
DEATH
DO US
PART
Sept. 26
Aged
JG FAHERTY
SAMHAIN

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Vengeance never dies.

When Art Stanhope's bitter, vindictive wife commits suicide, he believes all his troubles are over. Instead, they're just beginning. For Catherine's fury transcends even the grave, turning Art's world into a living hell as he struggles to keep his son and new fiancée safe from her lust for vengeance.

But there are secrets behind Catherine's death that Art doesn't know—secrets that could prove deadly for everyone involved as they learn too late that death is not always a permanent condition, and sometimes the ultimate sacrifice can be too great a price to pay.

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Death Do Us Part

JG Faherty

Dedication

To Andrea, my wife, best friend, and soul mate.

To my parents, who still remain my biggest fans.

To my eagle-eyed beta readers—Rena Mason, Patrick Freivald, James Chambers, Peter Salomon, Erinn Kemper, Chris Marrs, and Chantal Noordeloos. You guys rock!

To Don D'Auria and the great staff and artists at Samhain—thank you for all you do.

And to the old masters of horror who inspired this story by delivering *Tales from the Crypt* and *The Vault of Horror* into my hands as a child: William Gaines, Al Feldstein, Ray Bradbury, HP Lovecraft, Robert Bloch, Clark Ashton Smith, Fritz Leiber, Manly Wade Wellman, John Campbell, and so many others. I found those comics at yard sales, used book stores, and comic book stores. It didn't matter to me that they were already 20 years old and no longer in publication. I loved every one I could get my hands on.

Finally, as always, a thank you to everyone reading this book. All I can say is please keep reading, not only my books but everything you can get your hands on. And tell your friends and children to read. Don't let television and social media turn their brains into useless mush.

Disclaimer: No actual ghosts or zombies were hurt in the making of this story.

Death Do Us Part

Catherine Stanhope sent her Mercedes convertible speeding down River Road in a blind rage.

This was nothing new for her; anger in all its phases—irritation, rage, fury, vehemence, and just plain pissed-offedness—made up the majority of her days.

In this particular instance, a call from Art had lit her fuse, and had her driving at sixty miles per hour despite the sharp curves and lack of street lamps on River Road. Even set on high, her headlights struggled keep up with the car's speed, their twin cones carving away less of the darkness each time Catherine applied more pressure to the gas pedal. Although she didn't know it, only luck and German engineering had kept her from flipping over so far.

A divorce. The bastard wants a divorce! How dare he?

Her intention was to return home and give Art what he had coming to him. In her mind, she saw this as part of her duty as a wife, to school her husband in the ways of marriage and commitment. Much like a child who needed to be taught a lesson, sometimes that involved using a hand or frying pan to keep his attention. It wasn't violence, it wasn't abuse. Those were just words made up by therapists who believed in coddling rather than teaching. The same therapists who poisoned Art and Connor against her after she'd finally started to make headway. Ten years of love and hard work down the drain. Well, if they thought she was giving in without a fight, they could go to hell. All of them—the therapists with their high-and-mighty words, the doctors with their pills and Art with his fantasy of divorce.

Focused single-mindedly on the lessons she intended to dole out, she didn't notice the car behind her until flashing red lights lit the darkness like an alien craft swooping in for the kill.

Police! Her first thought was to press down on the gas. She was only a couple of miles from home. If she could just get there, Art would talk to them, explain that it was a simple misunderstanding. Cops never arrested wives of other cops.

Then a shard of common sense penetrated her rage. There was no way she could outrun a police car. Better to just accept the ticket and be on her way again. Let Art take care of it in the morning. It was the least he could do. After all, it was his fault she'd needed a few drinks

to calm down in the first place.

She pulled over to the right side, where an overgrown field bordered the road. On the left, a sharp embankment led down to the wide, black ribbon of the Hudson River. She waited for the officer to approach, but instead heard an amplified voice.

"Step out of the vehicle, please."

A new fire started inside Catherine. What did this cop think, she was drunk? How dare he! She'd only had two Cosmos at the club. Half the goddamned town was probably—

"Ms. Stanhope, step out of the car."

That caught her by surprise. They knew who she was. And the voice…it actually sounded familiar. Catherine opened the door and stood next to the convertible, unafraid of passing cars. River Road seldom saw any traffic during the day; at night it was virtually desolate.

Half-blinded by the unmarked car's headlights, Catherine squinted at the dark silhouette approaching her. She didn't recognize it until the glow of her tail lights revealed his face.

"You! But you're not supposed to—"

Pain blasted through Catherine's head as something hard struck her left temple. The world went fuzzy and then black.

When her vision returned, she was behind the wheel again. Blurred images of trees and rocks flashed by, and it took her a moment to realize the car was moving forward. In the same instant, the world tilted on its axis, sending her hard into the steering wheel. The car bounced and jumped but her seat belt held her tight. A ball of white exploded in front of her and slammed her back in the seat.

And then all sense of movement disappeared, replaced by freezing cold.

The river!

Instinct took over. Catherine struggled to free herself from the seatbelt but her hands tangled in the half-deflated airbag. Foul-tasting water filled her mouth, choking her. The water rose quickly, past her nose and over her head.

Even as her body fought against her approaching death, Catherine's mind focused on one thought.

I will get you for this. I will be back.

* * * * *

Staring down at his wife's coffin, Art Stanhope wondered at all the different flavors of

guilt.

Could he have prevented Catherine's suicide? Been a better husband? Avoided all the headaches and problems and sorrow by just leaving her when he first discovered he no longer loved her?

And, above all else, should he have waited until after they divorced before having an affair with her sister?

The worst part, he thought, while watching the last of the mourners drop their roses into the cold, wet hole that would serve as Catherine's final resting place, is that he had no answers to any of his questions.

Catherine had been one crazy bitch, especially at the end. Possessive, demanding, and more than a little delusional. But suicidal? There'd never been a hint. So how could you prevent what you never expected? As for being a better husband, sure, cheating on your wife wasn't exactly the best way to improve a marriage, but it wasn't like Catherine knew. He and Missy Sawyer had only started their affair a couple of weeks before…

She went off the deep end? He grimaced at the poor choice of words, considering how she'd died.

He knew he shouldn't feel guilty. Before giving in to his feelings for Missy, he'd done everything he could to try and save their marriage. Had even suggested counseling, but Catherine refused to consider it.

You could have left her.

That was true. But would it have really solved anything? Stopped Catherine's mood swings or her violent outbursts? Prevented her from accusing him of trying to poison her or drive her crazy? Or would it have simply hastened the inevitable outcome, sent her off that cliff months earlier? More than once, while she was still alive, he'd thought about divorce, and then decided against it. Mainly because each time, he got a picture in his head of Catherine boiling their cat alive and leaving it on the porch, or showing up one night with a gun and an ultimatum. Besides, admitting the marriage had failed would be music to his father's ears. Jeremy Stanhope had never wanted Art to marry Catherine, and even getting a grandson hadn't softened his stance on her.

"She's not right for you, son," he'd said after learning Art had proposed. "You can do better."

They'd argued, and that had led to a rift between them that had only grown wider with each passing year, to the point where he now only saw his father on holidays, when all of his other babysitters backed out or at police functions.

It wasn't until he'd been sure Missy felt the same about him as he did about her that he'd decided to end things. On the night Catherine died, he'd told her he didn't think things were working out, that he couldn't take it anymore. She'd stormed out and he'd assumed they'd pick up the argument the next day. Only in his mind, it ended with him moving out, not going to the morgue to identify her body.

Never once had he imagined she might commit suicide. Him, yes. But her? Not Catherine, who thought of herself as the center of everything, a dominant sun around which all the lesser people orbited.

Yet they'd found her note in the car, waterlogged and smeared but still legible.

"It's time to go," a soft, tearful voice said behind him. He nodded. Heard Missy retreat a few steps, leaving him to his final goodbyes. Everyone else had already left, including his father, who'd taken Connor for the weekend.

His final goodbyes. And with them, the final guilt.

I don't feel bad that she's dead. I should. I loved her, once. She gave me Connor, who was about as good a kid as you could have and hadn't deserved all the shit we put him through with our fighting. Now all I can think is that she finally did something nice for me. For us.

She freed us.

Art dropped his rose into the hole.

"Goodbye, Catherine. Thank you."

* * * * *

Out of respect for Connor, Art waited six months before telling him that Aunt Missy was now dating Daddy. He took it better than Art expected. Possibly because he'd always been close to Missy anyhow, loved her like crazy, or possibly because she'd been there for both Stanhope men before and after Catherine's death, a rock in their ocean of turmoil.

"Is Aunt Missy going to be my new mommy?" Connor asked when Art finished explaining that *"Daddy and Aunt Missy like each other in a different way than just friends. Like on TV, when you see people kissing and holding hands."* At eight, Connor understood the concept of dating, but Art had found that anytime he could use a television example, it sped up the explanation process.

"No. Your mommy will always be your mommy, even if she's up in heaven now. Missy will be…your substitute mommy. You know how sometimes you have a substitute teacher in school, when your regular teacher gets sick?"

Connor had nodded. Art expected questions about how Art could love another lady besides Mommy, or why Aunt Missy was going to sleep in the same bed where Mommy used to sleep, but Connor had simply gone back to his comic book.

Later, after Connor was in bed and they sat curled up on the couch together, Art wondered aloud to Missy if perhaps it was because so many kids at school had parents who had divorced and remarried.

"That could be," Missy said, sipping her wine. "Or maybe it's that deep down, he knows we're all better off this way. You and Catherine were always going at it, so this new, happy atmosphere has to be making him feel better at some level."

Art smiled and lifted his glass to her. "Good point. So I'm better off, and so is Connor. What about you?"

Missy chuckled. "I've got you, of course. And Connor. I love that kid like he was my own. Plus, now that I'm moving in, I'll be out of that crazy apartment."

She said it in a humorous way, but Art caught the tone of actual relief behind the statement.

"Still fighting with the neighbors, huh?"

"Not just them anymore." She shook her head. "Now it's the landlord too. He says I'm 'harassing' the other tenants with my complaints. I told him I wouldn't have to if he'd just do his job and find out who the hell is really causing all the problems."

Art finished his own wine and pulled Missy closer. For months, she'd been suffering through a series of disturbances in her apartment. Screaming coming through the walls. Thumping footsteps. Things falling off shelves, which Missy blamed on one of the neighbors either doing construction of some kind or playing the bass on their stereo too high and sending vibrations through the walls. At first, they'd joked about her apartment being haunted. Then, as things got worse, Missy had expressed concern that it was Catherine making her life miserable. Art had quickly and forcefully told her to stop thinking like that. They'd already agreed not to feel guilty about dating.

The problem was each time she called the superintendent the noises and vibrations stopped before he got there. Now he no longer even responded, which was why Missy had begun calling the building's owner directly. He insisted no one else had heard anything and no one was doing construction, that the superintendent had checked all the apartments. In turn, she'd accused him of ignoring her complaints.

"Well, the only times the walls shake here is when we bang the headboard too hard," he said. It had been his idea for her to move in. After all, why should she have to live like that?

She'd already been through so much, what with her sister dying and then devoting all her spare time to helping him and Connor. It was the least he could do.

Besides, he wanted her around as much as possible. And seeing a nice, stable relationship would be good for Connor. So despite the fact that they'd always said they should wait a year before she moved in, let themselves grieve properly and get used to being alone, he'd gone ahead and asked.

And she'd said yes.

"Do you want more wine?"

She finished her last sip and handed him the glass. "It's Saturday night, I'm with the man I love and Connor's asleep. Hell, yes! But I've got an idea."

"What's that?"

Missy winked at him. "Let's take the rest of the bottle into the bedroom."

He smiled. "Best idea I've heard all day." He reached for his glass, but just as his hand got there, it fell over and shattered on the coffee table.

"Wow." Missy stood up. "I'll get some paper towels. Good thing it was empty, Mister Clumsy."

"I never touched it," Art said.

"Yeah, right. One glass of wine and we have to cut you off."

He laughed. "Or maybe the ghost in your apartment followed you here."

Missy pointed a finger at him. "Don't even joke about that. I wouldn't put it past my sister to—"

"Dad? What was that noise?"

Art turned and saw Connor in the hallway, his hair mussed and his eyes only half open. "Nothing, buddy. I just broke a glass by accident. Go on back to bed."

"I can't. Something keeps poking me every time I fall asleep. Can you check my room for monsters?"

With a sigh, Art glanced at Missy. "I'll get him tucked in and meet you in a few minutes, okay?"

She nodded. "Go head. I'll clean up in here."

Grateful for her being so understanding—since Catherine's death, Connor hadn't been sleeping well, which wasn't surprising but it was annoying at times—he put his arm around his son and herded him down the hall.

"Now, what have I told you about there being no such thing as monsters…"

* * * * *

Two months after Missy moved in, the idea of a ghost was no longer a joking matter. Glasses toppled over and broke with regularity in empty rooms, pictures fell from walls and the television had acquired a nasty habit of turning itself on in the middle of the night.

Although neither of them wanted to believe an angry spirit haunted the house, they could no longer dismiss the strange happenings with weak explanations of earth tremors, construction or faulty wiring. Gone were the days when one of them would mention ghosts and the other would counter with a rational alternative.

What was once considered whimsy had grown into a terrible reality, their house morphing into something out of a horror novel.

Connor's complaints about nightmares also grew worse, but for Art the final straw came when Connor came into the kitchen for breakfast one Saturday morning with livid bruises on his arm.

In the shape of a hand.

"How did that happen?" he asked his son.

"Mommy did it," Connor said, his voice still muddled with sleep.

"What?" Missy paused in the middle of pouring coffee.

"She kept waking me up all night, telling me I was a nasty child," the boy continued, unaware of the looks his father and aunt were giving each other. "Then she grabbed me and tried to pull me out of bed."

Art said nothing, but later, after Connor was ensconced on the couch watching cartoons, he pulled Missy aside.

"I don't care what Doctor Sloane says, this isn't guilt or coincidence or a reaction to loss."

He expected Missy to argue, as she'd done in the past when he'd disagreed with the psychologist's explanations for Connor's problems, or suggested they take the boy to a different doctor. Instead, she bit her lip, her face as pale as if she'd been the one visited by her sister's spirit.

"It's Catherine," she said, finally putting a name to the specter infecting their home. "The bitch is haunting us."

Art nodded. "I'm calling Father Tony right now."

* * * * *

"You're lucky we grew up together." Father Anthony Donello—Tony to his friends—took a beer from the fridge and pointed it at Art. "Anyone else would have Child Services on the way over here to take Connor away from you."

For the past hour, Father Tony had listened to Art detail all the strange happenings in the house. To his credit, he hadn't laughed, although he did smirk a bit when Art mentioned how the clock radio in the bedroom kept turning on and playing Art and Catherine's wedding song whenever he and Missy tried to make love. But when Art asked Connor to "show Uncle Tony the bruises on your arms" Tony's face had grown serious and he'd shaken his head.

"Those are too small for a man's hands," he'd said, pointing at the five finger-shaped welts on Connor's skin. "And too big for a child's."

Now, standing in the kitchen, Art sipped his own beer. "So, you believe me?"

Tony shrugged. "I believe that you and Missy would sooner slit your own throats than hurt Connor. I believe there are things in this world science can't explain. But ghosts? That one I have trouble with. And why would Catherine want to hurt her own son? Or terrorize you, for that matter?"

"How the hell do I know?" Art heard the frustration in his voice, took a breath to calm himself before continuing. "She was half crazy for a long time. Maybe she finally lost it and that's why she killed herself. Or maybe it happened after she died. Maybe she's pissed about me and Missy. Frankly, I don't care why. I just want it to end."

In the living room, four light bulbs popped. Tony's hand twitched and beer spilled down his arm.

"What the hell?"

"Exactly." Art gestured at the broken bulbs. "That's the kind of shit we have to deal with every day."

"It could just be an electrical problem."

Art rolled his eyes. "Don't you think I've thought of that? We've had electricians, contractors, plumbers, anyone you can think of, check the place over. Nothing."

"All right, so something strange is going on. But, c'mon, ghosts?"

At that moment, a terrified scream filled the apartment. Tony jumped and his beer fell to the floor. He turned towards the living room, where the television had turned on by itself.

On the screen, children and adults watched in horror while a woman in a gray uniform stepped off a ledge and hanged herself.

"Did that just happen?" Tony's eyes were wide.

"Happens at least once a day. Same movie every time. *The Omen*. Always at the exact same point, where the maid commits suicide."

Tony's hands shook as he picked up his beer.

"Let's go down to my car."

Art frowned. "Why?"

"Because we're going to bless the shit out of this house."

* * * * *

Art opened the door and cringed at the pungent scents of musk and sandalwood that rolled out in a heavy cloud. In the three weeks since Tony Donello's last blessing, the heady mélange of incense had become a constant—and increasingly unwelcome—companion. All their clothes reeked of it, to the point where the other officers had begun making comments. The smell had even contaminated Art's car. Most days, he felt like it was permanently crusted inside his nose.

And the incense was only the beginning of what Tony had done to the house. Crosses hung on all the walls, so many of them that Art, Missy and Connor refused to bring guests over because the place looked like part of the movie set for a sequel to *Carrie*. Bottles of Holy Water sat on every windowsill and above every doorway. Stains on the walls and carpet showed where Tony had splashed jars of the stuff everywhere as he went from room to room, murmuring blessings and prayers in Latin.

Meals, once the high point of each evening, were no longer a time to bond over cooking and eating while conversation and delicious aromas filled the kitchen with love. Instead, they'd devolved into incense-drenched desultory affairs ended as soon as possible.

"I'm home," he called out.

Something went *thump* in the back part of the house.

Art's pulse kicked up a notch. The sound hadn't been loud; most likely it was nothing more than Connor tossing his sneakers into the closet or Missy shutting the door to the dryer.

Except those were noises for a normal house. He'd experienced too many odd happenings the last few months to ignore anything.

"Missy? Connor? You guys okay?" He headed down the hall, checking the different rooms along the way. Kitchen, dining room, bathroom, laundry room—all empty.

At the end of the hall, both bedroom doors were closed.

The feeling in Art's stomach grew worse. Normally, no one closed doors unless they were getting dressed. A chill passed through his body and his shoulders twitched in response. He gripped the knob to Connor's door and took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for anything. Then he threw the door open.

Connor, seated on the bed, looked up from his comic book and pulled one ear bud off, releasing the tinny sounds of pop music.

"Hey, Dad. What's up?"

Art shook his head and looked across the hall at the master bedroom door.

Another *thump*, this time louder.

"Missy." His throat constricted, reducing the word to a whisper. Ignoring Connor's "What's wrong?" he hurried to the door and grabbed the knob.

It refused to turn.

"Missy!" Art pounded his fist on the door. In response, more muffled *thumps* came from inside the room, and this time he felt sure he recognized the sound.

Someone stamping their feet on the floor.

Art reacted instantly, taking two steps back and then slamming his body into the door. It bowed but didn't open. He hit it again and was rewarded with a cracking sound from the area of the knob. For his next attempt, he started all the way from Connor's room and ran full force into the door, bending slightly at the waist so his arm and shoulder hit with maximum force, the way he'd learned back in high school football.

The door crashed open, wood splinters flying from the shattered molding. Art stumbled and then caught himself against the doorframe, his eyes already locking onto Missy's prone form.

For a moment he froze, his brain refusing to accept the reality of the scene before him.

Missy, dressed only in a bra and panties, on the floor by the foot of the bed. Something blue in her mouth. Her eyes terror-wide and her hair in shambles. A pair of jeans wrapped tightly around her ankles, binding her legs together.

Movement caught his eye. More clothes—pants, shirts, one of Connor's Spider-Man bed sheets—winding themselves around her chest, pinning her arms to her sides. As Art watched, one of his dress shirts rose from the laundry basket and dropped over Missy's head. The sleeves quickly tied themselves across her face and she pounded her feet harder.

It's choking her.

The thought of Missy's imminent death broke Art's paralysis and he grabbed the murderous shirt, tearing at the cloth until it released from Missy's face. The sleeves slapped

his cheeks, beating him so hard the buttons left circular welts on his skin that wouldn't fade for days. More clothes rose from the basket and attacked. Rolled-up socks flew through the air like fastballs and hit with bruising force. A lace bra whipped him over and over with its strap. The shirt came at him like a boxer, battering his face with lefts and rights until he clutched it with both hands and pulled, tearing the material in two.

Everything stopped.

The clothes in the air dropped to the floor. The two halves of his shirt fell limply over his arms.

There was an instant where the only thing Art heard was his own gasping and his pulse pounding in his head. Then Connor burst into tears and wrapped his arms around Art's leg, pressing himself tight as he cried.

"It's okay," Art said. He pried the boy loose and held him in his arms, hugged him close. "It's okay. Now let's help Missy."

Art knelt down, one arm still around his son, and used his other hand to untie Missy's wrists. With her hands free, she quickly released the cloths binding her feet and he helped her up.

The three of them hugged and cried for several minutes, their love and relief demonstrated far more effectively in actions rather than words. Then Missy pulled them towards the door.

"We have to leave."

They went into the living room, but Art knew she wasn't talking about just the bedroom. She meant the house. As long as Catherine's ghost was around, none of them were safe.

Except where would they go?

His wife's evil spirit had already followed Missy from her apartment to his house. It would surely follow them if they moved somewhere else. So how far would they need to travel before they were out of her reach? Another state? Another *country?*

Art looked at Missy and Connor, both of them with their heads buried against his chest, dampening his shirt with their tears. He clenched his jaw to keep a frustrated scream from escaping, enraged at his own impotence. As a cop, he'd always felt in control. Sure, there were dangers to driving patrol, but you had your training, your gun, an entire force for backup. But a ghost wasn't something you could apprehend and arrest. You couldn't shoot a malevolent spirit, no matter how much you wanted to.

If only it was that easy. Just go into bedroom, get your service pistol, and…

Jesus Christ. No.

His gun. It was still in the bedroom safe where he stored it each day after coming home from his shift. Missy's gun was in there too. Plus both their backup pistols.

If Catherine could attack with clothes…

"Stay here." Art pushed out from his family's arms. Connor tried to hold on and it nearly broke Art's heart to pry the boy's fingers loose, but he'd apologize later.

After he made sure his crazy ex-wife couldn't murder them from beyond the grave.

Missy pulled Connor into an embrace, whispering "Hush, honey, it's okay," while giving Art a confused look. Art shook his head and ran down the hall.

How long before Catherine either regained her strength or remembered the safe? Was he overreacting? She'd been haunting them for months and had never done anything with the guns.

She also never tried to kill her own sister before.

Art pulled open the double-doors of the closet just in time to see the dial on the portable safe turning. He reached up and spun the wheel in the opposite direction in an attempt to buy time and make Catherine start over. The fact that she needed to open the safe the normal way, instead of just tearing the lid off, gave him hope that he could prevent her from getting to the guns.

With one hand gripping the knob so it wouldn't turn, he pulled the safe down from its shelf, ignoring the sharp pain in his shoulder as his arm took the full weight of the heavy box. He ran back down the hall. Missy gasped at the sight of the safe, realizing instantly why he had it.

"Connor, hang on tight!" She hefted the boy in her arms and rolled off the couch onto the floor. Not that it would save them if Catherine got control of a gun. Nowhere in the house would be safe. Built in the sixties, it had thin walls and no basement. Even the backyard offered no protection. Surrounded by a six-foot-high wall to block the noise and the view of the nearby freeway, it was essentially a dead end.

The only chance, Art knew, was to get the safe out of the house and drive as far away as possible. But where?

The station.

As soon as he thought it, he knew the precinct armory represented his only chance. It was halfway across town, but there he could lock the safe away so securely even a ghost couldn't get at it.

He made it to the door and had his car keys in hand when Catherine made her presence known again. The locks on the door clicked shut and invisible hands tried to pull the safe

from him. He fought back, clutching it against his chest and wrapping his arms around it.

Something crashed into the wall next to him and shattered, peppering his cheek with tiny shrapnel. Afraid to let go of the safe, he closed his eyes and pressed his face into the corner between the wall and door. A sharp blow hit him in the lower back and a glass figurine fell to the floor. Another caught him in the shoulder, and he realized Catherine was throwing the contents of the curio cabinet at him. He ducked down, doing his best to protect his head. If she managed to stun him or knock him out, he'd lose his grip on the safe and it would be all over for him and his family.

"Leave him alone, you bitch! Sister or not, I fucking hate you!"

Missy's voice. Art wanted to turn and look, see what the hell she was thinking, when the supernatural force fighting him disappeared. At the same time, he heard objects crashing in the living room and understood exactly what Missy had done.

Bought him time.

He unlocked the door and rushed outside. Twenty feet to his car and he covered the distance like he held an empty cardboard box in his arms instead of a twenty-pound safe. He had the engine started and the car going down the driveway before he grabbed the door and pulled it closed. Then he was speeding down the road and saying a prayer for Missy and Connor to stay safe.

* * * * *

Art hung up the phone and let out a sigh of relief. Missy and Connor were fine. The barrage of souvenirs and collectibles had ended a few minutes after he'd left. And since he'd had no problems getting to the station house and locking his safe in the armory, he had to assume either Catherine had finally run out of steam or she was still looking for him.

Either way, we're not out of the woods.

There were too many things in the house a malevolent spirit could turn into deadly weapons. Knives, forks, a broken bottle…hell, even a belt could kill someone if used the right way. And they certainly couldn't empty the entire house, which left only one solution.

Get rid of Catherine for good.

He'd already told Missy and Connor to leave the house, check into a hotel someplace. Now he just had to—.

"Everytin' okay, Art?"

Art glanced up, saw Detective Benito Espinosa standing over him, one eyebrow arched

up as he stared down.

"Uh, yeah, Benny, fine. Sorry, I had to use your phone. I left my cell at the house."

"No problem, man. You sure you're okay? Like my pops used to say, choo look like sheeet, man."

Art tried to laugh, but the best he could do was muster a weak smile. He pictured himself as Benny was seeing him: sweaty, hair mussed, cuts on his cheek…not the look of a man who'd simply forgotten his phone.

"Yeah, I feel like it too. We…we're doing some renovations at the house, and I had to get away for a while, you know?"

Benny winked at him. "Yeah, I know. My Marta's a *diablo loco* too, whenever we're doing one of her stupid home improvement projects. Hey, how's your old man doin'? Ain't seen him around in a while."

"He's good. A tough old bastard, you know?" Over the years, Art had found it easier to answer questions about his father as vaguely as possible. Jeremy Stanhope had a good reputation in the precinct; people still talked about him, even after five years of retirement. *"Best desk sergeant ever,"* was the number one statement. Usually followed by, *"Sonovabitch could drink like a fish and still box your ears in."*

It was because of his reputation, and his relatively young age—he'd retired at fifty-eight—that he'd been allowed to join the auxiliary police force, which provided backup during emergencies and major events like parades and carnivals.

Of course, Jeremy had only done it so he could keep his full medical, but the Chief didn't care. He'd said having Sgt. Stanhope around occasionally was better than not having him at all.

When Art made Sergeant—the youngest ever on the force—Chief Hirsch had ended his toast with, "Here's to Art Stanhope, who's following in his old man's footsteps!"

Since that day, Art's stomach burned every time he drank champagne.

"You tell him Bennie says 'Hi' next time you see him, okay?" Bennie slapped Art on the shoulder and sauntered away towards the break room.

Glad for the chance to escape further conversation about his father or anything else, Art left the station and headed for the library, where he sat down at a computer and called up a search program. Then he paused.

What the hell did you search for when you had to rid your house of an evil spirit? Exorcists? Witch doctors?

Ghost freakin' busters?

In the end, he settled on *possessed homes* as a starting point. When he got more than 10,000 hits, he quickly narrowed his search to *getting rid of ghosts* and added in the name of their town. Numerous "self-help" pages came up, and he scrolled past them. He and Missy were well beyond self-help. They needed a professional.

And on page three of his results, he found one.

Madam Ileana Prioleau, Spiritualist.

Art read the first paragraph on the site, unaware he was speaking aloud.

"Thank you for visiting my web site. I am blessed to have the gifts of clairsentience (sensing) and clairvoyance (seeing). These are gifts that have been bestowed upon me from above. Having these gifts also allows me to reach out and help others, whether they are in need of guidance or help with a spirit problem, or are simply looking to contact a loved one."

Below the information was a contact number. There were other pages on the site, but he'd seen enough. He hit print and went to the front desk to retrieve his document.

Catherine, it's time to send you back where you belong.

Hell.

* * * * *

"What you ask, this is very difficult."

"But you can do it, right?" Art watched the old woman closely. He'd always been good at reading faces, the tiny changes in expression, the body language of head tilts and eye movements. Combined with voice inflection, they were great ways to tell if someone was lying, telling the truth or something in between.

Or just plain trying to rip you off.

Madam Ileana Prioleau had turned out to be nothing like he expected. Despite her ethnic name, he'd assumed she'd be American. Probably middle-aged and over-stated, like the psychics you saw on television. Instead, he'd been met at the door by a wizened old woman whose shriveled, wrinkled skin and snow-white hair made determining her age impossible. He figured she had to be in her late seventies or eighties, but if she'd said she was ninety—or even a hundred—he wouldn't have been surprised.

Her accent and name marked her as Northern European. Poland, Hungary, Romania, possibly the Czech Republic. When she spoke, it made Art think of a secondary character in a Hammer vampire movie from the sixties. The only thing American about her was her clothing, a simple long-sleeved gray blouse and a matching skirt, both of which looked as

old and wrinkled as their owner. Sensible black tennis shoes covered her feet.

After ushering him into a tidy house decorated in a country farm style, Madam Prioleau listened to Art's story without commenting. When he'd finished, she'd asked a few questions about Catherine: her age, her temperament, the way she'd died.

What he wanted to do with her ghost.

"I don't care," he'd told her. "Send it to heaven or hell or purgatory or wherever ghosts are supposed to go. Destroy it. Lock it in a box and drop it in a lake for all I care. Just make sure it never bothers me or my family again."

That's when she'd said it would be difficult. And although Art understood that he'd come to her, was counting on her to be an expert in her field, he also had no intentions of letting some old lady rip him off or charge him extra just because he didn't know shit about the supernatural. He was desperate, but not a sucker.

At least he hoped not.

"I can do," she finally said, after much staring into the air and rubbing her whiskery chin. She paused again, and he waited for the reveal. With any luck, he'd be able to talk her down to a reasonable price.

"Will cost, though."

Here it comes.

"I do for a hundred dollars."

"A hundred…wait. What?" Art frowned. "That's all?"

The crone smiled, revealing teeth so yellow she appeared to be wearing wooden dentures. "You want pay more? Fine. Two hundred."

"Deal." Art took out his wallet before his mouth got him in more trouble. "When can you start?"

Madam Prioleau pointed at the clock, which read a little after four. "Magic works best in the dark. You will help me get what I need and drive me to this place. Then we do."

"And you're sure this will work?"

Another wooden smile.

"Madam Prioleau guarantee. Tomorrow, no ghost."

Art nodded. "Let's get started."

* * * * *

Madam Prioleau's storage room, unlike her physical appearance or the rest of her

house, matched Art's expectations exactly.

Seemingly endless racks of cheap metal shelving, the kind you purchased by the box in Home Depot or Wal-Mart, crammed the long, narrow space from floor to ceiling. Each shelf held dozens of jars and bags and boxes, many of them so old the labels were yellowed and crumbling or had fallen off completely. In the dim light of two dirt-encrusted bulbs hanging from the ceiling, Art found it impossible to read any of the remaining hand-written tags.

The odors in the room, a suffocating blend of spices, incense, dust, mildew and things he couldn't identify, combined to form an almost solid presence, an invisible pillow that felt like it was expanding inside his lungs and preventing them from extracting enough oxygen. He had to fight for each breath, wheezing as he held a wicker basket for Madam Prioleau, who moved from shelf to shelf with complete surety, plucking plastic bags and tiny jars from their resting places and dropping them into the basket. Every movement sent new clouds of microscopic particles into the air, adding to the already intolerable atmosphere.

Each time the spiritualist stopped to retrieve an ingredient for her spell, she muttered the item under her breath, as if mentally checking it off her list. Most of the time, Art couldn't catch her words, losing them to her accent and lack of volume. Of the ones he caught, very few sounded familiar.

Ferret claw. Hand of Glory. Lumbricus terrestris. Amanita phalloides. Bufo marinus. Pig's blood. Despite his worries over eliminating the evil from his house, he found himself wondering where the hell a person acquired this kind of stuff? Was there a spellcaster's shop on the internet? And how much trouble would he be in if he got pulled over with it in his possession? He decided he was better off not knowing. Even so, he made a mental note to take the back roads home.

By the time she finished, the contents of the basket threatened to overflow the sides and Art placed a hand on top of the pile to keep everything from shifting as they walked to his car.

During the fifteen minute drive home, Madam Prioleau stared straight ahead, her eyes closed, whispering phrases to herself in some foreign language. Art assumed she was rehearsing her spell, but for all he knew, she could be reciting poetry or composing a letter to a friend.

When they were still a block away from the house, she opened her eyes and let out a small gasp.

"We are very close, yes?"

"Yeah, it's just around the corner."

"I feel her darkness. Your wife's spirit is greatly troubled. Very angry, this one."

"Tell me something I don't know." Art turned the corner and guided the car to the driveway. He was relieved to see Missy's car wasn't there; he'd been half-afraid she'd drive back to attend the exorcism of the house. He'd told her no, he'd rather she be safe in case anything went wrong. But Missy had a stubborn streak. Not as bad as Catherine's, but bad enough that he wouldn't have been surprised to find her waiting for them to arrive.

Art reached in to pull the basket from the back floor but Madam Prioleau stopped him with a leathery hand.

"You wait. I make things safe." She reached into the basket and withdrew an old one-liter soda bottle filled with a greasy-looking brown liquid.

Moving at a slow but steady pace, Madam Prioleau circled the house, pausing every few feet to take a mouthful of the bottle's contents and then spit it out. After motioning for Art to open the door, she moved through every room in the house, spraying more of the liquid as she went. Trailing behind her, Art caught definite whiffs of alcohol.

"Okay, good now. You get basket." Madam Prioleau wiped her lips on her sleeve.

"What is that?" Art asked, pointing at the bottle. She held it up.

"Rum and chicken fat. It will prevent your wife from disturbing the spell. But not last long. Hurry. Bring basket to me."

Art did as he was told, grimacing at the thought of how rum and chicken fat must taste. When he returned with the basket, Madam Prioleau told him to place it on the table, light every candle he owned, and then turn off the lights.

With the house darkened, Madam Prioleau was a silhouette in the dining room, her hands moving in rapid fashion as she poured fluids and powders into a large wooden bowl she'd brought with her. Bigger pieces of things went in too, and she stopped every now and then to crush one of them with a stone mortar. While she mixed, she mumbled more indecipherable words.

Just when it seemed like she might go on combining ingredients forever, Madam Prioleau held up the bowl and began speaking in a louder voice. Seated on the couch, Art felt something move the room, an unseen energy that crept over him with icy feet and left the hairs on his arms standing straight up. The atmosphere grew heavier, the air gaining mass until it seemed as thick as a humid day in Florida, only without the moisture. Madam Prioleau dipped her fingers into the bowl and flicked liquid left and right while she shuffled from the dining room to the kitchen, still reciting her spell.

A vile stench assaulted Art, a smell so rancid he had to pull his shirt over his face, and even then the pungent funk snaked its way into his nose and throat. The reek grew stronger with each handful of potion Madam Prioleau threw into the air, until he thought he might vomit.

Something crashed down the hall. Art tried to stand, but he found himself pinned down by the weight of the atmosphere.

Beneath the TV, DVD cases rattled and shook on their shelves. One of them slid free and shot across the room, burying itself in the sofa cushion next to Art. Two more flew past, spinning and whining and missing his head by inches. He tried again to get off the couch, gripping the sofa's edge and pushing as hard as he could with his arms and legs. Once more his muscles proved no match for the supernatural force filling the room, but he did manage to slide off the cushion and fall to the floor. A second later, three DVDs embedded themselves right where he'd been sitting.

"Begone!" Madam Prioleau's shout came from somewhere deep in the house, followed by a series of words in her native tongue. In response, the rest of the DVDs took off from their resting places. The sounds of glass and plastic shattering told him there'd be a helluva mess to clean.

If he survived.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator door opened and slammed closed over and over, creating a racket so loud it drowned out Madam Prioleau's chanting. Cabinet doors and drawers released their contents, adding to the din. A large carving knife thudded into the floor next to Art's hand, a full inch of the blade disappearing into the wood. Unable to do more than tilt his head back and forth, Art's fear and anger found release in his voice.

"Begone, you crazy bitch!" he cried. He had no idea if adding his voice to the spell would make a difference; he only knew it made him feel better. "Get the fuck out of my house, Catherine! Leave us the fuck alone!"

The coffee table by his head levitated up and he immediately regretted his words. He tried to move his arms over his head, but they were only halfway there when the table came crashing down.

It landed across his back, and the only thing that saved him from a broken spine was the legs striking the floor first and absorbing most of the impact. Still, when the heavy wood and glass snapped in half, it felt like a truck hitting him from behind. The air exploded from his lungs, leaving him wheezing and seeing spots as he fought to draw a breath.

Every light bulb burst at once, filling the house with miniature detonations. A violent

wind swept through the room, blowing out the candles and tumbling lamps from the end tables.

Then the manifestations stopped and the oppressive weight on Art's body disappeared. Air rushed back into his chest and he let it fill him, sucking in the life-giving oxygen in great, heaving gasps. When his vision returned to normal and the world stopped spinning around him, he pushed himself to his feet and called out for Madam Prioleau.

"In here," she responded, her voice sounding as weak as he felt. He staggered through the debris on the floor and found her in Connor's bedroom, sprawled across his mattress, which lay half off the bed.

"Is it…is it over?" Art leaned against the doorframe, afraid of what her answer might be. If this was only the beginning of the spell…

Madam Prioleau looked up and gave him a feeble smile.

"Can you not feel the difference?" She raised a hand and motioned it in a clumsy circle. "The evil is gone from this place."

Art righted Connor's desk chair from where it had fallen and lowered himself onto it with a sigh. The house did feel different, cleaner somehow, but he had no idea if it was because Catherine's presence was truly gone or because there was nothing supernatural happening at the moment.

"She'll stay gone?" he asked.

Madam Prioleau stood up with more energy than a woman her age should have, especially after what she'd just been through.

"Not to be worrying. I send spirit away, it stay away. No ghost, no more. Now, take me home. *Wheel of Fortune* starts in half hour."

Art looked around at the disaster area that was his house and couldn't help but laugh. She'd driven out a ghost, destroyed thousands of dollars in furniture and belongings, and all the diminutive psychic cared about was her game show.

So who am I to keep her from it?

He pulled his keys from his pocket.

I've got my house back and my family is safe.

It's time to start living.

* * * * *

Art waited three days before bringing Missy and Connor home, just to make sure

Catherine wasn't coming back.

It took a cleaning service two of those days to remove all the broken glass and scrub away the soda and food smeared across the kitchen floor. In the meantime, Art spent every waking moment putting furniture back into place, patching and painting the holes in the walls and replacing all the things Catherine had destroyed. New dishes sat in the cupboards, the refrigerator was fully stocked and all the lights had bulbs.

And in all that time, there'd not been the slightest hint of anything supernatural happening.

"Art, you did a fantastic job!" Missy turned and hugged him. Connor paid no attention to the new paint or furniture and ran straight for his room, where he turned on his Xbox. Art shook his head. *As long as there's video games and a TV, the kid probably doesn't care where we live.*

"Thank you, my dear," Art said, affecting a thick southern drawl. "And in honor of our new freedom, tonight we shall dine on…pizza." He held up his phone.

Missy laughed. "No time to cook anything, huh?" She hugged him again, and added a long, tender kiss. Then she leaned back and regarded him with a serious expression.

"What?" he asked.

"Is it really over? Is she gone for good?"

He nodded. "That's what Madam Prioleau says, and I believe her. I've been sleeping here for three nights and nothing's happened. No weird noises, no lights exploding, no television going on by itself. Ding dong, the witch is finally dead."

He sat on the couch and pulled Missy down next to him, but she avoided his embrace and frowned at him.

"Don't talk like that. She was your wife."

"And your sister," he said. "But we both know what she turned into. And I for one am glad that thing is gone forever."

"Maybe she had a good reason." Missy chewed on her lower lip, a habit she'd developed not long after Catherine started haunting them.

"What?" It was Art's turn to frown. "What are you talking about?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Ignore me. I'm just feeling a little guilty, that's all. In a way, it's like losing Catherine all over again, only this time it's our fault. We sent her away."

"And good fucking riddance." Art took Missy's hands in his. "Stop feeling guilty. We moved past that a long time ago, because there was no one to blame but Catherine for what she did. And it's the same now. We didn't turn her into a psycho ghost anymore than we

forced her off that cliff or put her paranoid delusions in her head. There was something wrong inside her, and it got worse after she died. End of story."

"End of story." She attempted a smile. "I like that. Close the book and start a new one."

"That's the spirit!" He pulled her hands up and kissed them. "I've got an idea. Instead of takeout, let's celebrate. We'll put on our best sneakers and head to Carmello's. Connor can still get pizza and you can I can enjoy some real food and a glass of wine."

"You sure know how to treat a girl!" She gave him a big kiss and stood up. "I'll go change. You pry Connor from his video game."

For the first time in weeks, Art watched Missy walk down the hall and his thoughts were on sex instead of her safety.

From now on, we live a normal life.

He couldn't imagine anything better.

* * * * *

One week after ridding the house of Catherine's ghost, Art found himself home alone again, although this time for purely mundane reasons. Connor was spending his Saturday night at a friend's house and Missy had the nine p.m. to five a.m. shift the next four days. She'd gone in a couple of hours early to catch up on paperwork. Or so she said. Art had a funny feeling in his stomach that she needed to use a computer where he couldn't see her, which could only mean one thing.

She was checking out wedding dresses. Or rings. Something to do with weddings, anyhow. She'd been dropping hints for a few days, things like "Once we're married we can…" and "I hear Hawaii is a great place to honeymoon."

Subtle hints.

And the fact that hearing them didn't cause his stomach to convulse made him smile, because it meant he was ready too. That Catherine hadn't ruined him on marriage.

As much as he knew Missy wanted him to bring the subject up—or propose—he felt he owed Connor the courtesy of talking about it first. Not that he expected any problems from the boy. It was just a guy thing.

He'd intended to do it that night, until Kelli Reutermann called to ask if Connor could spend the night with her twins, Randy and Roger. Art didn't hesitate in saying yes, despite looking forward to a "guy's night." After what they'd been through the past few months, Connor deserved some fun.

So after dropping his son off at the Reutermann's and picking up take out Chinese for himself, he ended up watching an old movie and heading to bed early.

Only he couldn't fall asleep.

He'd been having sleeping problems ever since they moved back into the house, jumping at the slightest sounds despite knowing in his head that they had no reason to worry anymore. He'd tried combating the insomnia with bad television: *Ancient Aliens, Seinfeld* reruns, late night talk shows. Nothing worked. He'd drift off, only to start awake when the air conditioner kicked on or ice cubes clattered in the freezer.

After a few nights like that, he'd been practically a walking zombie, his eyes threatening to close anytime he wasn't actively doing something, like arresting a suspect or cooking dinner. Not a big deal if you were watching TV or reading a magazine in the break room; another thing entirely if you were at your desk preparing a report or behind the wheel of a squad car watching for speeders.

Which was why the previous night he'd resorted to taking two Advil PMs, which never failed to put him out, in order to get a full night's sleep. And it had worked. In the morning, he'd felt reasonably refreshed and human again.

Now, lying in bed and watching a half-drunk alien conspiracy expert mumbling about reptilians living among humans, he gave in and shook out two of the sleep aids from the bottle next to the bed. Better to be a little groggy in the morning than exhausted all day.

Unaware he'd passed from dozing to full sleep, Art found himself walking a dark, ominous road, where the only light came from a full moon half-hidden by a forest of tall, dead trees. Skeletal branches reached into the sky, seeming to plead for life to return. No cars disturbed the empty night, and the cracked and pitted surface served as definitive evidence of a road rarely traveled.

The sensation of danger lurking in the dark grew stronger with each step. Art glanced frequently from side to side, alert for anything that might be waiting to prey on a lone traveler. The deathly silence unnerved him; the only sounds were his own breathing and the crunch of his shoes on dirt and stone.

He walked and walked, with no sensation of time. The moon never changed position, the sky never lightened. So he had no way of telling how far he'd gone, or how long he'd been on the road, when a new sound broke the hush.

A slow, steady thumping.

Art stopped and tried to determine where it came from. He turned in a slow circle, but the acoustics of the road and woods fought him, refusing to give any clues.

He tried to identify the noise. *Thump… Thump… Thump.* The deliberate, reverberating beat created an unwanted picture in his head, a giant alien heart pumping sluggishly inside a sleeping beast, a beast that might awaken at any moment.

The sound gained strength, as if somehow the hidden creature was drawing closer. Or growing larger. His imagination turned it from a heart inside a sleeping giant to an enormous heart all on its own, a colossal mutant organ sliding through the forest, leaving a trail of blood and acid in its wake.

With no idea where the monster was, Art took off at a run in the same direction he'd been walking. Still the malevolent thumping grew louder, until it seemed to come from all sides at once.

Thump… Thump… THUMP!

Art came awake, sitting up in bed and gasping for air. Under the influence of the pills, it took him several seconds to realize he'd escaped his dream.

And yet he could still hear the thumping.

His first thought was *Catherine's back!* But why was she outside?

Thump… thump… thump

There was something knocking at the door.

His brain still muddy from sleep, he tried to make sense of what was happening.

Thumping. First it was not as loud, now it's louder.

Front door, back door?

Someone knocking at the back door always made more noise; the back door was hollow metal instead of solid wood, and the kitchen tended to act like an echo chamber, with noises bouncing off the tiles and doubling in volume.

He swung his feet out of bed, his fear turning to anger. Was that all this was, some asshole knocking at the door and then going around to the kitchen when no one answered? He glanced at his clock. A little before midnight. No wonder he felt so loopy. He'd only been asleep a couple of hours; the pills he'd taken were still in his system.

Thump… thump… thump

"Shit." Probably some stupid drunk at the wrong house. Anyone he knew would either call on the phone or ring the bell if they were trying to reach him in an emergency. He grabbed his robe and cursed again. A drunk or a teenage prank. Well, it didn't matter. Somebody was going to get an earful of shit for waking him up.

He was halfway to the kitchen when the noise stopped. He paused, waiting for it to start up again, or return to the front door. When the house remained silent, he flicked on the

kitchen light and peered out through the window in the door.

No one stood on the porch.

Whoever it was realized they were at the wrong house. Most likely it was true, but Art still went to each of the kitchen windows to check the rest of the back yard, in case the late night visitor had passed out. Or there were kids waiting to toss eggs or rocks at the house.

Another thought came to him. What if it was someone he'd arrested, someone who'd found out where he lived? He purposely had an unlisted number, something all cops did as part of keeping their families safe, but it wouldn't be that hard to find out an address, not with all the information available on the web these days.

More cautious now, he turned the lights off and went around the house checking the rest of the windows and doors to make sure everything was locked. As he did, he noticed a hint of something foul in the air, a smell like rotten meat.

Gotta remember to take out the garbage in the morning.

By the time he finished locking down the house, he was wide awake, all the effects from the pills long gone.

With a sigh, he got a beer from the fridge and plopped himself on the couch, flicking through the channels until he found a *Married with Children* rerun.

Might as well wait for Missy to come home.

* * * * *

Missy Sawyer watched the sign for Eldorado Road go by as she slowly cruised down Fourth Street and almost gave in to the temptation to turn and follow Eldorado down to River Road, and then to her house. Not that she'd actually stop and go inside. Art would be sleeping, and God knew he needed his rest. It was just that despite how calm things had been for the past week, she still harbored a fear Catherine might return. That the psychic's spell would only be a temporary solution.

Catherine was a stubborn, vindictive bitch in life. If any ghost could figure out a way to break a spell, Catherine Stanhope would be the one.

Missy had no idea how much of her worries were based on guilt or just plain fear, and in the end it didn't matter. She had a feeling she'd always be looking over her shoulder for her older sister, always be thinking that tiny noise in the night was Catherine's angry spirit come back to torment them again. That was why she felt tempted to check the house each night she had patrol duty. Just to make sure everything was all right. That Art wasn't dead or

injured so badly he couldn't call for help, that Connor wasn't being force-fed his own Game Boy by a demented specter.

As crazy as live Catherine had been, dead Catherine was even worse. How else to explain why she'd tried to hurt Connor? She'd had plenty of reasons to be angry with her husband, hate her sister. More than anyone knew. But her own son? An innocent child? Why?

Missy turned right, putting Eldorado in her rear view mirror.

A question we'll never have an answer for.

The radio squawked to life and she turned the volume up, happy for the distraction.

"…units. Ten-twelve reported on two-sixteen High Street, north from Eldorado. Nearest unit please respond."

Missy hit the brakes. High and Eldorado was only a few blocks from her current position.

And only a couple of miles from my house.

She pushed the thought away. A ten-twelve was code for a possible intruder. Nothing at all to do with the supernatural events they'd been through. While putting the car into a U-turn, she thumbed her shoulder mike. "This is Charlie one-four responding to Code ten-twelve. I'm on Fourth, turning onto Eldorado. ETA two minutes."

"Roger that, one-four. One-one should be near you if you need them."

"Charlie one-one here. Ten blocks away on Lincoln."

"Hang tight, fellas. I'll let you know if I need assistance."

Car one-one was Eddie Tompkins and Derrick McGrath, two officers who'd been on patrol at least ten years. Despite an ever-present need to prove herself as one of only three women on the force, Missy felt glad there'd be dependable backup if something went down. Small town or not, enough bad shit happened on a regular basis that you couldn't be too careful. Not in an age when any kid who wanted a gun could get one and deadly drugs like crack and meth were as common as pot.

With no traffic ahead of her on Eldorado, Missy hit the gas but refrained from using the siren or lights. If there was really an intruder, the last thing she wanted to do was spook him. He might run away, or he could just as easily decide to take a hostage.

Her palms grew sweaty where she gripped the wheel, and she cursed the adrenaline coursing through her. Even after six years on the job, she still got that tingling feeling in her gut every time she responded to a call, that mix of fear and excitement that heightened her senses and fueled her reflexes, but also made it tough to grip a gun.

When she turned the corner from Eldorado, she caught a glimpse of the first mailbox.

Two-twenty-two. Since she was going north, the numbers would be decreasing. Two-sixteen would be—

"Holy shit." Missy skidded to a stop. Two-sixteen was a small brick two-story. All the lights were on. And there was a figure standing on the lawn. A figure Missy instantly recognized.

Catherine.

"It can't be." She opened the door, one hand already unlatching the strap over her service pistol. The figure turned around, caught square by Missy's headlights.

Missy's stomach contracted and her heart rate doubled as she stared at her sister's dead body.

Pieces of Catherine's face had sloughed off, revealing the muscle and bone beneath. Half her nose was gone, leaving a gaping black hole on that side. In the bright light, her eyes were two bluish-white circles devoid of any pupil or iris. Dirt stains covered her navy burial dress, the very same dress Missy had handed to the funeral director while Art and Connor wept in the other room.

"You're supposed to be gone," Missy said. She spoke to herself, but Catherine responded even though there was no way she could have heard her sister from a distance of several yards.

"You tried to kill me again, Sissy. Tried to send my soul to Hell. But it didn't work. Now I'm going to have my revenge."

Corpse Catherine pointed at Missy, who saw the tips of her fingers were missing, just pieces of bone sticking out from ragged flesh.

Jesus Christ, she dug her way out of her grave.

Missy's hands acted of their own accord, bringing her pistol up in a two-handed shooting grip. She pulled the trigger three times in rapid succession. All three shots hit their target, sending Catherine spinning to one side and then down to the ground.

In the house, curtains moved and someone screamed.

Catherine stood up. Thick, black fluids dripped from the holes in her dress. She smiled, exposing gums rotted away to almost nothing.

Missy fired twice more. Catherine's body jerked and staggered, but didn't fall.

In the distance, a siren howled to life.

"Charlie one-four! Sawyer! Reports of shots fired. Are you on the scene?"

The siren drew rapidly closer. Missy kept both hands on her gun and backed up until she hit the car door.

Bullets won't kill her. Her hands began to shake, and the trembling grew so bad she couldn't keep the gun straight. She gripped it tighter, and even then she knew she'd drop it if she tried to pull the trigger.

"Sawyer! Respond! Are you okay? One-one, move it! Sawyer's not responding."

Catherine turned her head towards the siren and Missy took a chance, turning her back on the dead thing that used to be her sister and ducking around the door to regain the safety of the car. She put it drive, intending to run Catherine over. Maybe it wouldn't kill her, but she wouldn't be much danger with a car parked on top of her.

Except when Missy looked out the windshield, Catherine no longer stood there.

"Hell!" She threw the car in park and twisted around in her seat, checking all the windows for any sign of movement.

The lawn was empty.

"…—er! I repeat, Sawyer, do you copy?"

Still checking the area around the car, Missy reached up and thumbed her mike.

"Sawyer here. I'm okay. Shots were fired by me at suspect who…escaped."

"Roger. Stay on scene, one-four. One-one is on its way." There was relief in the duty officer's voice; with assurance of her safety, it was back-to-business, for the air at least.

Missy leaned back in her seat, her pulse slowing a bit with the immediate danger gone.

How could Catherine be alive? And where could she have…?

"No." There was only one place Catherine would go.

Art.

* * * * *

The ring of the phone brought Art instantly awake. He sat straight up on the couch, heart pounding, unaware for a moment of where he was or how he'd gotten there. The second ring brought him back to his senses.

Living room. Couldn't sleep. Must've dozed off watching TV.

He glanced at the cable box while the phone rang for a third time. Not even one-thirty yet. The icy hand of fear gripped him. No one ever called in the middle of the night unless it was bad news.

Missy. He recognized the number on the caller ID as he picked up the phone, and felt his unease grow worse.

"Hello?"

"She's back! Get out of the house! Catherine's back!"

"What?" He stood up, remembering the knocking at the doors earlier. *No, that couldn't have been her. She'd have just been inside, like before.* "Slow down. What happened?"

"I saw her. On the street. She spoke to me. Art, she's dead but she was right there." Missy's voice was approaching hysterical.

"You saw her? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm goddamned sure! I fired five shots into her goddamned chest! Then the next second, she was gone. You and Connor have to get out. She's coming for you."

"We're leaving now. I'll meet you at the station." Art clicked off the phone and then cursed.

Connor was at his friend's house. What if Catherine went there first?

Art shoved his feet into his shoes and grabbed his keys. Connor first, then the station. He'd call Missy once he had Connor safe in the car.

The Reutermanns lived across town, on Oakwood and Carlisle. No way Catherine could get there before him.

Ten minutes ago you'd have said there's no way she could be walking in someone's yard.

"Shit."

He had the siren going and his grill lights flashing before he even left the driveway.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes after receiving Missy's frantic call, Art pulled away from the Reutermann's house, leaving a very confused Kelli and Jason Reutermann standing on their porch. He'd phoned them on his way over, apologizing for waking them and saying there'd been a minor family emergency and he had to leave town for a couple of days with Connor and Missy to be with a sick relative. It bothered him to lie, especially when Kelli offered to watch Connor until he and Missy got back. He felt like a jerk turning her down, but better that than putting an innocent family in harm's way just because his insane wife had apparently decided to come back from the dead and didn't care who she hurt.

Yeah, try explaining that to Kelli and Jason. They'd never let their kids play with Connor again.

He arrived at the station and stuck a half-awake Connor in the training room, where he could watch TV and hopefully fall back to sleep. Thanks to increasingly unreliable babysitters, it wasn't the first time a cop had parked a kid in there for a couple of hours.

Captain Ruiz tended to turn a blind eye, especially after she'd had to do it herself.

Missy came in a few minutes later, her face ashen and her eyes wild. Just seeing her like that made Art wish Catherine would show up right then, so he could choke the undead life out of her for what she'd done to Missy and Connor.

"I'll be right there," Missy said as she went past. He nodded, knowing exactly where she was headed. She'd fired her weapon; there'd be a statement to give and a report to fill out. "Be right there" was cop speak for "See you in an hour or two."

Which was fine. They were all safe. Undead or not, Catherine wouldn't be attacking them in a police station. She'd be blown to bits if she tried. Which might not be such a bad thing. Except how would he explain her being there in the first place?

With a confused but sleepy Connor settled in, and a cup of hot, bitter coffee in his hand, Art took a few minutes to sit and think.

Where had Catherine's body come from and how had it come back to life? Madam Prioleau had assured them she was gone for good, that…

Madam Prioleau. For Christ's sake, he had an expert on the supernatural right in his contacts list, and he hadn't thought to call her yet. After shutting the door so no one would hear his conversation, he pulled up her number and hit Send.

The phone rang several times before a groggy voice answered.

"Hello?"

"This is Art Stanhope. She's back. Only this time, she's not a ghost. What the hell happened?"

A sharp intake of breath answered his question. When there were no further sounds, Art worried that maybe the old woman had passed out. Or hung up on him. He was getting ready to say something when Madam Prioleau spoke.

"Did you say your wife is not a ghost?" This time the voice held no hints of sleep. "Please. Tell me what happened."

"Well, I didn't see her. But Missy did. Only a few blocks from my house. She says she shot Catherine several times, and nothing happened. Then Catherine disappeared. That's all know. The police are still questioning Missy so I haven't had a chance to talk to her."

"This is not good."

"Not good? Thanks for stating the obvious. You said she was gone forever."

"Yes, her ghost. But this…if your woman is right, this is being something different. I must see you. Both of you. Tomorrow, nine o'clock. You get me, bring me to your house. Do not go there without me. Goodnight."

The red disconnect button flashed, letting Art know Madam Prioleau had hung up.

"Dammit!" He resisted the urge to call the psychic back. What good would it do? She'd given him the one thing he needed to know until he saw her.

"Do not go there without me."

Great. Looks like it's back to the hotel tonight.

* * * * *

As it turned out, they never made it to the hotel. By the time Missy gave her statement—three times, to three different people, including the shift commander—and wrote up her report, it was already close to four a.m. Rather than wake Connor, who'd fallen asleep on a leather-wrapped bench, Art picked up coffee and donuts for the entire overnight shift and then he and Missy took seats in the training room where they could keep an eye on Connor and finally talk about what had happened.

"What did you tell them?" Art asked once they were alone. Even more than he wanted to know the details, he had to know what she'd said so he'd be prepared in case he got brought in for questioning later on.

Missy raised one eyebrow and stared at him with bloodshot eyes. Dark smudges below them magnified the exhausted, shocked expression she'd worn since arriving at the station.

"I told them the truth, or at least what I could of it. I answered a call about a possible intruder. There was a woman in dark clothes on the lawn, she came at me in a threatening manner with a weapon. I told her to stop but she didn't. So I fired. She went down, then got up and ran. I fired again but missed. I heard on the radio that backup was on the way. I waited for them to arrive and we looked for her but didn't find her."

"A weapon?"

"I might have exaggerated that part." She gave him a tired smile. "My official explanation for why she didn't go down was either she had on a vest or she was zonked on drugs. I had to say that, 'cause I hit her at least three times so there's bound to be trace on the scene."

"And you're sure it was Catherine?"

"I know my own sister, even though she looked like an extra from *The Walking Dead*." Missy downed half her coffee and took a bite of donut before continuing in a softer voice. "It was her, Art. She looked…she looked like she'd just dug herself out of her grave."

"That's—" Art stopped himself. He'd been about to say it was impossible, but who knew what the hell was impossible anymore?

"There's one way to find out." He stood up.

Missy frowned. "How?"

"I'm going to her grave. If it hasn't been disturbed, we'll know this is just another kind of haunting, and that's why the bullets didn't stop her. If it's been dug up, well…maybe Madam Prioleau can explain it."

"I'm going with you." Missy rose but Art stopped her with a gentle push on the shoulder.

"No. Stay with Connor, in case he wakes up. If anyone asks, I ran to the store for something."

He bent down and kissed her forehead. When he stood, she grabbed his arm.

"Be careful. She…she said she wants revenge."

"I don't care what she wants. We're going to end this if I have to burn her to ashes myself."

Missy watched Art leave the room and wiped a tear from her cheek.

She had a nasty feeling that getting rid of Catherine a second time wasn't going to be as easy as before.

* * * * *

Art arrived at Eternal Rest Cemetery just as the sun peeked over the horizon, painting the finely-manicured grounds with a golden light that did nothing to improve his mood. The gates were already open, and he drove to Catherine's grave as fast as the narrow, curving road allowed. From a distance, the grave appeared as green and neat as its neighbors, but Art hiked over to it anyhow.

Catherine's plot sat in an area devoid of trees. Morning sun turned dew drops into sparkling crystals. The perfectly-mown grass showed no signs of disturbance. Art walked a circle around the grave, examining every inch of the ground, but saw nothing. He was about to head back to his car when he caught a hint of a foul odor. He paused and took a deep breath. It was there, faint but definite, lurking beneath the more pleasurable smells of flowers and summer grass.

An odor of decay, of rot. Like meat gone bad in a trash can, or a dead cat under the porch.

A queasy sensation came alive in Art's stomach, and with it, a picture in his head.

Catherine's dead, decomposing corpse lying just beneath the grass, poised like a trap door

spider, waiting for him to take just another step or two closer so it could spring up from its hiding place, clamp its bony hands around his legs and drag him down into the earth, where it would make a meal out of him. Yellowed teeth carving out hunks of flesh. Leathery tongue lapping up his blood.

"No!" Art shook his head. Letting his imagination get away from him was the last thing he could afford to do. If they were being hunted by a supernatural creature, he needed to stay level-headed. Treat it like an investigation. Step-by-step.

Okay. So what's the protocol for the living dead?

Only one person knows that. He checked his phone. Still almost three hours until he had to meet Madam Prioleau. But his father would be up and about. Jeremy Stanhope was a classic early to bed, early to rise kind of guy. Always had been, unless he'd had a night shift. Then look out; a tired Jeremy was not a pleasant thing.

We can't bring Connor to the house while Catherine's on the loose. And I might need Missy with me if things go bad; two guns are better than one.

So what do I say?

He sure as hell couldn't tell his father the truth. The old man had about as much tolerance for "supernatural drivel" as he did for criminals or politicians.

Termites. He could say they'd found termites in the house and it needed to be tented for a couple of days. He and Missy would stay at a hotel, but they figured it would be better for Connor to spend some time with his grandfather.

Perfect.

Not that he relished calling his father, but at least with Catherine gone, they'd begun a sort of healing process. Missy helped in that respect too. The old man had always held a grudging respect for her, partly because she'd done well as a cop and partly because she didn't have her sister's abrasive personality. He hadn't been exactly thrilled when they told him they were dating—said it was "goddamned weird to date your dead wife's sister"—but he'd never bitched about her the way he had about Catherine.

Art opened his contacts list on his phone and then stared at his father's number for several seconds before touching the dial button. *Let's hope he doesn't have his bullshit radar turned on today.*

"Hello, son."

Even the tiny speaker of the cell phone couldn't mask the chill in Jeremy Stanhope's voice.

Good morning to you too.

"Hi, Dad. Listen, I need a favor…"

* * * * *

After dropping Connor off at his father's, Art and Missy picked up Madam Prioleau. She was waiting on her porch, dressed in the same outfit as the last time, which made Art wonder if she habitually wore it whenever she dealt with the supernatural, or if plain and gray was just her style.

"We go to your house," she said, buckling her seat belt. "On way, you tell me everything."

"We already did that."

"You tell me again. From beginning."

By the time Art fought his way through the morning rush hour traffic and pulled up in front of the house, he'd just finished going over all the facts about Catherine's death and the hauntings of Missy's apartment and then his house.

"Not make sense." Madam Prioleau shook her head in a quick, birdlike movement as she climbed the front stairs. "Monstru not possible, unless…"

"I don't understand," Missy said, while Art unlocked the front door. "What's a monstru?"

The psychic entered the living room and turned around to face them. "Monstru. Dead thing. What you saw." She made walking motions with her fingers.

"And these monstru things come from ghosts?"

"No! Monstru come from…" her voice tailed off and she stared past Art and Missy at the door.

"What is it?" Art turned around, half-expecting to see Catherine's reanimated corpse on the front porch. But all he saw was sunshine and an empty street.

"Shhh." Madam Prioleau squinted her eyes and sniffed the air. Following an unseen trail, she moved towards the door then went out onto the porch, where she knelt down and put her nose to the ground. She took several deep inhalations, paused and repeated the process. When she stood up, she pointed at the ground next to the porch.

"You smell?"

Art and Missy looked at each other. "I don't smell anything," he said. "Do you?" Missy shook her head.

Madam Prioleau frowned and pushed past them. They stood still, watching while she went from room to room, sniffing the air like a bloodhound. Eventually, she reached the back door.

"Come," she said, motioning to them. "Now you smell?"

Art was about to say no when Missy nodded. "I do. Something rotten, like old garbage."

"That's what this is about?" Art rolled his eyes. "I smelled that last night. There's some old meat or something in the trash. I forgot to take it out. I'll do it now."

He opened the lid and froze.

The plastic bag inside was empty.

"Not garbage smells," Madam Prioleau said from behind him. "Dead wife smells." She moved past him and opened the back door. "Here. She stood here. Smell remains, like in bathroom after you flush, yes?"

Art was about to say there was no way Catherine had been at the house while he was there, when he remembered the knocking on the back door.

Had it been her? Risen from the grave and ready to tear his throat out right on his own porch?

But how? The cemetery was miles from the house. He tried to picture her rotting corpse shambling through the streets, reaching the house, crossing the lawn, climbing the stairs, and then leaving again, heading over towards…

"Oh, no. Wait a minute."

"What's wrong?"

Art ignored Missy's question and hurried across the room to the junk drawer that's found in every kitchen where he pulled out the phone book. The pristine yellow cover showed how infrequently they used it. Why bother, when any phone number was a few swipes away on a cell phone? The phone companies knew it too, which was why new phone books were mostly coupons and ads. But one thing that hadn't changed over the years was the map of the neighborhoods in the front. Art flipped through until he found Eldorado.

"Look." He put the book on the table so Madam Prioleau and Missy could see it. "Here we are. Here's where Missy saw Catherine last night." He slid his finger over two inches, then moved it further. "And here's the cemetery. Notice anything?"

"Oh, my god," Missy said. "It's a straight line."

"The house on Eldorado is right between here and the cemetery. She was here, she knocked on the door, and she left. When you saw her, she wasn't on her way here, she was on her way back to the cemetery."

"That's not the only thing between here and her grave." Missy's voice dropped to a whisper as she touched her finger to the map.

Art looked where she was pointing and his stomach did a sick flip.

My father's house.

"Christ. We have to get over there right now!" Before he could move, Madam Prioleau put a hand on his arm.

"Wait. The monstru cannot walk in the daylight. Besides, how would one such as you stop it?"

One such as *he*? Art opened his mouth to tell the wizened old bat he had enough bullets to stop anything, then shut it again.

What if bullets didn't work? They sure hadn't when Missy unloaded her gun into Catherine's corpse. What then? He'd be left standing there like a helpless idiot while Catherine killed Connor and then came after him.

The sad fact was, he knew as much about stopping the undead as he did ridding his house of a ghost.

In other words, nothing.

"So what do we do?" he asked, taking a seat at the table. The others joined him.

"We must find out the truth of your wife's death."

"Dammit! We've been over this. She drove her goddamned car off the goddamned cliff."

"Maybe," Madam Prioleau said. "But not for suicide. Only murder make monstru."

"Murder?" Art's thoughts spun like tires in mud, trying to grip the impossible. "Are you saying someone killed Catherine?"

The old woman shrugged. "It is only explanation. Ghosts, they can happen with suicide or murder. You tell me suicide, so I drive ghost back into body. Once there, it stay forever. Unless…"

"Unless what?" Missy asked.

"Unless not suicide. Put ghost back into body that was murdered, body comes back. That is how you make monstru. No murder, no monstru."

"This doesn't make sense. Who would—"

"I would."

Art turned at Missy's words. She had her eyes cast down at the table and a terrible look of regret on her face.

"I killed Catherine."

* * * * *

Now I know how Alice felt.

A tumble into another world, a place where the ordinary didn't exist and the strange became reality. How else to explain what had happened to his life?

Because in the world Art Stanhope had always lived in, ghosts didn't exist, dead wives didn't come back to life and the woman he loved didn't commit murder.

But that life was gone. He'd left it far behind, crossed a line into a bizzaro world.

A world where Missy sat at the table and poured her story out, the words coming so fast he didn't even have a chance to interrupt.

"I kept out of things for so long. You know I did. Even after…after I knew you didn't love her, that you loved me, I gave you both your space. Because you said you needed to try to work things out. She was your wife. My sister. It wasn't my place to get in the middle of your problems. But you were so miserable. And Connor, it wasn't good for him, either. She wasn't good for him. I knew you'd eventually leave her, but I was afraid a divorce would only make things worse. Custody battles. Visitation rights. Catherine forever trying to turn Connor against you. None of us would ever have a chance for happiness. Not us, not you, not Connor. So when Catherine called me to meet her that night, I figured it was my chance to solve everyone's problems. Catherine always had Xanax in her purse. We had a few drinks, she told me how you'd said it was over. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. When she went to the bathroom, I took two and put them in her drink. Not enough to kill her, but she'd be woozy and probably fall asleep behind the wheel. And she did. But now…because of me, she's back."

Missy put her head down on her arms and broke into tears.

Madam Prioleau gave one of her birdish nods. "See. Murder."

Something relaxed in Art's chest, an easing of a constriction he hadn't even realized was there. The pressure didn't disappear entirely, but it lessened enough so that he could speak.

"No, it's not. She didn't kill Catherine."

Madam Prioleau frowned and Missy looked up, black mascara lines painting her cheeks in macabre patterns.

"Yes, murder. You heard woman."

Art nodded, part of him happy to deliver good news while another part still tried to comprehend what Missy had done.

"I heard her. But those two pills didn't kill her. They probably didn't help, but Catherine popped them like candy and drank with them all the time. All it did was make her more angry and paranoid. I tried to get her to quit, but she wouldn't. The autopsy said her bloodstream was loaded with the stuff, way more than just two pills worth. Besides, you're

forgetting one thing."

Missy shook her head, unable to voice her question.

"The note." Art waited for comprehension to sink in. In the brief pause, he had to time to reflect on how weird it was to be discussing murder and suicide in a bright, sunny kitchen.

My life keeps getting stranger and stranger.

"What is this note?" Madam Prioleau asked.

"Catherine." Missy's voice held equal parts relief and confusion. "She left a suicide note. I forgot about that."

"She planned on driving off that road. That's why there were no skid marks. So drugged or not, she was aware enough to do exactly what she wanted."

Art turned to Madam Prioleau, whose scowl was more intense than before, creating deep lines in the loose skin of her face.

"See? Suicide. Not murder."

The psychic shook her head. "No, cannot be. Only murder creates the monstru. You," she pointed at Missy, "you say she talk about killing her again. About revenge."

It was Missy's turn to frown. "Yes, but there's no way she could have known I put those pills in her drink."

Madam Prioleau shrugged. "Who can say what the dead know? What they see or hear from beyond?"

"Enough talk!" Art slammed his hand on the table, making both women jump. Supernatural revenge, a murderous girlfriend, it was all too much for him and his emotions boiled over, anger and frustration erupting before he could stop them. "Forget about what she knows or who killed her. I just want to know how to fucking stop her."

Missy's lips tightened to a thin line. Art controlled the urge to shout at her too. She wasn't the person he'd thought she was, and even if she hadn't killed Catherine, she'd tried. He didn't know if he could ever get over that, ever trust her. But he wasn't going to get into it in front of a stranger.

"Is important, though." Madam Prioleau's voice remained quiet and steady despite the tension around her. "In order to stop monstru, need blood of the killer."

"What?" Art couldn't believe what he'd heard. "Why can't we just blow her up or chop her to pieces?"

"This is not scary movie, *Domnu* Stanhope. You cannot burn the monstru, cannot chop her." The psychic made karate motions with her hand. "If you do not kill monstru the right

way, it comes back again the next night. And the next. It never stops until those it hates are dead. Only one spell can stop a monstru, and blood is needed."

"But Missy didn't kill her. So how is her blood going to help?"

"Your wife believes her sister killed her. That is what brought her back. Spell will work."

"I'll do it."

Art turned to Missy. Makeup and tears soiled her face. Dark circles rested beneath her eyes. Her hair was a tangled mess from running her hands through it. At any other time, he'd have gone to her, put his arms around her, told her he loved her.

Now he couldn't look at her without feeling betrayed.

At the same time, though, he couldn't just let her rush blindly into something that could be dangerous.

"You don't even know what she wants you to do. What if she needs all your blood? Or has to cut off a finger or something?"

"I'll still do it." Missy crossed her arms over her chest. "This is all my fault. Everything. I've ruined our lives. If I have a chance to make things better for you and Connor, I'm going to do it."

"No fingers," Madam Prioleau said, before Art could argue more. "Just some blood. Little cut, like so." She ran one finger across the palm of her other hand.

Art stared at Missy and she stared back. He recognized the look on her face. There'd be no talking her out of it.

"Fine." He turned to Madam Prioleau. "What do we need to do?"

* * * * *

Missy couldn't remember ever feeling so low. The last few hours had been a personal hell for her, one that grew worse with each passing minute. Each time the cut on her hand throbbed, it reminded her of how she'd destroyed everything good in her life. Living with the guilt of killing her sister had been one thing; she'd accepted that burden from the moment she let Catherine walk out of the bar and get behind the wheel. A police officer committing murder, a sin on her soul that would come back to haunt her one day. All worth it to free Art and Connor from the evil infecting their lives. She'd always intended to take that particular shame with her to the grave. No one else ever need share the weight of it.

Except now Art knew. And that knowledge had changed him and his feelings for her, just like she'd known it would the moment she revealed her secret. He'd spent the entire

day either ignoring her or staring at her with a look she couldn't bear to see on his face. Coldness radiated from him, creating a barrier that prevented her from approaching.

She wanted to scream at him, tell him she did it for him and Connor, beg him to talk to her or shout at her or even slap her. Any kind of reaction at all. Just stop giving her that look, the one filled with disappointment and hate and revulsion.

She'd tried once, not long after Madam Prioleau made her use a kitchen knife to cut a long, shallow line across her palm. Afterwards, with a towel wrapped around her hand to stanch the bleeding, she'd moved to where Art sat immobile on the couch. Before she could say anything, he'd glanced up at her with hard eyes and told her they'd talk when everything was over, but for now just leave him the hell alone.

Since then, she'd been seated at the kitchen table, alternating between watching Madam Prioleau prepare the ingredients of her spell and casting furtive glances at Art, in the hopes she might catch him looking at her with something other than repugnance.

So far, that hadn't happened.

Madam Prioleau's spell turned out to be relatively simple. She'd told Art to collect a bunch of weapons—guns and knives—and place them on the table. Then she'd dabbed some of Missy's blood on each blade and bullet.

"Without the blood, weapons have no effect," the psychic explained. The rest of her spell seemed to consist of mixing an assortment of oils and botanicals that she'd brought with her and reciting dozens of magical enchantments while anointing herself, Art and Missy with the surprisingly pleasant-smelling concoction.

Then, she said, it was just a matter of waiting.

"The monstru rises with the night. It will come for the ones who wronged it. You both together here, it will come here. Then, you kill. Bang, bang!" She pointed her finger at Missy and made like she was shooting a gun.

Missy had checked the clock at that point, and held back a groan.

Still five hours until nightfall.

Five hours stuck in a house with a grumpy old woman and a man who presently couldn't stand the sight of her.

As she'd imagined, time hadn't just passed slowly, it crawled on hands and knees, moving forward in grudging increments like a child desperate to avoid a bath on a Sunday night.

Finally, the daylight began to dim. Madam Prioleau, who'd moved to the love seat and dozed off an hour earlier, snapped awake.

"Not long now. Sun is setting."

Art gave a dull nod and continued staring into space.

Missy silently cursed the sluggish passage of time. She wished there was something to do, anything. But the weapons were laid out, pistols and knives for her and Art, the doors were unlocked so Catherine wouldn't find her way in blocked and redolent oils had already dried to a sticky film on everyone's skin.

The only option left was pacing the floors, and under the circumstances she figured it would only get on everyone's nerves.

So instead she sat as motionless and silent as her companions, with only her dark, depressing thoughts for company. Until she realized the shadows outside had given way to full night. She looked at the clock and the numbers gave her heart a jolt.

Eight fifty-three.

She'd zoned out and never even noticed.

"Shouldn't—" Missy had to stop and clear her throat after hours of not speaking. "Shouldn't she be here by now? It's been dark for a while."

Madam Prioleau shrugged. "No telling when she come. But she will. Monstru drawn to enemy like moth to flame."

On the couch, Art roused himself. "I think I'll call Connor and say goodnight before…" He didn't finish the sentence. His voice sounded as dull as his face had been throughout the day, and Missy hoped he hadn't lost his desire to fight. They'd need him if they were going to survive.

"Hi, Dad."

Missy split her attention between listening to the conversation and listening for noises at the doors. How had she drifted off like that? With all three of them in their own worlds, Catherine could have walked in and slaughtered them before they had a chance to pick up a weapon. Not good. Not good at all, if they wanted to see the morning.

"No, everything's fine. The hotel is nice. How about there? What? What's Connor complaining about?"

Something moved by the kitchen window. Missy rose from her seat, but it was only a shadow cast by a passing car. She sat down again.

"Well, maybe something spilled. Have Connor check. He likes helping. Okay. Yeah, put him on and I'll say goodnight."

A feeling of unease filled Missy. Her heart refused to slow after the false alarm of the shadow. What was it, though?

"You be a good boy and help your grandpa. And stop teasing him about having an old nose. Goodnight, kid. Love you."

"Everything's okay?" The words came out automatically, before Missy remembered Art wasn't speaking to her. He answered, though, and she felt a glimmer of hope that maybe the ice around his heart might thaw after all.

"Yeah. He's getting ready for bed. My dad says he's been complaining that the kitchen smells, even though they took out the garbage earlier. He keeps saying…"

Art's voice trailed off and his eyes grew wide. At the same time, Missy's heart jumped as her brain made the connection.

"There's a smell in the kitchen?"

"Shit! Catherine!"

Madam Prioleau sat up. "We must go now!"

Art grabbed two pistols and his keys. "I'll drive."

Missy paused just long enough to collect a couple of knives and her guns and then she followed them out to the car. Art had it in gear and moving down the driveway before she finished closing her door.

"Why would she go after Connor first?" Art asked as he tossed Missy his cell. She immediately scrolled to the last number called and hit redial.

In the back seat, Madam Prioleau shook her head. "Don't know. Not make sense."

"Dammit!" Missy closed the connection and immediately hit redial again. "Now there's no answer."

In response, Art turned on his grill lights and siren and pressed down harder on the gas.

Missy listened to the answering message come on and cursed again.

Jesus, help us get there in time.

* * * * *

Art blinked his eyes as he drove, fighting to keep tears at bay. The only sound in his head was the thudding of his own pulse, which eclipsed the siren, the roar of the car's engine and Missy's non-stop attempts to get hold of his father.

We have to get there in time. He couldn't lose Connor, not after everything they'd been through.

He took the corner to his father's street at forty miles an hour, the car careening across

the road and banging off the far curb before straightening out. Madam Prioleau cried out in the back as she bounced against her door. She'd barely regained her balance when Art slammed on the brakes and skidded to a stop, tossing her forward into his seat. He was out of the car and running for the door, Missy two steps behind him, before the aged psychic finished releasing her seat belt.

"Wait!" Madam Prioleau waved at them. "This house is not protected yet."

Art ignored her, his fear ratcheting up a notch at the sight of his father's front door sitting partially open.

"Connor!" he shouted, drawing his gun and increasing his speed. He struck the wood with his shoulder, knocking the door the rest of the way open.

The stench of rotten flesh hit him at the same time something came down on his arm, knocking the gun from his hand. He had a glimpse of a dark figure and then a heavy force slammed into him, sent him stumbling across his father's tiny living room. He collided with a chair and fell over it, landing on his hands and knees.

He lifted his head and saw his dead wife for the first time.

Catherine looked every bit as horrible as Missy had described. Gray flesh sloughed from her face, revealing large patches of bone. Shriveled eyes stared at him from black sockets. Shrunken, crusty lips were pulled back, revealing a gray lump that wriggled behind yellowed teeth. Death and decay rolled off her in foul waves, poisoning every breath he drew.

"Hello, Art. Nice of you to drop by." Her words whistled through her teeth, adding a hissing sibilance, so they came out as *"Nisssse of you to sssstop by."*

"Fuck you. Where's Connor?" Art pushed himself up and drew his second pistol.

"Back here!" Missy called out from somewhere deeper in the house. "They're okay."

Art smiled. "Then it's time to say goodbye, bitch."

Catherine took a step forward, raising hands almost completely free of flesh.

Art pulled the trigger three times, the shots deafening in the small space. Catherine's body bucked left and right as all three rounds struck home. The bullets tore through her rotting form, splattering ooze and embalming fluids across the walls and carpet.

Catherine paused, and then let out a gurgling, hissing laugh. "Didn't my whore of a sister tell you? You can't kill what's already dead."

Art fired again, three more rounds. Two into her chest and one that ripped a piece of her neck away, exposing the ringed tube of her trachea.

She kept coming at him.

"Shit!" Art moved to his right, putting the old, scarred coffee table between him and the rotting corpse. Catherine followed, moving faster than Art expected for something in her condition.

"Monstru!" Behind Catherine, Madam Prioleau's diminutive figure looked no more dangerous than a child. But when she shook a vial of liquid onto the Catherine's back, it had an instant effect.

Catherine froze in place, mouth open, arms outstretched.

"Hurry," Madam Prioleau told Art. "That will only hold it for a short while."

Art wasted no time. He got to his feet and approached Catherine, placed the barrel against her temple. Up close, the stink of her was a physical thing, threatening to double him over and drag the contents of his stomach out. Bits of skin and hair littered her shoulders, evidence that her decomposition hadn't stopped.

"Let's see how you do when I blow your skull to bits."

His finger tightened on the trigger and then in the next instant bright lights filled his vision and a burning pain exploded in his chest. The room went dim and spun around him, and then something hard struck the back of his head. A loud ringing filled his ears. Through it, he dimly heard a sound like wood snapping and then someone screaming. Another voice shouted his name but it was so far away, miles away, and he knew it wouldn't reach him in time to save him. He was falling over the cliff, down, down into blackness, into the place where—

"Art!"

Missy's voice. Closer. Somewhere in the dark. But where…?

House. Connor. Catherine.

He realized his eyes were closed. Opened them.

And wished he hadn't.

Catherine's horrific visage loomed over him, long, yellowish strands of drool hanging from her gaping, lipless mouth. Art lifted his hands. He'd lost his other gun. His ordinary flesh wouldn't stand a chance against Catherine's bony, dagger-like fingers driven by her supernatural fury, but he had no choice. Couldn't let her get Connor.

A series of gunshots erupted right behind him, each thunderous blast a hammer to his already aching head. Catherine's body disappeared. He pushed himself up and saw she'd been thrown backwards several feet by the force of the gunfire.

"Move your ass, Art! C'mon!"

He turned. Missy stood in the hall, her hands wrapped around a long-barreled revolver

that he recognized as his father's old .44 Colt Anaconda, a gun with enough stopping power to put down a bear. Madam Prioleau stood next to her, cradling one arm against her chest, a look of intense pain on her face.

Despite a gut-wrenching nausea brought on by the incessant pounding in his brain, Art got to his feet and staggered towards Missy, who kept the revolver trained on Catherine the whole time. She motioned for him to move past her. He tapped Madam Prioleau on the shoulder, indicating she should follow him. She flinched and muttered a curse, moving her injured arm away from his hand.

Missy shouted something to him that he only caught part of, something about "patio," and he headed towards the back door, hoping he'd heard correctly. He stumbled outside and found his father and Connor there, crouched behind the picnic table they'd turned on its side. As soon as he knelt down with them, Connor hugged him tight.

"Hey, it's okay," Art said. His words sounded muffled and warped, but better than before, indicating his hearing was returning.

"What in the seven hells is going on?" Jeremy Stanhope asked.

"I can't explain it," Art said.

"Why is mommy back?" Connor was crying, his tears glistening in the motion lights mounted on the back of the house. "She's supposed to be dead."

Missy and Madam Prioleau came through the back door at that moment, saving Art from questions he had no answers for.

"She's right behind us," Missy said. "Why aren't the bullets working?"

Madam Prioleau shook her head and groaned. From what Art could tell, her wrist was badly broken. It sat at an odd angle and had already swollen to twice its normal size and turned a purplish-red color.

"Spell…spell should work," she mumbled. Between her pain and the bright lights, her face looked as dead as Catherine's. "Always work."

"Well, it's not. Any ideas?" Missy glanced at Art.

Art glanced around the yard. It wasn't the place he'd have chosen for an escape. Or a standoff. Like his own yard, a ten-foot-high cement wall marked out the property line. To the left and right were houses, and in the back was a sharp slope that led down to the river. The only way out of the back yard was through the house, which meant they were trapped unless they could get around Catherine somehow.

"Weapons?" He'd lost both his guns in the house, leaving him with only a four-shot pistol in his ankle holster, which he quickly drew.

"This," Missy held up the Colt, "and a knife."

"Nothing," added Jeremy. "That…thing caught us by surprise just as we were getting ready for bed. Now, will you tell me what in the goddamn hell is going on?"

"It's Catherine," Art said, while he looked around the yard for anything they could use to hold the monster off until the police arrived. He couldn't hear sirens yet, but with all the shots they'd fired, it wouldn't be long.

"It's my fault." Missy's eyes never left the back door. "I poisoned her, and somehow her corpse came back to life. Now it wants revenge on all of us."

Jeremy opened his mouth to say something else, but never had the chance. The back door flew off its hinges and crashed onto the cement of the patio. Catherine, her burial clothes ragged and torn from the bullets she'd taken, stepped into the yard. Both of her eyes were gone, yet she still stared right at her prey.

"No esssscape now." Somehow she managed to smile, even with only remnants of lips, the remaining pieces of her face pulled away to show her bared teeth.

Connor moaned and buried his head against Art's chest. Missy fired again, two shots and then the gun clicked empty. As before, the bullets sent Catherine back a few steps but otherwise didn't seem to have any effect.

"That'sss the lassst time you do that, bitch!" Catherine sprinted forward, covering the space between them so fast Art never had a chance to move. She threw the table to the side and backhanded Missy, who tumbled over and lay still. Jeremy leapt up and rammed Catherine with his shoulder, putting all of his two-hundred pounds into his attack.

Catherine didn't even flinch.

She gripped her old father-in-law by the neck with one hand. With her other, she raked skeletal fingers down his chest and abdomen. Blood flew in all directions and Jeremy cried out in pain.

He was still screaming when she tossed him into the air, a crimson spray following him like a comet's tail as he flew over Art and crashed to the grass beyond the patio.

"Run!" Art pushed Connor to one side and dove in the other direction, hoping Catherine would follow him. She did, reaching him before he had time to get to his knees. Talon-like nails tore through his sweatshirt and dug into the flesh below his shoulders. Art's body went rigid from the pain, his own scream trapped in his throat. For a moment, the world disappeared in a red haze.

When his vision cleared, he was on his back, with Catherine on his chest, her knees pinning his arms down and preventing him from lifting his gun. She placed a gore-soaked

finger next to his eye and laughed as he flinched and turned his head away. Foul-smelling spittle landed on his cheek, where it burned like acid.

"Ssssweet hussssband," she said, each word accompanied by a wave of corpse-breath. "You betrayed me."

"No!" The shout came from next to him.

A burst of white light enveloped Art, and Catherine's weight disappeared from his chest. He blinked several times, trying to drive away the purple and red after-images. Something moved next to him, and he turned in time to see Madam Prioleau falling first to her knees and then to her side.

He looked around, but couldn't locate Catherine. Still half-blind, he pushed himself to his feet, and gasped as the pain in his back woke up.

"Missy? Connor?"

"Over here."

Art swung around, orienting himself to their voices. Fighting to retain his balance, he staggered towards the blurry shapes, one of which was waving at him. Drawing closer, he found Missy and Connor huddled on the ground next to his father. Even with his vision murky, Art had no trouble seeing that his father's wounds looked bad. Real bad. The entire front of his shirt was drenched in blood, and the four gaping, jagged tears in his belly looked like bottomless canyons.

"Jesus." Art flopped down next them and took his father's hand. "Dad? Can you hear me?"

Jeremy mumbled something but didn't open his eyes. Art looked at Missy, who shook her head.

"He's out of it. And I don't think we can move him."

"Where's Catherine? There was an explosion…" Art looked around the property. The spots in his vision had faded, but he still couldn't see her.

"She did something." Missy nodded at Madam Prioleau, who lay unmoving in the grass. "Whatever it was, it knocked Catherine clear across the yard." She pointed to a spot in the farthest corner, and Art turned that way, just in time to see Catherine slowly rising to her feet.

A cold, heavy weight settled on Art's shoulders. The burden of the inevitable catching up to him. This was it. They'd run out of options. Nowhere to hide, no way out of the trap they'd put themselves in, no weapons. No last minute magic from Madam Prioleau. Catherine was coming for them, and this time she'd end it.

He put his arms around his family, pulling them close together.

"I'm sorry," he said. He wanted to say more, tell them he loved them, but the words stuck in his throat and turned to tears.

"Me, too." Jeremy's voice caught Art by surprise. His father's eyes were still closed, his words thick with blood and phlegm. "Thought I was doing…a favor. Never expected her… come back."

"Shh, Dad, it's okay. You…wait." Had he heard his father correctly? "What favor? What did you do?"

"Art?"

He held up a hand to Missy and bent down lower, not wanting to miss what his father was saying.

"Never any good for you. Always…told you. Saw her that night. Drunk, over the line. My chance…to help. Hit…wrote the…not supposed to be like this. Supposed to stay dead."

Art froze as the meaning of his father's words sank in.

No. It can't be.

"No. No No NO!" Art pounded his fist on the ground. Now he understood why their bullets hadn't worked.

He pictured it clearly. Jeremy seeing Catherine's car swerving as she fought to control it, her abilities impaired by the drugs Missy had slipped her. He'd have flicked on his grill lights, the ones all auxiliary police officers were required to have. Wasted, Catherine would have pulled over. And then what? Had his father struck her? Or had he found her passed out in her car and just taken advantage of the situation? Either way, it didn't matter. Write a quick suicide note, knowing the water would smear the handwriting. Put the car in neutral, wedge her foot on the gas, drop it into gear…

What had it taken for Jeremy, a firm believer in the law, a cop with a perfect record, to consider murder as the only option for ridding their family of Catherine? And not just Jeremy. Missy too.

Hell, I was the one married to her and I never seriously thought about. They both did it.

And because of that, they were all going to die.

Catherine was closer now. Still moving slow, but the fleshless grin she wore told Art it was to prolong his agony rather than because she was still stunned by Madam Prioleau's metaphysical attack. Catherine raised her hands, bone and nails curved into deadly claws.

I can't let this happen. Can't just sit here and let her butcher us.

Art turned to Missy and kissed her, pressing his lips against hers with all his might. He

tasted the salty tang of her tears, an acknowledgement of his goodbye.

"Don't," she said against his cheek as he tried to pull away. "I love you."

"I love you too." He let go of her and hugged Connor tight, repeated his kiss and his final statement of love. Connor said nothing, just shook his head, unable to look his father in the eye.

His own tears running freely down his cheeks, Art stood up and faced the demon of retribution his wife had become.

As a cop, he'd always told himself he was prepared to die. He didn't relish the idea, but the possibility of it existed every time you responded to a call or walked into a dark building or pulled over a speeding car. He'd believed it too.

Now he knew he'd been lying to himself all those years.

He didn't want to die. He wanted to live, to grow old with Missy, to see Connor graduate college and start a career. There'd been so much in life to look forward to, so much he'd wanted to do.

Now it would all be taken away from him, stolen by something that shouldn't even be possible.

In that instant, Art understood the impossibility of facing death bravely. He was just taking the coward's way out. Dying first so he wouldn't have to watch his family get slaughtered.

"Do it," he told Catherine. He closed his eyes. His body shook so badly he thought he might fall over. He gripped the useless gun in his hand, but never raised it. Catherine's death-stench wafted over him. An uneasy feeling crept across his skin, telling him she stood mere inches away. He tried not to picture how she would do it, but he couldn't stop the morbid images produced in his brain.

A skeletal hand thrust into his stomach, reaching up to tear out his heart.

Yellowed teeth ripping his throat away, his blood spraying in fountains.

Razor-sharp nails puncturing his eyes and digging deep into his brain.

"Firssst you watch them die."

The words didn't register until Catherine took him by the arms and lifted him. He was still opening his mouth to shout "No!" when she tossed him over the heads of his family.

Art landed on his side several feet behind his father. Something *snapped* inside him and he cried out. Paralyzed by pain, he was forced to endure the ultimate agony, unable to stop Catherine as she approached Missy and Jeremy, one finger pointing back and forth as she toyed with them, an evil game of *Eenie Meenie* to decide who would be her first victim.

Catherine's jaw moved up and down but Art heard nothing except the sound of his own blood roaring in his ears. He forced his arms forward, fingers digging into the earth, each movement sending fiery bolts of agony through his body. He couldn't let his family die, not alone, not like that. Even if there was no way to stop Catherine, at least he would be with them at the end.

Missy shouted something as Catherine picked Jeremy up. Art wanted to shout as well, but he had no breath to spare. Catherine brought her head down towards Jeremy's neck. Jaws open wide, she looked like a laughing skull and out of the blue Art remembered a scene from an old comic book, *Tales from the Crypt* or something like it, about a corpse rising from the grave to hunt down the people who'd murdered it.

That's—

Art's hand came down on something cold and hard.

A gun.

My gun. He recognized it instantly.

And knew he had one chance to stop Catherine forever. A chance to save his family at the expense of his own heart.

"In order to stop monstru, need blood of the killer."

"I'm sorry, Dad."

Gritting his teeth against the pain, he lifted the gun in both hands and aimed at his father's back. Everything around him disappeared, his view narrowing to a circle that contained his father and the creature about to kill him.

He pulled the trigger.

And the world exploded.

Thunder filled his ears and the gun flew out of his hands. Catherine dropped Jeremy and stumbled back, her arms spread and her skull tilted up to the sky. Her jaw hung open, pieces of Jeremy's flesh still dangling from her teeth. A white glow enveloped her and she let out a horrible shriek, a high-pitched cry of anguish that went on and on and pierced his brain like acid-coated needles. Something *popped* inside his head and warm liquid trickled from his ears.

The white light disappeared and Catherine's body toppled over.

Everything went silent.

Darkness settled over him, a black fog that came down like a weightless blanket.

Art remained on the ground, his body refusing to respond to his command to *get up and move.* He heard a loud hissing, like being surrounded by televisions all set to empty

stations. Gradually, other sounds filtered through. Voices.

"…move?…Art…hear…Connor…"

"Is she…Dad…I…"

Connor. Missy. They're alive.

Catherine!

He opened his eyes, unaware until then that he'd closed them. Missy's face hovered close, covered in blood and bruises.

"Is she…?" He couldn't get the rest of the words out. Missy nodded.

"She's dead. Really dead. You did it."

Dead.

It was over then. He tried to smile.

Darkness returned.

* * * * *

Staring at his father's coffin, Art couldn't help but think about fate and karma.

Here I am, back again. Putting someone in the ground and feeling guilty as hell about it.

If he raised his eyes and looked beyond the rows of police officers decked out in their uniforms, he could see the section of the cemetery where Catherine's body had been re-interred.

So far, he'd avoided looking that way.

Unlike the days following Catherine's death and burial, Art had no doubts about whether the guilt gnawing at his guts was deserved or not. He'd killed his father, put a bullet straight through him. Sure, he'd done it to stop the hell-creature his father's actions had spawned, a creature who'd have torn all of them to pieces, who'd been in the process of delivering death to his father at that exact moment.

But I was the one who actually did it. Who ended his life. Did he understand what happened? Why I had to do it? Did he hear me say I'm sorry?

Art knew his father understood the consequences of murdering Catherine, at least at the end. He'd confessed. Apologized.

But they'd never told him it was his blood that held the secret to putting Catherine back in the grave.

If he had, would he have willingly sacrificed himself, knowing he was already dying? Knowing there was no other way, nothing else I could do?

Art wanted to believe he would have, but he remembered his own reaction when faced with imminent death. That he'd have done anything to prolong life just a little longer. Even a few more seconds. That wanting to give yourself up to save the people you love, even putting yourself in a situation to do it, was different than actually letting go of life.

Jeremy Stanhope had been a hero while alive. A cop who had no qualms about putting his life on the line. Yet wasn't it possible he'd have wanted Art to shoot him through the arm, or the leg, or anywhere that wasn't fatal?

Missy had said, more than once, that Jeremy would have told Art to shoot if he'd known the truth. That he never knew what killed him, never felt the bullet.

"She was tearing his throat out. All you did was end things quickly for him, save him a lot of pain. And save all our lives in the process."

The guilt rat in Art's guts took another nip and he held back a groan. The truth was, he'd never know the answers to any of his questions, and that the torment of what he'd done would linger on forever, no matter how long he lived.

Hands took his, Connor to his left and Missy to his right. Their love flowed through him, warmed his heart and stilled the hungry animal doing its best to chew a hole in his conscience.

He'd saved them, and they were still a family.

I guess I can live with some guilt.

* * * * *

He killed you, Jeremy. Your own son. Shot you.

No. Not like that. Not…

He put a bullet in you. He didn't have to.

Yes, yes he did. My blood. Only way to stop you.

Your blood, yes. But he didn't have to kill you.

Yes, he…he did, didn't he? How else…?

How else, indeed, Jeremy. He never stopped to think. None of them did. Not him. Not her.

I…

He killed you, Jeremy. Just like my sister tried to kill me. Never cared about you when you were alive. Put his family before you. Always did. You know that. How does that make you feel?

Angry.

About the Author

A life-long resident of New York's haunted Hudson Valley, JG Faherty has been a finalist for both the Bram Stoker Award® and ITW Thriller Award, and he is the author of six novels, including his most recent, *The Cure*, as well as eight novellas and more than 50 short stories. He writes adult and YA dark fiction/sci-fi/fantasy, and his works range from quiet suspense to over-the-top comic gruesomeness. He enjoys urban exploring, photography, classic B-movies, good wine, and pumpkin beer. As a child, his favorite playground was a 17th-century cemetery, which many people feel explains a lot. You can follow him at www.twitter.com/jgfaherty, www.facebook.com/jgfaherty, www.jgfaherty.com, and jgfaherty-blog.blogspot.com

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Winterwood

She was born with the power to cure. Now she's developed the power to kill.

The Cure

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Leah DeGarmo has the power to cure with just a touch. But with her gift comes a dark side: Whatever she takes in she has to pass on, or suffer it herself. Now a sadistic criminal has discovered what she can do and he'll stop at nothing to control her. He makes a mistake, though, when he kills the man she loves, triggering a rage inside her that releases a new power she didn't know she had: the ability to kill. Transformed into a demon of retribution, Leah resurrects her lover and embarks on a mission to destroy her enemies. The only question is, does she control her power or does it control her?

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Cure:

Fifteen minutes before she saved a man's life, committed murder, and started a chain reaction of events she could never have imagined even in her worst nightmares, the only thing on Leah DeGarmo's mind was a hamburger and French fries.

It had been years since she last ventured into a McDonald's—or any other fast food restaurant—and after a particularly bad morning at work, her cravings had reached the point where she couldn't ignore them any longer.

"I'm taking lunch," she said to Chastity Summers, as she hung up her white lab coat and headed for the front door of her veterinary clinic. "I'll be back in an hour."

"Okay, Doctor D." Chastity Summers waved, never looking up from her computer screen. She was busy entering the data on the last patient of the morning, a twenty-year old beagle in remarkably perfect health. At one time Smokey Two had suffered from cataracts and liver disease, but he'd managed to beat them both. His owner, Tanya Weston, always told people Smokey Two was a walking advertisement for Leah's skills as a veterinarian.

Opening the door to her three-year-old Toyota, Leah felt a pang of sadness in her heart. Smokey Two couldn't keep it up much longer. Dogs rarely lived past twenty. She wiped tears from suddenly damp eyes. It would break Tanya's heart when her dog finally passed away.

She glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure she hadn't smudged her makeup. People always said her eyes were like windows to her emotions, changing from hazel to brighter green when she was happy or excited, and to a murky brownish-green when she felt sad or depressed.

Today there was almost no green at all, and the dark color looked odd against the

glowing backdrop of blonde hair flowing down to her shoulders in waves that were always on the verge of turning unmanageable. Even her face looked pale beneath the deep summer tan.

"Get a grip on yourself," she told her reflection. "It's too nice a day to wallow in regrets."

The warm September day helped push her melancholy away, and Leah decided to treat herself to a greasy cheeseburger and fries. A determined smile on her face, she pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward McDonald's.

Leah opened the heavy glass door and entered a different world, one where the air dripped with oil, steam, and fat-laden odors that simultaneously repulsed and excited her.

There's something about a McDonald's that reminds you of being a kid. Not to mention the dopamine spikes triggered by the smell and taste of hot grease and fried meats.

Why is it the foods that are the worst for you are always the ones that taste the best?

The lunch hour crowd filled the space in front of the counter. As she waited her turn in line, Leah struggled to read all the choices on the menu board.

I've never even seen half those meals before. Guess that's what happens when you make an effort to eat healthy. I didn't think McDonald's could change so much in three years!

Luckily, the basics still held their place on the menu, and when her turn came Leah ordered a quarter pounder with cheese, large fries, and large diet coke. While she waited for her food, she went to the condiments bar and grabbed napkins, ketchup, and a straw. Her one task completed, she let her vision roam around the crowded room. She couldn't help noticing the police officer standing a few people behind her in line.

He doesn't look like he eats here any more often than I do. Leah admired his tall, wiry frame and the way his brown hair fell across his forehead. With his dark, intelligent eyes and bright-white smile, he looked more like a politician or maybe a banker than a cop.

Smile? Oh, he's smiling at me! *He saw me staring at him.* Leah turned away, feeling her face grow hot as the blood rushed to it. The counter girl returned with her order and Leah grabbed the tray, nearly spilling the contents onto the floor as she hurried off to a table before the man could say anything to her.

"Christ, I can't believe I did that," she whispered to herself as she sat down. "Get a hold on yourself. You're not fifteen anymore."

She took a long sip of her soda, hoping the cold liquid would drive the heat from her cheeks. Still, she couldn't help thinking about the cute, half-quizzical, half-admiring smile the cop had shown her, and she peeked to the side to watch him pump ketchup into a little

white corrugated cup.

Straw still in her mouth, she tried to push away the particularly graphic thoughts all the pumping and squirting created in her head.

I guess it really has been too long. She followed her rueful thought with a quick duck of her head as the object of her fantasy glanced in her direction.

"Shut up or I start shooting!"

The shouted words made Leah looked up again, just as people started screaming.

A man at the counter had a gun aimed at one of the cashiers, who was crying and holding her trembling hands in the air.

"Hurry up!" The gunman's order acted like a signal for everyone to move. People fell to the ground or ran for the doors, and one of the other cashiers, a man in his thirties, darted back into the kitchen.

The would-be thief grabbed a nearby woman and pulled her tight against his cracked and aging black motorcycle jacket, his crazed eyes darting back and forth. His hostage tried to struggle, but he clamped a hand over her mouth and put the large, evil-looking handgun to her head.

"Gimme the goddamn money now, or you're gonna have brains all over your counter!" he told the two remaining cashiers in a voice as frenzied as his movements. The two teenage girls clung to each other, eyes shut, crying uncontrollably.

Leah dropped her cheeseburger, the sudden, spastic opening of her fingers the only movement she seemed capable of making. *He's going to shoot that woman.* She knew it as surely as she knew he was high on drugs, or that the two girls would never get past their fear and give him the money. *Ohmigod, he's gonna…*

A quick movement interrupted her thought as the police officer threw his tray of food in the direction of the gunman. The tray clattered on the floor and soda sprayed everywhere, distracting the man from his prisoner.

"Police! Drop the gun!" the cop shouted, his face no longer smiling, his dark eyes cold and dangerous as he squinted down the barrel of his service pistol at the heavily-bearded robber.

"I'll kill her, man."

"If you do, you'll die right after her," the young officer said. Sweat stains bloomed in the armpits of his previously immaculate uniform, but neither his gun nor his voice wavered.

"Not if I kill you first." Pushing the woman to the side, the man turned the gun and fired two shots. The twin reports broke the spell that held the remaining patrons captive,

and once more the air filled with screams as the remaining customers rushed for the exits.

The officer let out a cry of pain and fell backwards into the condiment counter. A wet, red smear followed him as he slowly slid down the white plastic to the floor.

"No!" Leah jumped up and ran to the officer, insanely hoping it was just ketchup dripping onto the floor, too familiar with violent wounds to be fooled into thinking it was anything but blood.

"Get away from him!" the shooter said to her, but she ignored him, already placing her hands on either side of the crimson flower blooming in the center of the man's shirt. Amazingly, the officer - *Officer Carrera,* she read on his tag as she ripped open his shirt - opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Get out of here," he tried to say, but the words disappeared in a wet hiss, informing Leah that one of his lungs had collapsed. From the amount of blood pooling around the body, it seemed likely at least one major blood vessel, probably the vena cava, was ruptured as well.

"You're gonna be okay," she told him, pressing her hands against the wound. "Lie still." The familiar warmth surged through her, followed by a sharp pain as if she'd touched a live wire. Even though she was prepared for the shock, it still made her twitch. Under her hands, the officer's body bucked as if jolted by a defibrillator. Leah started to tell him again that he'd be all right, but just then a rough hand grabbed her by the back of her shirt and pulled her away, nearly choking her in the process.

"Are you deaf, bitch? I told you to stay away." She looked up and saw the gunman aiming his pistol at her. "Now you can die alongside your boyfriend."

Without thinking, Leah grabbed the man's leg, sliding her hand up under his pants to touch his skin. Another spark, but this one brought relief, a coolness, as if a poison had been sucked out of her body.

His eyes wide and surprised, the man opened his mouth to yell but it turned into a choking gasp that cut off as his mouth filled with blood. He stumbled away and his finger twitched on the trigger as he collapsed, sending a bullet whining past Leah's head to chip the tile floor before ricocheting away.

He landed hard, his eyes already blank and lifeless, a red stain spreading on the front of his shirt.

Oh, Leah, you've really done it this time. The thought forced her into action.

"Hurry, move him over to the counter," she ordered Officer Carrera, as she grabbed one of the gunman's arms and pulled him towards the small island holding the ketchup and

napkins.

Carrera rose unsteadily to his feet, then put out a hand to stop her. “What the hell happened?”

“We have to make it look like he got shot over here. Now help me!”

Carrera stood there for a moment, fingering the hole in his uniform. Then he grabbed the man’s other arm and helped her slide the body over until it was roughly in the center of the blood and ketchup already staining the floor.

“Lady, will you tell me what’s going on? I was shot, and now I’m fine and we’ve got a dead gunman.”

Sirens sounded outside, reminding Leah they didn’t have time to talk.

“I’ll explain everything later,” she promised him. “Please, just trust me.” She sat down on the floor a few feet away, preparing herself to play the part of the terrified witness.

I won’t have to pretend too hard, but what am I more scared of? Almost being shot or having my secret exposed?


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