



A HELLSINGER SHORT

HELLSINGER
FILE 241

RHYS FORD



File #241
By Rhys Ford

Residence: Hazel Maplethorn-Bocker
Paranormal Activity: Objects Relocating
Location: Eureka, CA

The residence is occupied by Ms. M-B and ten cats. Client is retired school-teacher and has no history of psychic or paranormal activity either personal or in residence. Residence is 1940s bungalow with no recorded deaths. Land cleared of any prior paranormal activity; formerly undeveloped acreage. No structures or causalities reported at location. Cannot discount native population or transitory inhabitants prior to establishment of city boundaries.

Team: Gidget and Matt
Consultant: Tristan Pryce



Wolf imagined Eureka was exactly as he'd last left it—damp, crawling with quinoa-munching yoga moms and brimming with a sticky resonance more due to the area's large scale artisan pot fields than any ghostly echoes. Green dappled with hunter hues and sienna made up most of the blurry landscape as Wolf wove through the road leading to the town tucked into a curve of California's choppy coastline. He was tired and a bit worn out, confined to an SUV with Tristan was one thing. Having Gidget and Matt in the back seat stretched out every thread of his patience, especially when one of them came up for air in between their gidget fest.

"Not that the 299 isn't pretty but why didn't we just take the 101?" Gidget piped up after another five minutes of driving. "We'd have been there by now."

"He's avoiding the coast. Probably because relatives live there." Matt joined in, shifting enough to kick the back of Wolf's seat. "Oops, sorry."

"For the last fucking time, I'm not avoiding the coast. I had to go to Redding. Did you not remember stopping at Redding?" Wolf growled at them, glancing over his shoulder when Gidget snorted under her breath. "Sides, I wanted Tristan to eat at one of my favourite restaurants."

"It was a café. That served Asian-French fusion food. And most of it was frozen out of a bag." Gidget leaned forward, resting her chin on Tristan's shoulder. "Don't you think going over a hundred miles out of our way to avoid Humboldt is a little extreme? Even for Kincaid?"

"You don't have to answer that, Tris." Wolf glanced back at his employee. "And one more peep out of you and you're going into the trunk."

"Hah! This is an SUV." Matt's snark lathered his response. "There is no trunk."

"There are two trunks." Wolf met the young man's gaze in the SUV's rear view mirror. "I will pull over onto the side of the road, dump out the equipment and shove both of you into one. And if you're wondering how the hell you'd fit, I don't necessarily have to keep you in one piece to do it."

"Are you going to let him talk to us like that, Tristan?" Gidget edged her chin closer to Tristan's face, battering her eyelashes at him playfully.

"I don't think I'd notice." He shrugged, dislodging her from his shoulder. "I see the dead. I'd probably just see you in the back seat and wouldn't even realize he'd chopped you up."

“And threw them into the ocean.” Wolf added for good measure. “Tristan wouldn’t notice. You two would probably just disappear out of the back seat and I could tell him I stopped to let you out because you wanted to go have hot rock star penguin sex in a treehouse.”

“I’d believe that,” Wolf’s lover murmured. “They certainly worked their way through the Grange. I think they had sex places I didn’t even know existed.”

“Hey, just the ballroom!” Matt grumbled softly. “And we said we were sorry.”

“And the... um... elevator.” Gidget pulled back quickly from between the front seats as Tristan turned to stare at her. “What? How often does someone get the chance to have sex in an old fashioned bird cage like that? It’s all brass, gears and glass—”

“I have the chance every day and yet I can stand the pressure not to.” Tristan glared at Wolf. “Why did I let you bring those two into my house?”

“If it makes you feel any better, I ask myself that every fucking single day.” The freeway’s sides fell away and the car crested a hill. Spread out before them was a sparkling vista of coast, fog-shrouded church spires and Hellsinger Investigations’ next assignment. Shooting Tristan a quick glance, Wolf winked when his lover gave him sly smile. “Just say the word, Thursday.”

“Better leave them alone,” Tristan snorted. “Knowing them, they’d just spent their afterlife fucking on your back seat and you’d never get rid of them.”



Unlike Eureka, Miss Hazel Maplethorn-Bocker was exactly as Tristan imagined. The town was...eclectic. The time they'd spent driving was mostly spent hunting down the purported haunted house through surprisingly tree-barren streets. A left turn brought them past a baseball field and a burst of wealds, more in line with what he'd thought Eureka would look like. Then a few twists later and Wolf turned onto a circular street ubiquitously dubbed a drive then pulled up in front of a slope-roofed, ivory white house.

An off-centered A-line, the green shingled roof was brighter than the forest jutting up behind it. The house's terracotta trim and broad windows were inviting and one of the two white brick fireplaces stretching up to the grey sky puffed cheery lines of smoke. The lawn was pristine, ruthlessly contained into a sweeping arch with riverstone pavers cutting a broad swath to a large half-moon cement landing leading to the front door. Window boxes groaned under the weight of vivid blooms, their startling purple, pink and yellow hues echoed in the flower beds framing a concrete driveway. A newspaper wrapped in plastic lay a few feet away from the flowers, nearly touching the wheel of a giant black Cadillac squatting on the drive. If Tristan guessed right, the car wasn't only old enough to buy booze but possibly even have driven Tristan's grandmother to the hospital so she could give birth to his father.

"Well, this is a disappointment." Gidget muttered to Matt as they climbed out of the SUV. "It's all suburban and pretty. Guess the Carson House would have been too much to ask."

"You were hoping for cobwebs and flying monkeys?" Tristan asked, studying the manicured lawn with its matching topiary bushes positioned on either side of the green front door. "It's nice. Very... sturdy. Like whoever lives here bakes those tuna casserole in braided bread things."

"Okay, that's scarier than flying monkeys." Matt shuddered. "I'm going to have nightmares about pimento loaf and salmon Jell-O now. Thanks for that."

"The monkeys would have been too much but we could have at least gotten a couple of bats. Something to add atmosphere." She tossed her hair back, her waterfall of wee banana earrings jangling as she moved. They'd all dressed for comfort, knowing the drive would be hours long and unlike Tristan's rumpled Whiskey and Wry tour shirt and faded creased jeans, Gidget's pedal pushers and crisp cherry-red top looked freshly pressed. "Not like the Grange. I mean you pull up in front of your place, and you know shit's going to go down there. All it needs is an evil house soundtrack playing out of speakers hidden in the bushes and it would be perfect."

"The Grange isn't evil—" Tristan protested.

"Nope, pretty sure with that relative of yours, if it wasn't before, it is now," Wolf cut in, handing Tristan a rolling carry-on. "Here. Grab this. I'm right behind you. Gidge, grab portables for right now and Matt, I want a full spectrum filter on your lens. Let's see if we can't break this down fast. If there's something here, I want to know about it before afternoon hits. That'll give us time to set up and settle in here. Hazel's retired so she said we can go round the clock if we want to."

"We're not going to a hotel?" Tristan let the crack about the Grange and his relatives slide. Wolf gave him a telling look and Tristan sighed. "Of course not, that would be silly because you're going to be up all night watching cameras and little white bouncing dots."

"Babe, unless an entire line of French can-can girl ghosts comes waltzing out of the pantry, then yeah, this is going to take a while." Hefting a duffel bag over his shoulder, Wolf turned around to grab a hard case out of the SUV."

"I don't think that will be the case," A sweet faced pudgy woman toddled down the drive, her floral cotton housedress clearly chosen for their resemblance to the house's flower beds. An enormous grey cat stalked her steps, its large paws darting out to catch at the backs of her terrycloth baby blue house

slippers. Nearly the size of a Sheltie, the cat gave Tristan a baleful, yellow-eyed glare before attacking the plastic-wrapped newspaper.

“So definitely no can-can girls?” Wolf’s smooth charm and simmering sexuality oozed over the woman and Tristan sighed, wondering why his lover only seemed to be suave and entrancing when on the job... and not after they discovered Wolf’s mother inadvertently got them stoned out of their gourds. “Miss Maplethorn-Bocker, I presume?”

“Oh yes but please, just call me Hazel. Those can-can girls would be lovely now wouldn’t it? My girlfriend would be so jealous.” The late morning sun broke through for a second, gilding platinum on Hazel’s silvery curls before disappearing back behind the clouds. Reaching down to pick up her behemoth feline, Hazel remarked off-handedly. “Sadly, no. There shall be no re-enactment of Moulin Rouge here tonight. You see, I believe my ghosties are actually Wyiot Indians...and they’ve come back to have their revenge.”

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“Indians.” Gidget stared up at Wolf from where she was crouching on the floor. Her legs were nearly buried in equipment and cables. “Here? In Eureka?”

“Native Americans,” Tristan corrected, handing his lover a cup of coffee. “Hazel said there was a massacre here back in 1860. Well not here, per se but on an island out in the bay. Nearly all of the women and children were killed with hatchets and axes. A witness said he heard screaming but went back to sleep. Apparently they didn’t want to use guns because the shots would be too noticeable.”

“That’s horrible.” Matt echoed Gidget’s disgusted look. “Why... why would someone do that?”

“Land, cattle.” Wolf mounted the stepstool Hazel’d given him and began to pull video cables out of an air conditioning duct he used to thread feed lines through the house. “Because they could. A lot of shit happens in this world because people just *can* do something.”

“Cynical, much?” Tristan shot him a look and Wolf answered with one of his own.

“Realist.” He responded lightly, fitting the grate back onto the opening to prevent it from rattling about as they filmed. “Skeptic where ghosts are concerned—”

“Even after everything we’ve been through?” Tristan straightened up and cocked his head at Wolf. “Really? Still?”

Wolf didn’t call out his employees suddenly finding something else to do in another part of the house although he had to give them credit for slithering away as quietly as they did. Matt even gently shut the door behind him, sealing Wolf and Tristan into Hazel’s dining room with a quiet snick of a latch.

“Especially after everything we’ve been through.” He climbed down from the stepstool then reached for Tristan’s arm. His lover shook him off, green eyes flashing with a clear warning of a brewing storm. “Thursday, come on. You *know* my first instinct is to debunk something. I’m not saying ghosts *aren’t* real. I’m saying not everything is a ghost and people shouldn’t jump to conclusions before they examine the situation.”

Tristan’s response was thick with derision. Short, certainly, but thick. “*Huh.*”

“I come from a family where people *lie* about ghosts to make money. Not all of them—” Wolf held up a hand to stop Tristan’s incoming protests. “But definitely a lot of them. It’s taking advantage of people and *that’s* why I’m skeptical.”

“Okay, name one job where you declared there were phantasms.” Tristan stuck his hands in his jeans pockets, rocking back on his heels and staying out of Wolf’s reach. “One job.”

“Sey— ”

“One paying job.” Tristan qualified. “Name one assignment when it wasn’t swamp gas or kids playing a joke. I’ll even take a job where you said *maybe* there was something there.”

“I don’t have... shit, okay, yeah. We’ve had some jobs where things could be spectral but there wasn’t enough evidence to say for certain that there was a haunting.” Wolf edged closer, snagging Tristan’s belt loops to pull him in to a loose embrace. “Doesn’t mean I said there weren’t any ghosts. Just that there wasn’t any evidence.”

“Sometimes you have to take things on faith.” Tristan sighed heavily but let himself be pulled in tighter. “I’m not saying there are ghosts or something here. I’m saying you have to open yourself up to the

possibilities more. You can't come into a place and say... prove it. You should come in with at least an inkling that there *might* be something—or someone—there.”

“Tell you what, if you tell me there's something here, I'll believe you.” Wolf murmured as he nibbled on the corner of Tristan's mouth. A strand of his lover's hair was caught between them, and Wolf smiled as he tasted the citrus scent of Tristan's shampoo on his tongue. “But I've got to have something to take away to show it's real. It's what I do, Tris.”

“I know. But I'd like you to open-minded. You say you're a scientist. Yes, you need proof but aren't you guilty of the exact same thing you're accusing other people of?” Tristan leaned back in Wolf's arms, sliding their hips together in a sensual grind.

“Keep doing that and there's going to be more than ghost hunting.” Tristan gave him a steely glare hot enough to rival the one they'd gotten from Hazel's grey cat. “Okay, what am I accusing people of?”

“Jumping to conclusions.” Tristan broke away, sliding his hand across Wolf's flat stomach before picking up a portable EMF reader. “I'm going to see what I can find out in the kitchen. You sit here and stew in your hypocrisy a bit and let me know how it tastes. Hurry up in here. Hazel's making us lasagna for dinner.”

“Yeah, right,” Wolf called out as Tristan opened the door. “You guys have lasagna. I'll be choking down that helping of crow you just served up to me.”



Three am looked different every night, especially when they were on the job and the team hadn't quite found their groove at their current location. Different yet with so much sameness, Gidget wondered if she just wasn't stuck in some skewed time ouroboros' belly. Kincaid would get them all set up, run Matt ragged for a few hours while she sat in their makeshift control room watching for orbs and moving objects and listening to the EMF readers chirrup and beep like R2-D2 on crack.

"Sheesh, have stupid sex *once* and you're marked for life." Matt set his camera gear down on the dining room's floor then plopped down in the chair next to Gidget, his weight squishing the cushions and letting out a shooshing rush of air. "Kincaid just tore me a new asshole. No sex while in the house. Like I'd do that since—okay, not that I wasn't thinking about it because you know, it's you. How can I not? You'd think Kincaid would be a more forgiving now that he's getting laid. Swear to God, he doesn't change. It's still all work-work-work."

Matt'd certainly changed since she'd first joined Hellsingers. Back then, he'd been a round-faced geeky boy with a liking for fast food and little respect for her technical skills. They'd fought then one night, things changed. He'd changed and life went to a crazy place where she worked with possibly the hottest, most intense man she'd ever met but fell in love with the quirky sidekick.

Unless *she* was the quirky sidekick, in which case there was a good chance she'd be killed by the chain-saw wielding baby doll born from a torrid skankfest between a plastic dinosaur and Malibu Barbie.

"Not like *he* didn't have sex at the Grange," Matt continued, taking his glasses off to polish them on his t-shirt. "Why was it okay for him and not us?"

"Because we'd just gotten there, it was in the ballroom and it was stupidly unprofessional?" She smiled at Matt's beleaguered sigh and patted his thigh in sympathy. An increasingly muscular thigh, strangely enough. "I thought you were looking different. Are you working out? Is that why you're eating more salads? Are you going to the *gym*?"

"You say that like it's a bad thing," he muttered sheepishly. "And yeah, a little bit. It's in the building and it's free. Don't give me that look. It's not about cleaving to society's demands on me to look a certain way. Truth is, chasing after Kincaid is a fucking nightmare and I'm the one carrying a thirty pound camera. Fucker always is running up and down stairs. After about five minutes, I'm heaving up my lunch because I can't keep up. So yeah, I kind of have to."

"Well, shit." Gidget leaned back in her chair, trying not to smile. "And here I thought you were doing it for me."

"Nope, just for work." Matt teased, smiling slowly. "Okay, maybe a little bit for—"

The howling began at a fever-pitch, screeching vocalizations pounding up into the upper ranges of Gidget's tolerance. Their equipment picked up the steel nails on chalkboard modulations, slamming feedback out of every speaker in the room. Gidget's headphones vibrated against the table, their padded earpieces quivering from the waves coming off of their interior receptors. Within moments, the howling stopped churning and settled down into a single horrifying pinprick of sound, sharp enough to pierce an eardrum.

A second later, it stopped, leaving behind a ringing in their ears and a tendril of smoke coming out of Gidget's discarded headphones.

"Did you hear that? Did you catch that?" Wolf skidded into the room, catching his hand on the doorframe to anchor himself before he plowed into the card tables they'd set up to hold their camera monitors. "Fuck, that was awesome. Tell me something showed up. And while you're at it, you might want to toss those headphones out. I think they're on fire."



The screaming stopped as startlingly quickly as it began, draining the silence like a tsunami pulling the tide away from shore only to return the deafening nothingness in a crashing, devastating wave.

Tristan reeled in the silence, suddenly cut off from the spectral threads pouring out of the house's walls. The feeling of being left adrift wasn't a new one. Hell, he'd learned to bounce back from phantasm lines suddenly disappearing probably before he could walk but the dim hallway left him a bit disoriented so he headed to the band of light coming from the open kitchen door.

He was hoping to find Wolf. Especially since it was three in the morning and he'd just come out of a nuclear blast from an air raid siren.

What he found was a large, square-bodied older woman slowly pouring hot water from a steaming kettle into a mug with a Lipton's tea bag tag hanging from a string over its lip. Her lantern jaw was softened slightly by an edgily cut bob dyed an improbable black but the strength of the colour somehow matched the no-nonsense expression on her handsome face when she turned to greet him.

"Ah, you're one of the boys Hazel brought in for this ghost nonsense." She finished filling the mug and slid it over the counter a few inches. "Here. Have some tea. Hazel's reading some of that porn she buys so I came in to get some to make me sleepy. Tea always does it for me."

"Um, thanks, tea's fine." The mug was hot and Tristan pulled his fingers back to blow on them. "I'm Tristan."

"Deidre Bocker." She retrieved another mug from the dish drainer then looped a teabag into it. "And before you ask, no I didn't hyphenate Hazel's last name onto mine. Told her that was kind of silly. Not like we can get married."

"But you can—" Tristan took a step back and inhaled deeply.

The kitchen smelled lightly of tea and baking soda, a dash of cleanser from a thorough scrubbing someone'd done to the floor in the past few days. Other scents competed with the domestic air, a delicate trace of unfiltered cigarettes and an even fainter brush of violets, a fake sugary overlay from an old school candy Tristan remembered one of his nannies chewed on to mask the gin on her breath.

What he didn't smell was another human, the oily heat of another body chewing up the seconds until its death, a constant race to the end.

Deidre'd already gotten to the end of her race.

The question for Tristan was... did she know it?

She moved about the kitchen, too smoothly for as heavy-footed as her body would have been in life. There was no way he would have known she wasn't actually alive except for the smallest of hints—the silence of her footsteps and the quivering of the mug as it floated an inch off of the counter as Deidre's incorporeal hand ghosted it closer to the tea kettle.

He was a master at *that* particular conversation but most—okay all—of the ghosts he'd encountered as an adult *knew* something was happening to them. They showed up at the Grange knowing they were on the brink of something new—a beginning of a journey to somewhere fantastical while spending their last few days in spectral comfort.

If they were at the Grange, the souls he met came for a purpose, freeing themselves from their earthly anchor before they became trapped in the mire of a hellish existence. He bore scars—both physical and

psychological—from ghosts unable or unwilling to shed the ties to their former lives. Souls *had* to move on. There *had* to be a balance between life and death with a clean break between the two.

And from the stubborn scowl on the dead woman's face, getting Deidre to understand that—was something else entirely.



The screaming jerked Hazel up out of her sleep, yanking the breath from her lungs as the piercing broke through her dreams. The house was dark, so very dark and despite the soft sounds of chatter coming from down the hall, she felt so very alone. Her bed was empty, cold and clammy despite the cozy warmth of her home and not for the first time since she'd called Hellsinger Investigations, Hazel wished her lover, Andrea, hadn't taken her damned business trip to Toronto.

Scrambling to find her robe, Hazel slid halfway off the bed and felt around at the floor with her feet, looking for the pair of fuzzy slippers Andrea'd given her last Christmas. If anything, the floor was colder than her bed and Hazel shivered, feeling as if ice chips were crinkling through her blood.

Something fuzzy brushed her toes and Hazel let loose a small grunt of triumph. Working her foot into her slipper, Hazel bent over to grab its twin when the ground gave way under her. The hardwood floor she and Deidre stripped, stained and varnished slipped out from under her and Hazel went down, sliding into the ooze bubbling up around her bed's frame.

Every part of her mind screamed the slick liquid swallowing her up wasn't real but Hazel choked, trying to clear the viscous fluid from her open mouth. It clung to her skin and tongue, a foul sourness working its way down her throat and filling her lungs and belly. The bed tilted away from her as she sank further into the growing damp lake. Kicking her feet only bound her nightgown and wrap around her legs, restricting her movement and the heavy weight of the sodden material seemed to be pulling her down further, sucking her down into the murky depths. Afraid to stretch her toes out in case it drove her deeper into thick liquid, Hazel steeled herself and tried to find steady footing beneath her.

There was nothing there and she felt herself being dragged down deeper into the muck, her frantic struggles splashing up waves of the foul oily water into her face. Panic set in, chilling and prickling her skin and Hazel let go of her pride, screaming for someone...anyone... for help.

Breathing deep, she scolded herself, "Come on, old girl. Do *something*. Be smarter than this."

The bed seemed immune to the spreading sinkhole and Hazel slowly churned her legs, trying to bring herself closer to the frame. The room's walls were wavering, slowly folding down into the rippling fluid. Kicking hard only dragged her down further but swaying helped her drift closer.

Nearly to the bed, she made a grab for her knitted coverlet, hoping to hook her fingers into the tucked in throw's open weave. The yarn slithered around in her hand, curving to tighten painfully around her wrist. Her cry must have shaken the house because the pendant light set into the recessed ceiling began to sway and chunks of plaster broke off above her, crashing down into the water below.

Fighting the coverlet, Hazel spat out a mouthful of rank liquid, alarmed at how warm it was getting. The ripples grew stronger, cresting up into tiny waves and splashing her face. There was shouting going on somewhere, faint and indistinct and Hazel opened her mouth to respond, hoping to draw someone to her room to help her.

Her screams turned to horror then silence as something grab at her ankle and yanked her down into the burbling, hot depths and she disappeared beneath the churning surface.



It was a different kind of scream that sent Wolf sprinting down the hallway to Hazel's bedroom. This time, the sound was less terrifying and more terrified, reaching down into the depths of humanity's shared consciousness to dredge up primal images of death and forsaken souls. He could hear Gidget and Matt coming up behind him and when the hallway jogged to the left, Wolf cut the corner too quickly and jammed his shoulder into the plaster wall, rattling pictures hanging from thin wires along the length of the front wall.

He didn't stop. He couldn't have stopped even if he wanted to because Hazel's wailing suddenly cut off, leaving an echoing nothingness in its wake.

The silence sank into the house for a long moment, steeping into a dark thick brew as Wolf reached Hazel's door. The knob refused to give in his hand and Wolf ground his teeth tightly while he pounded on the door.

"Hazel?!" Only the dead wouldn't be able to hear him. Not in the stillness around them. Gidget's heavy, panicked breathing punctuated the seconds in between Matt's and Wolf pressed his ear to the door, hoping to hear something—anything—from the woman inside.

"Take it down, Kincaid," Matt urged. "Fuck, dude. That—she's..."

"Fucking knob has an actual key," Wolf muttered, running his hand over the frame. The door was solid, framed out in thick, polished oak. "Gidge, see if you can find keys somewhere. Maybe the kitchen."

"Got it. Wait, try kicking at the knob. My uncle used to do that to my mom when they were kids." Gidget intercepted Wolf's skeptical glare. "And I'll go look in the kitchen while you—"

"I'll be kicking at the door." Wolf growled while Gidget retreated back down the hall. "Stand over here, Matt. I'll use you to balance."

"Dude, not a Wallenda." Matt's forehead beaded up with sweat and he moved closer so Wolf could lean on his shoulder. "Fuck, she's not making *any* noise now."

"Yeah. Bend your knees a bit so you don't get hurt. You'll be able to take my weight better."

Any excitement over the possible manifestation slithered away guiltily into Wolf's subconscious at the possibility of Hazel being hurt. The gregarious woman'd kept them laughing as they shared pizza and beer, her Mrs. Santa like face beaming at the company she was keeping. He knew she'd already lost one love of her life, Deidre and she had been resigned to spending the rest of her life alone when a pixie faced irreverent attorney named Andrea caught her eye and her heart.

Wolf knew she missed teaching because she loved seeing a child's eyes bloom with intelligence and that she had a wicked looking geisha tattoo on her back, letting them take a scandalous peek at it when she shrugged her housecoat down off her shoulder for them to have a look.

"Okay, let's do this." Wolf took a deep breath. "Don't lock your knees either. You'll end up face first on the floor if you do."

"Sounds like you've done this a lot." Matt crouched slightly, grunting when Wolf placed his hand on Matt's shoulder.

"Busting down doors is a family tradition. Hold on," Wolf warned. "Let's see if we can get in here."



The old crystal knob was nearly as solid as the door and Wolf's Converses weren't up to the challenge but he was going to give it his best effort. Angling his leg, Wolf brought his foot down on the latch and was rewarded with a small nearly imperceptible cracking sound. Matt buckled a bit when Wolf shifted his weight but he rolled his shoulders forward, and nodded for Wolf to continue.

"Dude, go again." Matt widened his stance. "And shit, you've got some fucking long legs."

Tristan came around the corner just as Wolf struck the knob again. This time the crystal sphere gave way, shattering under Wolf's kick. The shockwave of hitting the solid mass twisted up Wolf's thigh and he grimaced while rubbing at his knee. Lead crystal shards flashed through the air and spread over the hall floor, glinting a sharp promise for an unwary, unshod foot.

"We need to—" Matt stepped back, allowing Tristan to move in front of the door.

"Watch your feet, Tris." Wolf cautioned. "Shit's sharp."

"I'm wearing socks," Tristan said softly. "You know, I've got a skeleton key on my keychain for these knobs. We've got them all over the Grange."

"Of course you do." Straightening up, Wolf studied the latch. The silence from inside was nearly as loud as the crystal. "Can you get this open? Unless you've got some magic way in here, Thursday because I'm open to suggestions."

"Here, let me undo the locking mechanism. These are exactly like the ones we've got home." Tristan crouched and began to fumble with the odd gear-locking mechanism poking out of the heavy door. "Gidget's calling for an ambulance. Just in case."

"Hazel! Hazel if you can hear me, we're coming in!" Wolf pounded at the door again.

"Not helping me here, Wolf," Tristan warned. The latch gave way, vomiting up its innards and the door swung open on its oiled hinges. "Go."

Hazel lay on the floor, her mouth flecked with drying foam. Her legs twitched, struggling against some unseen threat and her fingers kneaded at a knitted afghan, its fringed ends nearly knotted around one of her wrists. She keened, her eyes open and bulging, seemingly singing back at the ambulance's siren cutting through the soft murmuring evening sounds coming from an open unscreened sash window.

Falling to his knees, Wolf cradled Hazel into the crook of his arm, sliding his finger into her mouth to check her airway for any obstructions. The older woman choked on the invasion, her tongue lashing about to shove Wolf's fingers out of her mouth but he persisted until he knew she could breathe easily.

"What the hell happened in here?" Tristan collapsed onto the bed, its springs creaking.

Wolf sympathized with the helplessness in Tristan's voice. There wasn't much either of them could do and Hazel was unresponsive to anything Wolf tried to rouse her. Hazel gasped and wheezed in Wolf's arms and he cursed the ambulance's slow progress through the neighbourhood's winding streets. It was torturous to hear it but unable to do anything but wait.

Something caught his lover's attention and Tristan was off the bed before Wolf could respond. He crossed over to the open window, carefully stepping around something glittering on the floor.

"Oh god, Wolf. One of the panes is cracked" Tristan turned, his face pale and alarmed. "There's glass all over the ground outside."

“She broke the window?” Matt said from the doorway.

“Maybe, but I doubt it.” Wolf said as a pair of paramedics burst past him, pushing Matt into the room. He got up out of the way, pacing over to the window to pull Tristan back. The room’s pendant lamps were now blazing, giving the paramedics light to work by. It also spilled out of the window, illuminating the ground under the sill. “See if the cops are coming too, Matt. There’s footprints in the mud outside and there’s the screen. Someone was in here. With Hazel. And it sure as hell wasn’t for a quick cup of tea and a chat.”



Tristan was dead tired.

Poor choice of thoughts, he realized as he glanced towards Wolf. The man was busy blocking up the broken window with duct tape and cardboard. A glazier would be by later in the afternoon to fix the pane but—Tristan started, realizing it was already past noon and none of them had slept or eaten since... he couldn't remember when.

"I got a hold of Andrea." He skirted the bed, its covers stripped off and taken in with the police for testing. His sweats and shirt disappeared alongside the linens but the detective had been understanding when he'd confessed to sitting down on the bed while Wolf tried to revive Hazel. "She's at the airport on standby. The airline said they can probably get her on the next flight."

"Still a long ass haul." Wolf tore off another piece of tape and cornered it across the cardboard he'd cut out. "Glass guy called. He said he can't get out here until tomorrow. Told him it would be fine since we're not going anywhere. Gidge and Matt are going to stop for food on the way back from the hospital. I told them to grab something from the Vietnamese place on 4th. You like that meat and cold noodle dish, right? The one with the egg rolls?"

"*Bún thịt nướng?* Yeah." Tristan knew he was hovering but he couldn't help it. Pacing down the room's length, he stopped at the fireplace and stared at the photos arranged on the mantel. A snapshot of a younger Hazel and Deidre had a prominent place, framed out in a thick black wood rectangle. "Did they say Hazel was doing okay?"

"Yeah, doctors think whatever it is, she didn't ingest enough of it to do any permanent damage. Cops took everything in the bathroom and the tea canister from the kitchen. Screen too. Kinda interesting watching them cast the footprints. Got a good talk in with that detective. 'Course she had as many questions for me as I did for her. She was interested in the screeching we heard before Hazel got sick. Don't be surprised if they start hunting through the air ducts tomorrow looking for speakers."

"So that's what you think the screeching was... a speaker in the air ducts?"

"Think so. Someone's trying to fuck with Hazel. Babe, someone *poisoned* her. With something that would make her go crazy. That's not a ghost story. That's someone alive and well fucking with a woman who seems like a pretty nice person. Sorry, babe. Looks like there's no boo-wiggly here."

"Yeah, about that," Tristan said softly, picking up the picture frame with Deidre and Hazel smiling broadly in a loose embrace at a windswept beach. "I met Hazel's girlfriend."

"Andrea?" Wolf cocked his head and glanced at Tristan. "When?"

"Not Andrea." He shook his head and held the photo up for Wolf to look at. "Deidre. The Bocker in the Maplethorn-Bocker name. She's here, Wolf. Problem is, I don't think she knows she's dead."

■
“They took *all* the food,” Tristan complained from his perch in front of the freezer. “Even the ice cream.”

“I’ll get you ice cream tomorrow,” Wolf said, firmly closing the freezer door. “There’s fruit the Terrible Twosome bought. And I can make you an iced latte or something. If you want that.”

“What I want is rum raisin ice cream.” His lover shot him a dirty look through his mop of blond hair. “What I’m going to do is go out to the sun room and feed Hazel’s cats. Then we can talk about Deidre.”

“Deidre is definitely on the to-talk about list. And I already fed Hazel’s cat.” Wolf nudged a licked clean food dish he’d filled with tuna and salmon surprise earlier. “I might feed him again just so he doesn’t eat us in our sleep.”

“Not...Gandalf,” Tristan mumbled, digging through the pantry. Extracting five cans of wet food, he frowned. “I hope this is enough for them. It’s all she’s got. If I’d known she was so low, I’d have asked Gidget to grab some when they hit the store.”

There hadn’t been a chance to talk since Tristan dropped his bombshell in Hazel’s room and if Wolf didn’t act fast, he’d lose his lover to the care and feeding of Hazel’s already rotund cat. He followed Tristan out to the sun room, a heavily windowed space behind the kitchen. “Babe, she only has one cat. Yeah, the file said she has ten but that was a typo.”

“Then explain all of them,” Tristan snorted and waved his arm about as if unveiling a car from behind a prize curtain.

The room was empty of people. There were signs the cops had taken it over to process some of the evidence they’d gathered, mostly a few strips of plastic from baggies they’d shoved food into but those were neatly placed in a delicate looking metal trash can next to a pair of hunter green arm chairs. An afghan, much like the one Hazel’d wrapped around herself, lay draped over the back of a plaid loveseat set under a bank of windows set into the room’s long wall. There was proof of cat there. A thin layer of long grey hair coated the soft pink yarn.

“Huh,” Wolf said slowly. “Cats, huh?”

“Dude, they’re everywhere!” Tristan looked around at the floor. “Now help me find their dishes.”

“Babe, I love you but...” He crossed over to where Tristan stood peering around an ottoman. “The only cat in this house is Gandalf the Pig. And he’s already eaten.”

“You don’t see them then?” His lover’s eyebrows pulled in close, worry creasing his nose and Tristan’s mouth tightened as he thinned his lips. “Really?”

“Really,” Wolf assured him.

“I can usually tell... I mean, cats! People are harder sometimes. Like the one time that church lady came to the Grange and told me I was going to hell because...well, she has issues with monsters. Even good ones. I thought she was a guest. She *looked* like a guest. She had pearls and sensible shoes on! Who the hell looks like June Cleaver at three in the afternoon?” Tristan sat down on the ottoman and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Fuck. *Shit*. I hate this crap. I can’t even...”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Wolf murmured. He carefully stepped around Tristan’s legs then sat down on the chair in front of his distressed lover. “So there aren’t any cats we can see but fuck, it’s kind of cool Hazel’s so nice her damned cats want to stick around after they’re gone.”

"They're not *her* cats. They're ours." A gravelly female voice sent echoes through the room and Wolf stiffened his shoulders, looking around for who spoke. "More importantly, who the fuck are you, why are you in my house and where is Hazel?"

■
“So you’re telling me I’m dead?” Deidre’s look was long suffering as if she’d spent decades trying to reason with someone with pie-in-the-sky ideas. From Tristan’s brief experience with Hazel, he could only imagine the *discussion* they had over the years. “God, I need a cigarette.”

“This conversation would be so much better if I could see her,” Wolf grumbled softly. “I’m hearing voices but I don’t know where to look.”

“This really fucking pisses me off,” Deidre ground out, shooting Wolf a filthy look. “Look, kiddo. I’m sitting right here. Don’t talk about me as if I’m not in the same damned room.”

“This is not going to work.” Wolf gestured at the room in general. “What the hell are we going to do with her anyway? Unless she’s the one poisoning Hazel—”

“What are you saying? Poisoning Hazel.” Deidre stood up and glowered. The room went dim as a bulb from an overhead light popped and a slow keening wind picked up, casting about the pulled back curtains and rattling a nearby lamp. One by one, the cats blinked out, scurrying off into the nothingness between spaces. “What’s happened to Hazel?”

“You’re not helping, Wolf, and she’s right besides you. On your left,” Tristan muttered, blocking his eyes from the gust of hot wind blasting up into his face. “Deidre, we need you to calm down. Hazel is fine.”

“But she wasn’t? When the hell did this happen? I’ve been home. Right here! How could anything happen to her? For God’s sake, we just had breakfast together and...” The ghost’s lantern jaw worked back and forth, grinding together non-existent teeth. The hot gusts stilled “And I’m dead? No, I don’t believe—”

“What was the last thing you remember, Deidre?” Wolf asked a spot to his right.

“Your other left, Kincaid,” Tristan muttered under his breath and Wolf turned around to face Deidre.

“Hey, I’m trying here. Last time you remember having a cigarette or actually eating food? When was that?” Wolf cocked his head. “Course I’m not one to be quizzing you. Tris here is the ghost expert. I’m just the scientist. Shit, think I can go get—”

“Just leave the machines where they are, Wolf.” He slapped Wolf lightly on the arm. “Deidre, really. Focus. What was the last thing you clearly remember doing?”

“I had breakfast with Hazel. She was...worried because I had a headache. Damned thing just wouldn’t go away. She was being pissy so I went outside to get a smoke—she doesn’t like me smoking in the house. I remember opening the door.” The ghost’s body flickered and one of the lamps began to rattle its way across a table. Deidre glanced over Tristan’s shoulder, staring out at the open windows. “It’s dark outside. It shouldn’t be... dark. I just had breakfast. Shit, I can still taste the damned scrambled eggs. She always makes them too wet because...” Deidre choked back a sob. “Because Hazel says they’ll continue to cook once they’re off the stove but they never do. The eggs are always too damned wet but I eat them because she’s made them. Oh fuck, Hazel...”

Slowly around them, the shadows began to move, long slithering shapes crawling out of the walls and furniture. They grew thick, solidifying and wrapping around Deidre’s legs, slender feline shapes with bristling open maws and sharp yellow gazes. The room’s dim deepened and the cats fell in closer, forming a moving whirlpool around the ghost’s legs. A glow formed around the edges of their eyes, growing stronger as they moved faster and faster until suddenly they were a blur of black on shadow and as one, they began to howl, screeching out a piercing rip edged enough to puncture eardrums.

“Fuck, I see the cats.” Wolf took a step back, barely audible above the caterwauling.

“That’s not all I see,” Tristan exclaimed as something caught his eye. Pointing to one of the windows, he exclaimed. “There’s someone outside, Wolf. Right outside of this room.”



The ghostly smoke ring of cats flew up into dust motes, choking the air as Wolf sprinted past—or even possibly through—the dead woman in the room. A brisk chill hit his skin then grabbed at his marrow and for an instant, Wolf feared his bones would crack open at the icy clamp on his body. His breath bloomed into a chilled plume and when Wolf sucked in a surprised gasp, the air shivered through his lungs, piercing the warmth in his chest. Another step forward and he'd broken free, shaking off the glacial freeze slowly peeling away from his skin.

Meanwhile, the shadow outside of the window turned and bolted back into the night.

Wolf hit the sunroom's outer door running, shoving at the latch hard and hoping it was unlocked. The door flew wide, slamming open and striking the exterior wall, its glass window rattling and buckling under the force of Wolf's exit.

Funny thing was—the shadow certainly was a hell of a damned more solid than Deidre and about as graceful as an elephant in a tutu.

A row of hedges took the brunt of the intruder's flailing, his churning legs destroying the neatly lined up greenery. With the moon playing peek-a-boo with a thickening Eureka fog, Wolf could only catch glimpses of his prey as they ran through the back yard towards the front of the house.

With only a few feet separating them, the shadowy form feinted about, zigzagging left and right in an attempt to avoid the large barrels Hazel'd set up on the side of her house to grow tomatoes and herbs. Successfully dodging the hazards of the herbal labyrinth, it was an old rose bush that proved to be the intruder's undoing.

A rose bush obviously out for vengeance and more than likely, manipulated by a very pissed off Deidre.

The bush stretched out from its trellis, thorny tendrils snapping out to slap at the shadowy figure's face and chest. Wolf caught the tail end of a bloom-rich whip across his cheek. It stung, opening up a cut deep enough to bring up moisture.

Sadly for him, the intruder didn't get off as easily.

The trellised bush groaned and creaked, its branches bending across the walkway to grab at the running man. Stretched past their physical limits, a few thick stems broke, curved too far around for their heavy limbs to survive. They snapped, tiny shotgun booms as leaves and stem pieces showered down over the man. Too short to encase the runner, Deidre had other plans for the sharp, prickly branches. One by one, the stems dove in, stabbing at the man's exposed face and arms, rapid fire punches deep enough to leave gouges in his skin.

Screaming, the man's mouth was speckled with foam and his eyes were bulging in the short time it took Wolf to reach the man's side. He was young, barely into his twenties, and even in the faint light coming from the street lamps a few yards away, Wolf could see he was terrified. The smell of piss hit the air and a dark stain began to spread over front of the young man's sweatpants.

"Deidre, let him go," Wolf muttered, grabbing at the branches. "Shit, I don't know if you can hear me but... let him go. You're hurting him."

The whisper in Wolf's ear was barely loud enough for him to hear over the frightened man's screams but it was there, raspy and enraged.

"I don't care," she whispered. "He hurt Hazel."

"You're going to kill him," Wolf pointed out, yanking his hand back just as a thick root broke open, its shorn, glistening end poised over the young man's chest. "You're going to *kill* him."

"Then he'll be dead. Like me. And then imagine what I could do to him."

"Hazel wouldn't want you to do it," Tristan's voice rang through the madness. He came through the front picket gate, the watery moon running silver over his pale face. "Please, Deirdre. She'd hate herself if she knew she was the reason he died. Even after all he's done to her, she wouldn't want that. Not Hazel."

"No," Deirdre's voice echoed, gravel and velvet wrapped around deep sadness. "She wouldn't."

The branches stopped moving then in a slow churn, unraveled, dumping the young man onto the stone walkway below. Wolf lunged, grabbing the intruder then pulled him free of the trellis as Tristan awkwardly patted the house.

"For Hazel," Deirdre's whispers began to fade. "But never....again..."

9

"God, I'm glad to be home." Wolf flopped onto an antique velvet loveseat set near the Grange's reception desk. Boris looked up from his sprawl on the floor and contemplated the man sitting nearby. Schlepping himself across the floor in a lazy flop of fur, claws and tail, the wolfhound flopped into a heap at Wolf's feet, resting his head on Wolf's shin with a contented grumble. "The dog's glad I'm home too."

"You don't live here," Tristan reminded him as he went through the journal Ophelia Sunday left for him, documenting her impressions of the spectral guests the Gilded Age mansion had while he was gone.

"We could change that." Wolf laughed at Tristan's skeptical glance. "Okay, yeah maybe we shouldn't be underfoot all the time yet."

"Yeah, probably a good idea. Let's wait until I don't want to stuff you in a teapot every other hour." The journal was fascinating. Wolf's sister left him pencil sketches of faces and clothing where she could. One man in particular had come in missing his nose and he'd wondered for a moment if she just couldn't see it before he read the annotation that it'd been bitten off by an enraged donkey.

"Got a call from Andrea. Hazel's doing well." Stretching out, Wolf scratched at Boris' ear. "She's home...and other than the unfortunate death of her rose bush, everything's back to normal. Like...*normal* normal."

"And that asshole ex-student of hers?" Tristan frowned, despite reading about the young Victorian girl who'd spent her three days joyfully cooking puddings and treats with Cook in the kitchen. "If he's what Hazel ran up against, I don't blame her for retiring. A C on a five-year old report card isn't the reason you can't get a job. Maybe because you're an asshole."

"Full agreement about the asshole," Wolf grunted, pushing Boris back as the wolfhound dug his massive head into Wolf's stomach. "Andrea said the noises and other shit has stopped."

Tristan turned a page and wondered why Ophelia Sunday jotted down a number for a yogurt place beneath a note to milk the cow. "Did you tell her about Deirdre?"

"Babe... Deirdre was weird enough for *me*. I'm not going to bring up Hazel's dead lover who had a fatal aneurysm in the house she and Hazel live in now." He snorted when Tristan opened his mouth to object. "Sometimes, it's better to leave things alone."

"So long as Hazel's okay," he replied softly. "Still, jail's too good for that asshat. He needs to...shit, I can't even think of anything off the top of my head. Maybe wading for valuables in the sewer system. Think they've got a gator like that place in Florida."

They both fell silent and the hall was quiet with the exception of Boris' contented grunting and moaning as Wolf scratched the dog's nape and back. A few minutes later, Wolf cleared his throat, interrupting Tristan's reading once again.

"It wasn't so bad, was it?" His lover's voice turned, threading a darker, somber tone into Wolf's rolling baritone. "You and I—out there. It was...pretty damned good. *We* were pretty damned good together."

Tristan stopped reading and gave Wolf his full attention, leaning on the well-used reception bank his uncle bought from an old hotel. Shadows played with Wolf's face, teasing down the length of his nose and curving down over his firm jaw, leaving his mouth untouched for the afternoon sun to play with. The Grange's front expanse of windows stretched up nearly two stories, flooding the grand hall with light gloom hanging over Muir Woods.

There was a hint of something...wild in Wolf's eyes. Knowing what he did of Wolf's family, Tristan realized *he* was the one with a home, with a place he'd grown up and been loved—fully without any reservation or expectation other than to be who he was.

Of the two of them, Tristan had anchors—even if some of them were ghosts—his life was grounded and *normal* as far as he could ever be normal.

Wolf had none of that.

And the hesitant, defensive feral gleam in Wolf's eye hid his deep-seated longing to *belong* somewhere...to *someone*.

"Yeah, babe," Tristan murmured, rounding the reception desk. "We are really damned good together. I can't imagine it being..."

The Grange's front doors flew open, banging wildly against the plastered walls. A torrent of wind blew through the great hall, swirls of leaves and moss curling up into the air and skittering over the parquet floor. Outside, the clouds deepened to a dark grey and a heavy rumbling cracking overhead, shaking the window panes in their frames.

Caught in the gust of wind, Tristan threw up his hand to protect his eyes from the debris when the doors suddenly slammed shut again, leaving only echoes behind.

And a very familiar, lantern-jawed woman dressed in sensible flats, capris and a buttoned-up shirt.

"Well... guess it's time for me to go," Deidre said wistfully, approaching the men at the end of the hall with long, steady strides. "Said goodbye to Hazel. Don't know if she heard me but... I think she's happy. She feels happy. And that's a damned good thing—even if I'm not the one making her happy anymore."

"You'll always make her happy," Tristan murmured, crossing over to greet his new guest. "She loves you. Every time she thinks of you, you'll bring her happiness."

"Good." Deidre nodded curtly.

She opened her mouth but an intense screaming howl ate up the relative quiet then a blur of white and brown flashed between Tristan and Wolf as a ghostly terrier leaped over Boris and disappeared into the depths of the Grange. A heartbeat later, a smoky mass of claws and glowing eyes erupted out of the closed front door, feline ears flattened back on their triangular heads as they pursued their quarry. The cats disappeared as quickly as they arrived, splashing into a far wall and leaving only a faint coating of pearly black dust on the paint.

"Oh and um, yeah." Deidre looked sheepish, an odd expression on her handsome, strong face. "Looks like the cats came with me."