

# Chapter One

April Cassidy's life should have been drab and boring. She'd never seen more than a few states and lived just hours from where she was born. She wasn't the type to do exciting things like sky diving or zip lining. Her associate degree in office administration had made her just another worker bee for a small company that sold plumbing supplies. She lived alone in a small apartment and hadn't dated anyone for nearly six months, because her relationships never lasted long.

But April was more than an office drone. Like her mother, grandmother, and the women of her family who'd come before them, she was *gifted* with abilities that kept her from enjoying a normal life. No matter how much she wanted to be just like everyone else, she wasn't and never would be 'normal'.

Her grandmother had called those gifts an affinity for the past, and April had never been able to explain it any better than that, though it didn't really describe all she could do, like the slight touch of psychic ability that let her know when the phone was about to ring or the true dreams that warned her when things were going to happen. Those powers seemed to have more to do with the future.

But she couldn't deny that much of what she could do related to the past. When she touched items with history, she could sometimes get a glimpse of where they'd been and who had owned them. Listening to someone tell a story that was extremely personal and emotional could be a hazard because she was often drawn in, to relive the tale like it had happened to her. This was more than just visualizations; it was a full-sensory experience that left her a bit dazed afterwards as she tried to separate herself from someone else's memories.

And then there were the dead. She'd seen her first ghost when she was around five. Great Uncle Aloha had been the first person she'd ever known to die, and she'd barely understood what that meant. It confused her that he sat there looking so sad while the rest of the family pretended they couldn't see him so she'd finally asked. Her grandmother quickly realized that April had been one of their line to inherit the gifts and explained, "You mustn't pay him attention, April. Spirits are meant to move on but, sometimes, if you pay them too much attention, they get stuck here permanently."

Her grandmother had firm ideas about how to deal with spirits, and for all the years April had tried to pretend that she was no different than anyone else, she had still listened to the woman's attempts to share her wisdom. She'd refused the training to learn to control any of it, much to her regret, but she'd always listened respectfully, which was why she was so scared of how her grandmother was going to react when she found out exactly what April was up to.

April had been tempted into taking an extremely lucrative short-term job that involved the skills she'd spurned for most of her life. She'd been left in the dark for a while about how they'd found out about her or what she could do, though that mystery had finally been resolved when she met her new boss, an old college friend of her mother.

They were looking for a medium to assist a paranormal research team in a house that was supposedly one of the most haunted in the country. The team would be collecting data for their own research while the owner of the house, a game designer, would be using the footage they captured for a new virtual reality horror game. Despite her distaste for using her talents, the rewards had just been too tempting.

For every week that she stayed, she would receive a check for twenty-five thousand dollars. If she managed to remain there for an entire month she'd have earned a hundred thousand dollars and they'd promised to sign over the property, a fully renovated mansion worth millions.

It was absurd, an impossible offer. It couldn't possibly be real, but it was. The conditions were extreme, but so were the benefits. It was impossible to walk away from a deal that would set her up for life, no matter how many restrictions they placed on her or how difficult they were to live with. She'd thought dealing with being on camera all day and night would be the hardest part, followed closely by being unable to leave the grounds for any reason during the whole month. She didn't know the half of it.

The house really was haunted. She'd felt it the second she set foot inside. She could feel the dark chaotic energy swirling around her oppressively. Hungrily. There were forces in the house that would hurt her if they could. They were tortured, angry souls who wanted to lash out and hurt the way they'd been hurt, and when she'd learned a little about the history of the house, she'd come to understand why.

Nothing could have prepared her for John, though. A ghost so strong that he'd briefly fooled her into thinking he was an intruder who'd broken into the house. She'd attempted to defend herself and the altercation ended very badly for her. She hadn't been in the house a full day yet when she was filmed being spanked in the kitchen by an angry spirit. Of course, the paranormal team couldn't actually see him, they lacked her mediumistic gifts, but they certainly saw the results.

Somewhere, there was archived footage of her ass being bared by an invisible force as she was bent over the counter. Dark red handprints appeared as if by magic all over her skin, vivid in the strong kitchen lighting. Even the sounds of the smacking could be heard as one searing swat after another landed.

Only afterwards, when he'd vanished right in front of her, did she realize *he* was one of the entities who haunted the manor. That's when she'd begun to regret not learning more about her talents. She'd have more cause to be sorry about that shortly, because before too long, she'd fallen in love with him. Dead or not, after less than two weeks, she shared a connection with John that felt unbreakable, and she couldn't bear the thought of leaving him and hoped she wouldn't have to.

There were many spirits in the home, all with tragic stories; some were quite dangerous as she'd already discovered, but John controlled them. He considered the house his, and since he was part of it (literally, thanks to his corpse being sealed into the very foundation) he could draw on the energy of it to keep the others in check. This meant that there was no need for her to fear what the more violent among them could do to her. There was nothing that would scare her out of the house before the end of the month.

Except possibly one thing.

When she'd signed the contracts agreeing to be filmed twenty-four hours a day and giving the owner all rights to the use of the footage, she hadn't been terribly concerned. Other than using the bathroom, she hadn't planned on doing anything that would be embarrassing on film, and the master bathroom was the one camera free room in the house, anyway. However, falling in love with a kinky ghost had been unexpected, and discovering that he made her hot and needy pretty much all the time was something she was unprepared for.

Having her sex life with an unseen lover filmed was bad enough but finding out that the game designer, Elizabeth, intended to use that footage in an adult virtual reality experience was humiliating. The money and house wouldn't have been worth staying for that, but by then, there was John. She was in love with a man who couldn't leave the house, and to have him...she had to stay. She'd agreed, reluctantly, and with much embarrassment, to continue the project, even when

Elizabeth insisted that she spend as much time being recorded with John as possible. She wanted all the spanking and sex they could manage, graphic and in full-view of the cameras.

April had given in reluctantly; she'd already signed away the rights for everything they'd caught on camera, but agreeing to escalate things to give them even more material...that had been a hard decision. She was gambling now on her ability to perform, despite her embarrassment and shyness, for a percentage of the profits off the sales of the first adult-rated virtual reality porno. Of course, Elizabeth hadn't outright called it that; she'd called it an 'experience' but April knew what it was.

She'd had reasons, of course. If they kept the game designer happy, they wouldn't lose the one place in the house they could have privacy. She was desperate to keep the master bathroom off camera, not just for the most obvious and embarrassing reason, but so they had a place they could talk freely and get to know each other. Staying in the house for the full month and getting the deed was more complicated than the lawyer had made it out to be. It meant agreeing to be John's life mate and she needed to know him much better before she could settle down with a dominant ghost who had a penchant for spanking.

She leaned her head against the wall with a soft thump and sighed. No matter how long she took, sorting things out in her head and going over the current situation, she was pretty sure there was no easy answer. All she was really doing was stalling to avoid making the phone call home she'd been dreading. It was going to be a rough morning.

John had been displeased that she'd agreed to make their sex life even more visible and explicit. He'd worked all that annoyance out on her ass, making sure every bit of the punishment was captured on camera, as well as the sex that followed. Partly, she thought, to drive home what she'd agreed to, and partly just to add to the punishment for not including him in the decision. Whatever his reasoning, it was exactly what Elizabeth had demanded and she knew the woman would be pleased.

April was still trying to deal with the realization that later this morning a kindly professor and his assistants were going to roll back the tapes and see a no-holds-barred sex show right there on the kitchen table. Her eyes flickered over to that piece of furniture and she flushed. Her traitorous body reacted to the memory of John bending her over and...she cut those thoughts off right there. She had a phone call to make and *those* particular images weren't going to help.

When John had finished with her in the kitchen, he'd carried her upstairs and they'd spent some time soaking in the tub while they discussed how they were going to handle the next couple of weeks. Even though she'd already had a bath earlier, she certainly needed one after the kitchen sex, and the warm soak eased her throbbing backside as they discussed the situation. She thought she'd be able to fulfill her side of the bargain she'd made with Elizabeth, at least she hoped so, but she probably wouldn't know for certain until she had to deal with the reactions of people viewing what had happened in the kitchen.

Her face flamed with embarrassment every time she thought about it, but John had a way of relaxing her. She told him all about her lunch in the small Greek restaurant and how nice it had been to get out of the house, if only for a couple hours of supervised time with Elizabeth. Having gotten all the anger out of his system, he was able to listen as she explained what she'd been thinking. Eventually, he had to admit she hadn't had a great deal of choice.

Yes, they could have held out and done nothing the slightest bit risqué on camera. No more spanking, no more sex, just two and a half weeks of quiet behavior until the end of the month. But they both knew Elizabeth was a determined woman who would get what she wanted in the end. Attractive women working in coding and programming didn't have it easy, and she'd clearly

learned to do anything necessary to get her way. First, she'd take away their privacy, and if that didn't work, well, there were plenty of ways in which she could make April miserable.

She knew better than to enter the house where John could get his hands on her, so there was very little *he* could do to help with the situation. Giving in to her demands and negotiating a price for it was probably the best solution all around. "It's not going to be easy for you," he warned her.

"I know that. I hate it. I'm probably going to want to back out and change my mind and hide. Especially when Carson sees what happened in the kitchen. I can't stand that bitch," she said. Her tone reeked of self-pity; she was already dreading the morning confrontation.

John cleared his throat, one eyebrow going up. She expected him to comment on the swear but he let it go. He really *was* trying not to hold her to standards a century off from her time. "You agreed, and you were right. There wasn't much choice, so you're going to have to see it through. I'll help."

"That's what I'm afraid of," she muttered. With a sigh, she sank down below the tub line until her chin was half-submerged in the water. "You're right, though. Don't let me back out on this, but, um, if you can avoid dragging me out of the bathroom kicking and screaming, I'd appreciate it. I'm not sure how much more embarrassment I can take at this point," she said mournfully.

He chuckled and shook his head. His shoulder-length hair stuck to his skin, all the curls flattened from the water, and it seemed to frame his handsome face. She knew from experience, though, that it only looked like he was wet. His body wasn't really taking up any space in the tub, and as soon as he willed it, all the water would drop away, leaving him dry. Benefits of being a ghost, she supposed.

"I don't think it will come to that," he said confidently. The slight smirk curving his lips made it plain that he thought he'd be able to get her to behave without much effort. He was probably right; he had a strong hand and she didn't want to look childish on film.

They'd both relaxed enough for a pleasant evening together. She spent the time teaching him to play a couple of card games with a deck she'd found in the library. He knew how to play blackjack and poker but he'd never heard of the simple games she knew like War and Go Fish. It passed the time, bridging the span between them and there wasn't much else to do for entertainment other than the obvious, which they'd taken care of in the kitchen earlier, and the television, which tended to bore him easily.

When she woke in the morning, he had vanished, as was his usual habit. She'd gotten used to it by now, and although she did enjoy his respect for her space, part of her wished he'd stay around for sleepy morning cuddling now and then. Still, she was smart enough to figure out that cuddling would likely escalate into sex. With the team coming in every morning, getting a late start was the last thing she needed.

She sighed and got out of bed before she was tempted to roll back over for another hour of sleep. She'd made a decision during the night; it was time to call her grandmother and discuss what was happening. Her worries about that conversation nearly eclipsed her dread in discussing the kitchen scene with the professor and his assistants. Jerome, at least, would be kind about it, but Carson...

And now she was standing in the kitchen, a few feet away from where she'd had her most explicit scene on camera yet, stalling to avoid talking to the wisest woman she knew. The only one who likely had *any* insight on her situation at all. She knew she wasn't going to find approval from

her, but she hoped for something. Some sense of empathy for what she was going through, and maybe some advice that would help her make up her mind.

She had no intention of filling her grandmother in on the changes to her contract and what they meant. Her grandmother knew the basic details of the job, or as much as she'd known herself before arriving, but there was no way in hell she was going to go into detail about Elizabeth's new plans. Staring at the kitchen table while she talked was going to be hard enough without casually dropping her new adult film career into the conversation.

Sighing, she deliberately turned her back on that side of the room and pulled the phone off its wall cradle. It was an old-fashioned phone, complete with a long, coiled cord that would stretch the length of the kitchen. She'd never used one, just seen them in old reruns of television shows. She figured it had been here when Elizabeth bought the house, and she'd left it when she realized, as April had, that cell phones didn't work well or reliably in the house. Even cordless phones, the professor had mentioned, tended to cut out.

He had a theory about it having something to do with the psychic energy that filled the mansion, but all *she* knew was that it made contact with the outside world a pain in the ass. There was something satisfying about having the cord to play with, though. As the phone rang, she wrapped the coils around her arms, tugging, stretching, and, in general, working out her nervousness with it.

It was soothing in a way, but when her grandmother answered the phone, that calm vanished. "Appo? It's April," she said, trying to keep the nervousness out of her voice. When she'd been little, she hadn't been able to say Appo'si', the word for grandmother, so she'd shortened it to Appo and it had stuck.

"April! I was expecting you to call before now. I've had a feeling." There was worry in her voice. Her grandmother's feelings were usually reliable, even more so than her own.

"Sorry I didn't call sooner, Appo. Things haven't been going the way I thought they would, and it's been... I'm really in over my head," she admitted. She sighed, leaning against the wall with her head tilted so that her straight black hair swung forward to hide her face like a curtain. The cameras were picking up every word she was saying, which made it even more awkward.

"I suspected there were going to be problems with this. Chepota, I did warn you that one day you'd regret not learning," she said, lightly scolding, but always practical, she moved past the I-told-you-sos quickly. "How can I help?"

"I'm not sure you can. To be honest, I'm not even sure I can explain what's going on, but I'll try in a second. First, how's mom?" April asked, not bothering to hide the yearning in her voice. She so badly wanted to be with them.

Her grandmother snorted. "Foshi is fine, getting much stronger and complaining enough for ten people. I told her, if she yelled at me one more time, I'd roll her bed out into the yard for the crows to peck her."

As April laughed, a sudden sparkle of tears came to her eyes, surprising her. Her mother and grandmother bickered constantly but it was filled with love. "Sounds like mom. The crows wouldn't dare peck at her, though."

"She's too stringy and tough," her grandmother said with a vicious cackle. "But you didn't call to hear about that. Tell me about your ghost problem. I was waiting for your call."

For a moment, April said nothing and then, like a dam breaking, words began pouring out of her mouth in a torrent. She had to start at the very beginning. Even though her grandmother knew about the job offer and the extraordinary amount of money it contained, there was a lot she didn't know, because April hadn't learned the real story until after she'd arrived. She corrected that

now with a detailed report of everything that had happened right up until the moment she met John. From there, she went more carefully. "I thought—"

"He was alive?" her grandmother finished. "Yes, that can happen at times. Spirits can attach themselves to a person or place and draw power from them. The stronger they are, the more real they seem."

"Yeah, well, he seemed pretty real. So real, that, when he grabbed me, I couldn't get away," April said. That got an instant reaction and April wondered if she should have left that part out, too.

"Did he hurt you?" the woman asked quickly.

"No, well, yes, actually, he, um—" April had to force herself to get the words out. "He spanked me for being rude and threatening him with a knife." There was a long moment of silence, during which the younger woman imagined all kinds of reactions. What she didn't expect was amused laughter.

"Glad *you* find it so funny," she said with an embarrassed huff.

"Oh, I do. Of all the things a spirit could do, I'd never have expected that. So, he's an old-fashioned kind of guy, hmm?"

"Yes, very. And like I said, he's really strong. Enough that I—" She stopped short. What could she say? That she'd fallen in love with him? That she'd had sex with him? She didn't want to deal with the reactions to that on camera.

"I see." It was a neutral tone, and one of suspicion.

There was no judgment, but April squirmed anyway. The phone cord twisting, twisting up her arm until it cut off her circulation. They were both quiet for a minute but a glance at the clock told her she didn't have a lot of time before the researchers arrived. "I have to go soon, Appo, and there's a lot more to tell you. I can call you back this afternoon. If I walk down by the gate, I might be able to get a cell signal. Right now, I'm calling from the house and there's not a lot of privacy, if you know what I mean."

"Ah, right. You told me they'd be recording everything. You're braver than I am. Though, I guess for enough money, most people can be brave. Call me later and we'll talk. In the meantime, please be careful. I've had a feeling that you're in danger there. It's been keeping me up at night."

"I will be; I promise. Please, tell mom I love her. Talk soon." She hung up quickly before tears could start. She intended to catch the team as they arrived and discuss things with them before they saw the footage, and for that, she needed to look strong, not like she'd just been crying. Slow breathing, a cup of coffee and a piece of toast helped.

When the trio arrived, they found April sitting on the bottom step waiting for them. "Morning, Dr. Marlowe, Jerome," she said, offering the men a smile. She avoided looking at Carson, though she did notice the tech had changed her short hair. Formerly sleek and as pink as bubblegum, it was now spiked on top and a pretty shade of teal. If it had been anyone else, she'd have complimented her on it, but she didn't have a good relationship with Carson.

"Good morning, April," Professor Marlowe replied, returning her smile easily. "Ben, please," he added. She still had trouble addressing him as Ben, though he'd reminded her several times. "Anything interesting happen last night?"

She wasn't surprised it was his first question. As nice as he was, his mind was constantly on the research. It *was* what they were there for, after all, and the evidence they'd gathered so far could mean great things for him professionally. "Yes, and before you guys check out the tapes, we need to talk," she said. She made a gesture towards the parlor. "Why don't we sit?" she suggested.

The professor raised an eyebrow in question but acquiesced without comment and turned towards the softly appointed room just off the entrance. They often had their morning briefings in there, anyway. Jerome and Carson were never included in those, however, and both reacted with surprise. Jerome shrugged. "Sure," he said, simply. He wasn't terribly talkative at the best of times.

Carson, the more vocal and less pleasant of the two, snorted. "Yeah, no thanks. I have work to do," she replied. Her tone, as usual, was biting. She hadn't made it a secret that she was disgusted by April and her paranormal romance, though Jerome had confided it was mostly jealousy over April being the center of so much spectral phenomenon. For Carson, this material was something she could base her whole career around and having to rely on April was grating.

April frowned as the girl turned on her heel, intending to ignore the request and head straight down the hall to the equipment room. "Carson!" she snapped, raising her voice so that all three of them looked at her.

"I get it. You hate me. You think I'm a slut. Fine, I don't really care what you think, but if you want to keep working here, you will keep your opinions to yourself and stop being a bitch." April narrowed her eyes until you could barely see a hint of the hazel, her mouth pressed firmly in a line as she finished speaking and waited for a response. She deliberately avoided looking at Jerome, who had pleaded with her to give Carson another chance. She'd done so, but she was finished putting up with the snide comments and behavior.

"You can't fire me. You're not my boss," Carson snarled. Her lips curled in disdain, making the bangle in her septum ring jingle cheerfully.

"No, I'm not, lucky for you. But they can't do this without me, and I'm pretty sure they *can* survive without you. Think about that for a minute and then decide what you want to do," April said firmly. There wasn't the slightest hint of give in her stare, and after a second, Carson cursed and stormed past Jerome into the parlor.

The temptation to gloat was strong, but April knew it would only escalate the situation so she kept her face neutral as she followed them into the room. She took a seat on an over-stuffed loveseat, because she needed to brace her shaking legs. Confrontation wasn't exactly easy for her, especially in a situation where she felt vulnerable. Supervising office staff wasn't even in the same ballpark.

She took a deep breath and then forced herself to meet the quizzical (and in one case, surly) expressions of the investigation team. "I went out yesterday with the owner of the house, Elizabeth," she said in case any of them weren't aware. "She discussed some changes she intends to make to...well, to the game she was planning. With everything that's happened, she's decided she wants to take advantage of the situation." She stopped as she tried to work out the best way to explain.

"Take advantage?" Ben asked, one eyebrow going up in surprise. "I don't understand."

The professor leaned forward in his chair, looking concerned. Of course, he was probably worried about his research and wondering if the changes would affect the team.

She hadn't been sure, at first, that she'd even be able to tell the three of them about the new deal. She was bound under a confidentiality clause, and Ms. Hagmaier had stressed the importance of keeping everything quiet. She'd been torn on whether that excluded the team, so she'd gone back over her contract looking for a loophole that would allow her to explain. To her relief, there was a codicil that not only allowed, but required April to inform the team of anything that could affect their research.

But just to be sure, she asked, "Did the lawyer make you sign a confidentiality clause?" she asked the professor.

"Yes, we all had to sign," he said, watching her intently. "There were some restrictions about when we could release data, and a stipulation that no reference to the partnership, the owner of the house, or any of her plans be mentioned."

There was a strained sound of annoyance there that was plain to her ears. He wasn't pleased about it, but it did make things easier for her. She relaxed, telling them should be no problem then, since they wouldn't be allowed to talk about it, either.

"Is she canceling the investigation?" Carson demanded. She wasn't seated like everyone else, instead, she was leaning over the back of Jerome's chair. Her posture seemed a little possessive, as if she was marking her territory. April ignored the pose, she had no interest in Jerome except as a friend and it was a fair question.

"No, nothing like that. Everything you guys are doing will continue. She wants as much data and film as possible. She's still doing a horror game like she'd planned. She, uh, she's just working on a different kind of project, as well." April cleared her throat, trying not to sound as embarrassed as she felt.

When no one asked what kind of project it would be, she was forced to continue without encouragement. "Basically the sex and other stuff was unexpected, but since it happened, is happening, she plans to use it."

"Oh. I—" For a change, the professor was at a loss for words. He gave her a look full of sympathy. It was obvious she wasn't thrilled about the development; she couldn't hide that. "That *is* a surprise," he said weakly after a few seconds.

"Yeah," April said in a low voice, almost a sigh.

"And, of *course*, you said yes," the other girl said, a derisive laugh punctuating her words.

"I said yes, not that I had a choice. My contract allows them to use any and all data they collect here. It allows you *all* to record every second I'm in the house and everything I do. Any attempt to hide or evade can get my ass kicked out the door," April said with a shrug. Her eyes drifted downwards towards the hands that twisted nervously in her lap.

"Oh, I'm so sure you hated agreeing to be her sex star," Carson said, snorting and rolling her eyes.

April's head snapped up, eyes flashing as she stared at the teal-haired tech. "I hate it. Hate every fucking second of being filmed in this house! I had no idea what I was getting into when I got here. None! I was a *virgin* when I got here, Carson. I don't give a fuck if you believe me or not. Turns out? Most guys aren't into spooky psychic chicks. I didn't have a nice guy to help me out and talk people out of firing me," she said in an acid tone. Her eyes flicked to Jerome and she jerked her chin at him.

"I've always ignored my powers as much as possible. I came because I needed the money, and when I got here, I found—" Her voice dropped until it was barely a whisper. "I found love. I fell in love." She blinked away tears and took a deep breath. Her damp hands flattened out and pressed against her jeans as she rubbed them dry. "So, yeah, at this point, I'll do anything to stay in the house with John, because I love him."

"April—" The professor reached a hand towards her; though he wasn't sitting quite close enough to touch her; he was trying to offer comfort, not judgment. He'd already guessed something of that nature was going on. He'd tried to warn her but the reality was he had very little advice to offer. He'd known ghosts were real. He'd seen things over the years. Frustratingly, there had never been enough proof to convince people, and some people would probably say even this was fake.

The idea of a ghost who was both conscious of his situation and corporeal enough to physically love someone was beyond his experience. He didn't want her to be hurt, but he also

didn't want to end the most successful investigation of his career. His self interest warred with his conscience, but in the end, who was he to tell her it was impossible? Maybe for her, it really could work out.

"I understand. Of course, you have to do what's best for you. And the money and house would be enough incentive for almost anyone, even if love wasn't involved." He shot a quelling look at Carson, but to his surprise, she looked more thoughtful than disgusted. He wondered if something April had said had gotten through to the girl, because Carson remained uncharacteristically quiet for the remainder of the meeting.

April relaxed and shot him a grateful look. "Thanks for understanding, Pr-Ben. This isn't easy, at all. None of it has been, really."

Jerome, not the talker of the group, had said nothing until now, but he was nothing, if not professional. "So, what's this going to mean going forward? I mean, how's it going to affect things around here?" he asked neutrally.

April tugged her hair over one shoulder and began playing with it, twisting the long strands around her hands idly as she explained, "Well, to start with, she's not allowing me to hide in the bathroom. She wants everything on camera, as visible as possible." She gnawed on her bottom lip and then made herself go on. "Graphic sex, and the, uh, kinky stuff. She wants variety, not just bedroom stuff but all over." Her cheeks had been slowly suffusing with red, but now the blush glowed like a sunset over her tan skin.

She snuck a look at Carson, waiting for the snide remarks, but the girl said nothing and her expression was unreadable. Oddly, it wasn't comforting to April; she'd almost counted on the predictability of the girl's attitude and it threw her off guard. She stammered a few syllables before she got into the flow again. "S-so, b-basically, John and I just got cast in the paranormal version of a porno, and since he's invisible, well. Yeah. It's mostly going to be me."

"Holy shit," Jerome muttered, eyes widening as he shook his head. She flinched, thinking he was judging her, but no. "Damn, you've got more courage than me. Talk about stage fright," he said with a sound that was half laugh, half snort.

"I'm not entirely sure how well I'm going to do, but John wasn't exactly thrilled I agreed to her new terms without talking to him and it led to some pretty graphic stuff in the kitchen. Exactly the kind of stuff she wants," she added guiltily. "I wiped everything down with bleach," she added hastily. She had taken care of that this morning as she paced the kitchen and stalled making that phone call.

"You talk about the entity, John, as though he was alive. Does he feel alive to you?" Ben asked with interest. With him, things always tended to curve back towards his research, though he had the grace to look embarrassed as he quickly clarified, "I mean emotionally, mentally." After a long pause, he couldn't resist adding, "But I'd like more details about the physical sensation, as well."

She almost laughed, but he couldn't help it. "He's as real to me as any of you. Physically, he's normal. I can feel and hear his heart beating. His chest moves as he breathes. He doesn't have to, of course, but he said it's a habit. He blinks, his skin is warm." She shrugged, not sure what other criteria there was to share. Obviously, they knew he could perform sexually.

The professor had taken out a small notebook and was making notes. "But, originally, he seemed less alive, correct?" he asked. They were going over old ground now. She'd described some of the differences to the professor during previous briefings but the man did tend to repeat his questions, probably looking for consistency.

She nodded as she thought back to her first contact with John. "His skin was colder. Not corpse cold but like he'd been outside on a cold day. And he was paler. There were probably other things but I wasn't watching for them, and it wasn't long before he became more...more..." Unsure of the word, she gestured vaguely until she settled for "normal".

They had discussed this already, and she'd told him John's explanation, that being close to the living charged the dead batteries of the spirits, so to speak. The more time he spent with her, the harder it would be to distinguish him from a live man, and truthfully, she rarely noticed anything otherworldly about him now, unless he did something ghostly on purpose.

"We really do need to plan some experiments," he replied. There was a look of quiet awe on his face, to be so close to what he dreamed of accomplishing. It was all within his grasp, the proof he needed to establish himself at the forefront of his field. "And I'd like to talk to John, with you as interpreter, of course," he added.

"I'm sure he won't mind," she said confidently. She'd asked John about Marlowe's interest before, and he had seemed amenable to a discussion.

"Good. Well, now that we've discussed the situation, it's time to view the footage from last night. Carson, get started on the EVP, if you please. Jerome, the tapes, but save the kitchen. I want to view it together, after the morning debriefing with Miss Cassidy." He slipped easily into his teacher persona and, just like that, April became Miss Cassidy, and she could go back to calling him Professor Marlowe on the record, so everything looked professional. The session was fairly easy, considering the sensitive nature of the story she had to tell. She'd already given them an advanced warning of the graphic events in the kitchen and that made it easier to fill in the details on camera.

When they were alone, he reached to start the camera and then paused. After a long hesitation, his hand dropped away and he turned his focus back to her. "Before we get started, you're a smart young lady, and you have the ability to do things that I couldn't even imagine. I'm grateful for the work you've done here; it's opened doors that I never dreamed—" He stopped and shook his head. "I'll be writing about this month for years to come. At least one book, maybe two, just from what I've seen so far."

April sat back, hands folded in her lap, looking far more relaxed than she actually was, unless you noticed the damp spots where she'd wiped her hands. "You're welcome, Professor. I wasn't sure I could do this. I wasn't sure I even wanted to try. If I hadn't needed the money, I probably would have turned down the offer," she admitted with a slight shrugging of her shoulders.

He laughed. "I can't blame you for that. I'd have taken the money, too." His face sobered as he continued, blue eyes looking concerned. "I can't help feeling that you were tricked. Agreeing to have the data used for scientific research and to have the basic story of your experience used in a video game is one thing. What they are asking of you, now, is, quite frankly, way beyond reasonable. You understand that I have no say in that aspect of your contract?"

"I know. Really, I don't blame you at all, Ben. Elizabeth is—" She paused as she struggled with the words to describe her temporary employer. "She is driven and competitive. I don't know if she was always like this or if it's just her career, but she's going to make this happen. I figured I'd better give in early so I could negotiate better terms, rather than wait to be forced into it."

"Hmm, well, at least you're getting something more out of it," he said with a sigh. He fiddled with his tie, tugging at it thoughtfully as he examined her. "Jerome said he told you about the attorney?"

"Mr. Bruebeker? Yeah." There was a hint of anger as she bit off the word and then a pause before she continued, "I really dislike that man. I feel gross just being in the same room with him."

"I can't say I feel much different, to be honest," the professor replied. "It's funny; he wasn't like that the first time I met him. When he came to us about the proposal, he seemed quite pleasant." He frowned, thinking about it. "I get the idea that he's a bit obsessed with you, and I worry about you being here alone with him."

She nodded and then surprised him by grinning. "I'm never really alone in this house, though. Now that I know John can show up, even in the daytime, I'm a lot less worried. You've seen how, uh, physical he is, when he wants to be," she said delicately. Physical enough to bend her over the table and slap her ass until it was throbbing and sore was left unsaid.

"True," he said doubtfully. A ghost protecting a mortal against another mortal was somewhat beyond his understanding, but if she had faith in John, he wasn't going to challenge it. He had one more thing to say, though, and it was extremely hard for him. His need to study and research was second only to his own sense of ethics and that was being challenged by this situation. "April, I'm not sure it will help, but if you don't want to continue with this, I will inform them that we're pulling out of the project. Removing our equipment could delay her plans enough to—"

She was completely astounded that he'd even make the offer but cut him off firmly, "No. No, Ben. Thanks for the offer. I know that couldn't have been easy for you, but no. It wouldn't delay her more than a few days. She'd have new equipment installed in under a week, and I doubt she'd bother to find another paranormal group to get involved at this point. The whole project would just be about sex after that, nothing but filming ghost porn." She took a deep breath and shook her head firmly. "At least, this way, there's actual research being done. Who knows how much you'll learn in the time we've got left?"

He couldn't help looking relieved. He'd had to make the offer and he'd have done it if she asked him to, but following through would have been a terrible blow to his career. "You're probably correct," he agreed. He reached towards the camera, and after confirming she was ready, switched it on.

He went through the usual procedure, first introducing himself and noting the date and time of the interview. Then he introduced her and asked her to begin with their departure on the previous day. The day had been unusual, since it had been her first excursion from the house, but what happened outside wasn't relevant except for how it had affected the scene in the kitchen. She certainly wasn't going to go on film spilling Elizabeth's plans so she glossed over the whole thing, mentioning only that they had discussed changes to the format of the investigation.

"When John appeared in the kitchen at sunset, I told him that I'd agreed to some changes, and he was angry that things hadn't been discussed with him." She flushed, shifting in her seat nervously as she went on to describe the quarrel which had led to being bent over the table and spanked. She felt no need to be terribly descriptive about *that* since they'd see it all on the film.

The professor had questions about her account, which was normal. He'd made notes as she told the story and now flipped back through them. "So, the entity that you call John, you've obviously grown attached to him and earlier expressed love, correct?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Do you have a sense that he also experiences normal human emotions?"

"Yes, absolutely. He feels love, anger, sadness, all of it," she assured him.

"And you've said he's aware of the year; that time has passed since his death?"

April nodded. "Oh, yeah, definitely. He said, when the house was empty, he spent hours watching television to try and catch up with the times."

That seemed to shock the professor and, for a second, he was silent, lost in thought. A ghost trying to educate himself? He'd never heard of such a thing. "I imagine that must be confusing for

him. Such a gap in years between the time of his death and now. How would you say he deals with it?"

These questions seemed to be more along the lines of psychology than parapsychology, and she wondered why he was interested, but answered readily, "I think, at times, things are strange. He has a fairly good grasp of where the world is but, when it comes to how people have changed, that seems more difficult for him."

"I see; do you think that explains the spanking?" He struggled to keep his professional tone, but Dr. Marlowe's face showed his embarrassment.

"Um, I mean, that's part of it. He's old fashioned, and he was going on instinct the first night in the kitchen. I think without someone in the house, he'd kind of drifted, and when he found me there, he reverted to how he would have behaved in his own time." She hesitated because this next part wasn't something she fully understood herself and she wasn't sure how to explain it. "He didn't actually seem to know what year it was that night. Like, when he was alone in the house, he lost track. He seemed annoyed I wasn't wearing skirts then, but he's definitely aware of how modern women dress so I think he was just confused, at first."

John *had* mentioned something else that night, though she couldn't remember the exact words now. After he'd apologized for scaring her, he'd said something about how he hadn't realized *she* was the one. Of course, that had meant nothing to her at the time, but later she'd learned that he'd been expecting a female medium who might possibly become his mate, as part of his deal with the owner of the house.

"Interesting," Professor Marlowe said, making a note. "I suppose it makes sense, with being trapped in this house for so many years, things would blur together without an outside influence. I wonder if the television helped stabilize his sense of time," he mused.

April shrugged, it hadn't come up in conversation. "I'm not sure, but I think the television has only been available to him for the past year or two. I mean, prior to that, this place was abandoned. Whenever Elizabeth first started the renovations, I'd guess, is when he got a chance to learn about the modern world. I don't think a year of learning can entirely fix all the time alone," she said.

"Good point. I do wonder if he's reached his capacity for change or if he'll continue to learn and grow like a living person does throughout their life," he commented.

"I hope so! We discussed how women aren't used to being controlled by men anymore, and he understands it but—" She paused, nervously gnawing on her bottom lip.

"But?"

"But, well, he likes being in charge. He thinks he has a right to punish," she explained.

"Ah. So, would you say that some of his behavior is related to being raised in a different time, but some was due to a fetish for spanking and discipline?" Ben asked, a look of intense interest in his eyes.

"Yes, I think so. He understands that he can't expect me to do what he says just because I'm a woman, and he understands women are supposed to be treated as equals now. But we agreed that I would be submissive because he likes it and—" She turned her head, avoiding the camera as she felt her cheeks getting hot again. "I do, too," she said after a brief pause.

He made some notes—a lot of notes. The pen scratched frantically across the paper, sounding loud in the quiet room. "Thank you for your honesty, Ms. Cassidy. I know it's difficult for you to speak about private things like this, especially on camera. Why don't we move on and discuss the rest of the day?" he suggested.

It took her a minute to pull her scattered thoughts back together and then she gave a brief overview of the evening. Very little of interest had happened after the scene in the kitchen, at least in terms of what she was willing to share with him. They had scant privacy and what they did have, she kept quiet. One positive thing she'd discovered, just the night before, gave her hope that they were getting a little more privacy than she'd realized, though she had no way to prove if it was true or not yet.

In addition to the cameras, there were recording devices scattered around the house to pick up electronic voice phenomenon. They were finely tuned to pick up even a whisper but, last night, John had told her, musing while they soaked in the generously sized bathtub, that he thought he could make them less effective. Ghosts had a way of messing with electronics to begin with, which is why the equipment in the house had gone spotty so often before her arrival.

Since she'd moved in, however, it had been nothing but perfect recordings. It turned out she had John to thank for that, as well. "Well, there's hardly any point to them being here with their spying eyes, if they can't record," he'd pointed out smugly. "But before you came, I would push energy through them until they stopped working. It was amusing to watch them get so upset about it," he said.

She'd scowled, realizing that he could easily have kept her embarrassment from being shown on camera many times but hadn't. The conversation had moved back to the voice recording before she could complain about it, which was only fair since she'd started it with a question.

Marlowe was still stubbornly refusing to let her watch any footage she wasn't the star of, and that extended to the EVP recordings. He said that, until she was no longer the subject of the investigation, it could compromise the data. But she'd heard Carson complaining loudly to Jerome. "I don't *get* it. The audio's always perfect at first and then it goes to shit whenever she starts talking out loud," she'd said to her partner.

Apparently, they picked up nearly every sound in the house, from the hum of the fridge to the voices on the television, but whenever she started to talk, the recording quality would begin cutting in and out. She hadn't realized it since they never had the sound playing during the few times she'd been called in to watch footage. Except once—when they'd replayed the sexual dream encounter for her—the sound had certainly been on, and it had definitely recorded perfectly, but she wasn't talking to John then. She was just moaning graphically in her sleep.

The rest of the video footage she'd seen had been muted, so she'd had no idea how much of her talks with John they were able to decipher. Inside the bathroom, of course, there were no electronics and she could speak freely, but elsewhere in the house, she'd tried to be careful of how she phrased things, assuming it would all be heard—at least in the beginning, but she'd be less worried now.

"I'm not certain. I know that the machines can pick up a ghost's voice when it speaks, but *only* if it chooses to be heard. If you record a spirit speaking, you can be sure that it wanted you to do so. I choose my words to be heard only by you, but I'm not actively trying to keep their machines from recording the things you say. I suppose I could, if you'd like me to. After all, you agreed to be more visible on camera, not more audible," John said.

That was true enough so far as she could recall, besides, bad sound quality couldn't be blamed on her. "Yes, please! At least we can talk outside the bathroom without them hearing every word," she said excitedly.

He'd shrugged and settled back in the tub; the movement hadn't displaced the water at all. "It's probably easy enough since it's been happening already, unwilling, so I should be able to distort the sound more consistently. Only when we speak of private matters, though," he warned her. She

guessed that meant they'd still get to hear her moan during sex, but still, it was one small victory. She wished she'd known about the possibility earlier.

The interrogation wrapped up quickly after that, and she didn't mention any of this to the professor. He was pleased that she'd already written up her own synopsis of the day before and left it on the desk in the library for him. "Would you like to view the kitchen footage with us?" he asked gently.

She hesitated; it was going to be graphic and embarrassing, and standing in there with them while they saw her completely exposed would be torture, but knowing they were in there watching while she waited outside wouldn't be any better. Besides, part of her was dying to see what it looked like to have sex with a ghost, and she followed him down the hall to the cramped equipment room.

Carson and Jerome sat at the long counter, with a stack of monitors in front of them. They were all ten inch, except the large one in the middle, which allowed them to scan multiple rooms at once and then switch any interesting footage to the larger, center screen for easier viewing. Carson was wearing headphones and listening intently. Jerome's eyes flicked restlessly from one picture to the next.

Both stopped and looked over when April and the professor entered. There were only two seats so they moved to stand behind the techs, and Dr. Marlowe asked Jerome to bring up the kitchen on the main screen.

"Sure, one second," Jerome said. His dark eyes dropped to the keyboard in front of him and he began tapping. The familiar room popped up on the large monitor and the picture cycled rapidly on fast forward. It went black for periods of time as the lack of motion allowed the cameras to power down, but periodically, it would snap back on for no apparent reason.

"I thought they stopped recording when nothing was happening in the room?" April asked, as he continued to scan forward minute by minute.

"Usually, yeah, but it can be set off by motion or sound, and whenever the appliances kick into high gear, it sets them off." He let it run until April saw herself enter the kitchen and then he slowed it to normal speed. "This it?" he asked casually.

"No, that's when I first got home. Nothing happened until I came back down a couple of hours later," she said. Her hands were freezing and her stomach churned, making her feel slightly sick, as he did something that caused the scene to jump two hours. There was still nothing but it cycled rapidly, and in less than a minute, she saw herself again. "There!"

He switched it to normal speed and everyone watched in silence as she took her leftovers out of the fridge and put them in the microwave. Her yesterday self was dressed a little nicer than normal, in a flirty skirt that stopped halfway down her thighs, instead of her usual jeans or yoga pants. Well, at least she was going to look decent for her first exhibition, she said to herself, feeling resigned.

When John arrived, it was immediately obvious. Her entire demeanor changed and her face lit up and grew animated as she chatted to empty air. It looked kind of surreal and April wasn't sure what to think. It was obvious that she wasn't just talking to herself; her eyes constantly found a spot of a certain height to orient on and there were pauses in her manner that made it clear she was listening, even though the sound was muted. Not that it much mattered in the kitchen, anyway. The cameras were high up, and with various interference from appliances, it was unlikely much would have been heard while they talked quietly. Unlike the EVP equipment which were more sensitive.

The scene changed rapidly and she couldn't help but stare. It wasn't the first time she'd seen herself spanked on camera, but she still watched with interest. When it began, her skirt was covering part of her ass, though in the bent over position, it had slid up to expose her bare thighs and her panties. On the video, there was no one there but her, of course, which meant his body blocked nothing from the camera. Something held her flat to the table, even though she struggled to get up. That same something, or rather someone, began to spank, and it held the attention of everyone in the room.

They could see color appearing on her upper thighs, peeking out from under the cotton panties. The expression of open-mouthed dismay she made on screen when her panties were yanked down to her knees made her wince. Jerome inhaled sharply and Carson shot a glare in his direction, which he barely noticed because he was so intent on the film.

Her tan skin darkened to a burgundy blush as an invisible hand flattened her ass cheeks. The imprint of his large fingers was clearly pressed into her skin with every swat and they could see each impact as she silently yelped and pleaded for it to stop. She was embarrassed to see the fuss she made, and while she watched quietly, her face colored with shame.

The problem, of course, was that no matter how determined she was to accept the punishment stoically without kicking and struggling, once it really started to hurt, she completely forgot the cameras were rolling. Spanking had a way of reducing her to an unthinking state where all the emotions and animal instincts took over. She kicked her legs and squirmed desperately as he punished her, showing humiliating flashes between her thighs as the camera scanned past and then returned.

It almost looked like she was having some kind of seizure, the way she thrashed around, but the darkening of her skin and the wide open-mouth shouting her pain made it clear something else was going on. The most difficult part was getting closer—the part when he moved past the punishment to the sex, and when it started to happen, she cringed. It looked...bizarre was the only way she could describe it.

Her legs were pushed apart and they all watched as 'something' pressed into her body, parting her lower lips and sinking in until it caused her entrance to gape obscenely. "Holy shit," Carson breathed, barely a whisper but loud in the cramped room.

The professor cleared his throat but said nothing, his eyes fixed on the screen as the show continued. April, however, had seen enough, and she turned away, unable to watch any more. It was too much, too graphic, and she was nearly in tears with the mortification of seeing her body undulating beneath her lover's invisible body while her most private parts were on full display.

How was she going to make herself do this for two more weeks, she wondered? "April? Do you need a break?" Ben asked gently. His eyes were fixed on her with a gentle sympathy. Carson half-turned in her seat to look at them.

She inhaled a ragged breath and shook her head without looking at him. "No, Prof-Ben, I'm fine. It's almost finished, anyway. About another two minutes, I think," she said, though it was more guess than certainty. She'd been a bit foggy with pleasure by that point and couldn't really have estimated how long it had gone on.

Suddenly, there was sound to go with the picture. Carson had accidentally bumped a button while watching the two of them and the sounds of flesh slapping and loud moans spilled from the speakers. April covered her face as the technician flailed at the keyboard hurriedly to cut it off. She looked almost as embarrassed as April did, with her cheeks flushed bright red.

April's eyes were drawn back to the screen, peeking between her fingers to watch, as it mercifully went silent again. John had confessed to enjoying taking her from behind so that he

could slap her ass, and that he liked it even more when she was red and hot from being spanked. That she enjoyed it, too, was obvious from the sounds of pure pleasure they'd briefly heard.

She sighed and looked away, but she couldn't block out the memories of it or the effect remembering had on her body. By the time it was over and the kitchen was empty, her face was practically glowing with heat. Jerome switched the recording off and there were several moments of complete silence in the small closet.