past that. She was doing her level best not to swear or call him names, but she couldn't eliminate the attitude from her tone. He didn't seem overly concerned about that, though.

"Ah. That explains your behavior, then. You've been allowed to run wild. Perhaps the lesson I gave you will do some good, then. You should reflect upon it until you can sit comfortably." Again there was a hint of amusement in his expression.

"What century are you from?" she demanded, crossing her arms and giving him a defiant look. The absolute nerve of this guy! Who the hell did he think he was?

"Not this one—or hadn't you figured that out yet, miss? You came looking for ghosts, did you not? Why so surprised that you found one?" He smiled outright, light blue eyes twinkling. His attention turned to the food that she'd set out on the table and then moved back to her. "I see that you were about to dine. I'll leave you to it. We *will* meet again soon," he said.

And then he vanished, right in front of her eyes. The chandelier overhead tinkled as it swung in a non-existent breeze. The lights blinked twice and then—nothing. She was alone and everything was normal. She stood and stared at the empty spot where he'd been standing for so long that her legs went numb and she was forced to sit down abruptly before she fell.

That mistake sent her to her feet with a yelp. The antique wooden seat had no cushion on it, and the throbbing in her backside was renewed on contact.

"That didn't happen," she moaned. "It couldn't have. Ghosts don't— They can't—" She trailed off.

Obviously, they could, at least in that house, because he had. Explaining this to the researchers was going to be—

"Oh, god, the fucking cameras!"

It had just occurred to her that every instant of the ghostly assault had probably been caught on tape. She was torn between curiosity at what would show up on film and mortification that if anything at all had been recorded, a group of strangers would be getting a very intimate look at her bare ass. She prayed there'd be some glitch to erase the footage before anyone could look at it.

She was no longer hungry for dinner. She left the Coke and knife on the floor where they'd fallen, evidence for the parapsychologists, and went up to the bedroom suite. She headed straight for the bathroom and locked herself in, knowing it was the only private place in the house. That it was also the only place where ghosts (supposedly) didn't go was an added bonus. She stripped off her clothes and stood with her back to the mirror. She half-expected to see nothing, but the proof was there. Her backside was a vivid mix of pinks and reds that stood out clearly against her tan skin, and she could feel the heat rising off the abraded flesh. No way had she imagined it.

She was very thoughtful and more than a little scared as she climbed into the tall bed. She hadn't felt like she was in danger, not exactly. Despite the spanking, which had been painful as hell, she hadn't gotten any sense that he wanted to harm her. But she'd never, in all her research, heard of a ghost who was able to look and feel solid like that.

Some physical manifestations had been reported, of course—having your hair pulled, your arm touched. Things flying across the room, yes, people had complained of those. Even being pinched or hit was possible, if a spirit was especially strong, but the kind of sustained physicality that was required to pin her down and slap her ass over and over? No, this was something she'd never heard of.

That she was out of her league was obvious before she'd set foot through the door. She was an amateur, and not even that, really. She'd spent her life denying her gifts, only to be forced, as her grandmother had once warned her, to confront them. Now she wished she'd listened. She could, of course, leave in the morning a thousand dollars richer. She should do just that.

But. Twenty-five thousand was a lot of money. With it, her money problems would be over for a good long while. For that much cash, she could deal with an uppity ghost, even if it meant getting her ass spanked every night for a week. She *was* determined to make it at least a week, and she tried hard to pretend like that was the only reason she wanted to stay.

It wasn't because she'd felt an oddly strong connection to the man. It wasn't because there was something uniquely primal about the way he'd taken control of her, stripping her

down and physically punishing her in a way that felt more protective than abusive. No, of course not. Women didn't want to be controlled, they wanted to be respected as equals, which definitely didn't consist of being spanked. It was the promised pay out, and that was all, she decided as she fell asleep.