

A PARANORMAL DISTURBANCE
BEFORE
THE ENVY SERIES

COLOR
GRAY



J. K. GRUEBER

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A PARANORMAL DISTURBANCE

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MYSTIC RIDGE PUBLISHING, LLC

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COLOR GRAY

Within the thick shadows of his windowless bedroom, Isaac Bentley stood contemplating his crowded closet, concentrating as if his life depended on the decision he was about to make—whether to wear an Armani suit or black jeans. Hell, he should just wear a pair of coveralls. And that was probably the only selection he wouldn't find in his closet. This should not be so difficult. He wasn't taking a trip, although the mere thought of packing ignited a tingle at the edge of his mind, and he flashed a vision of himself walking in circles within the surrealistic glow of vapor lights illuminating a vast parking lot . . .

An airport parking lot. The vibration of a jet engine drew his attention. Unconsciously, he combed his walnut waves aside and lifted his emerald gaze from the glow of the single bulb dangling in his closet. Mesmerized, he watched a silver craft launch into a platinum sky. Coming or going . . .? He was coming . . . returning from a two-week junket he knew abruptly. But he couldn't remember which of his God-blessed sports cars he'd driven into the long-term parking lot.

Absently, he watched his hand shift his sports jacket sleeve. And on a dual plane, he tipped his bare wrist and read the face of his Rolex. The watch was genuine, but most folks in Bentwood, PA, believed him when he called

it a knock-off. Only Tim Spencer, the local lawman and, gratefully, Isaac's closest friend, knew differently.

9:20. AM? PM?

The time remained the same, and the significance fled through his mind's eye.

9:20 p.m. . . . *Someone was about to die.*

9:20 a.m. . . . In exactly ten minutes, Meg Price would arrive on the corner sidewalk across from Olden Time Antiques and Collectibles. Somehow or another, he'd agreed to chauffeur her six blocks across town to Humphrey's Funeral Home, the last place on earth he wanted to visit. Graveyards never bothered him, although he usually preferred to steer clear of those, too, but funeral homes were altogether different. The dead were restless, especially the freshly dead. He'd known that much his entire life and considered that old "RIP" a flipping oxymoron regarding the dearly departed. No way did the dead rest, much less peacefully—not in his experience.

And he was wasting time.

Damn it.

Muttering curses, he yanked a pair of black jeans off a hanger and grabbed a black jersey and gray sports jacket. A guy had to draw the line somewhere. Attending a funeral service dressed like a farmer might be appropriate; however, he was a businessman—never claimed or pretended to be anything other than a businessman—and most folks in Bentwood had accepted that detail at the onset.

Hurriedly, he dressed, stepped into comfortable black loafers, added a heavy silver antique chain, and glimpsed at his phantom image in his dresser mirror. Despite the shadowed glow of lamplight, the silver and black onyx sparked silver darts from the signet ring on his right hand. Ominously, it spiked white-hot slivers toward his image as if to impale him on the glass.

How the hell had he agreed to attend this ordeal? He didn't do funerals or funeral services—not since attending his mother's funeral nearly eighteen years earlier. And he had no desire to change that decision—damn it.

For Meg. For Megan Price, he would likely walk through the fires of hell, though sometime soon . . . the fires of hell.

Shuddering head to heel, he pivoted from the mirror and strode from his room. His kitchen was not much brighter than his bedroom, not with heavy drapes and curtains effectively blocking the morning light. He preferred the dark . . . but he halted two steps from his apartment door and turned, watching, fascinated, as his room illuminated, and a column of white light floated across the floor.

9:24 a.m. . . . and he could use a cold shower if the activity in his apartment was any indication.

Snatching a set of keys off the brass nobs near the door, he let himself out, concentrating on descending the stairwell to the first floor. Five years earlier, he'd purchased this old department store building that spanned a quarter-city block and stood two stories high. He lived alone in one of several apartments to occupy the second floor above his antique showroom store; the entire rear half of the building provided warehouse and garage space that housed three sports cars and a fancy pickup.

Meg enjoyed riding in the Maserati. She said it reminded her of an Italian sports car driver she'd dated in her wild and rowdy youth. Luckily, the car waited nearest the rear garage doors and faced outward, likely sparing him another bout of shouting from Hazel Handler, his octogenarian neighbor who accused him of running over her unruly rose bushes. She was likely already on the other side of town, paying her respects to the Farnsworths, which was a fine 'go-figure.' When he finally deemed to respect her scrub brush, she wasn't haunting her porch to witness his courtesy.

By the time he engaged the remote to close the garage door and rolled onto the narrow side street between his shop and Meg's Diner, Meg stepped off the curb at the corner of Maine. Even more lovely than usual, she wore a black, mauve-flowered dress belted at her tiny waist and flowing to her slender calves. Despite spiked high-heel shoes, she walked with the grace to

defy her sixty-odd years, and with her blond silver-laced hair fluffed about her cameo-smooth face, she could pass for a woman half her age.

He reached the corner with barely enough time to slide from behind the wheel and clasp the passenger door handle a step ahead of her. Holding the door open, he bowed in courtly fashion, spouted several lines in Italian before realizing her bewilderment, and transitioned smoothly to American English with a smirk twitching the corner of his mustached lips. “Your chariot, madame.”

“I don’t think that’s what you said at all, was it?”

“Hmm, might never know,” he said and winked. What he’d said might have made her blush, though she generally accepted compliments with an easy grace. If she were ten years younger . . . well, maybe more than ten years. She was over twice his age and most often treated him like the son she’d never had, which suited him just fine. Striding around the car, he slipped behind the wheel, still smirking at his thought. Glancing over, catching the twinkle in her pale gray-blue eyes, he idled, “Don’t suppose you’d want to skip this affair and run away with me? We could drive over to Pittsburgh and take a riverboat cruise? Or jaunt up to the Top of the Golden Triangle, and I could buy you lunch for a change?”

Her twinkle remained despite her sobering. “I’ll take a raincheck if you don’t mind, honey.”

He’d already sped onto Maine, headed for Humphrey’s. “I’ll hold you to it, Meg,” he said as he sobered with a thought of their destination. He hadn’t known Victor Farnsworth that well. Might have only spoken to the man a half dozen times in the past five years, but he’d seen him around town often enough to recognize him. The oldest son, Calvin, wasn’t too much younger than Isaac—maybe five years—and the two younger children . . . weren’t exactly children, Isaac corrected silently. Victor, the younger brother, was attending his third or fourth year of college in Pittsburgh, and Valerie . . .? Val would be nineteen, now, likewise enrolled in college.

With his thought, he reconsidered his need to step into Humphrey's, then silently cursed his lack of compassion. The young woman had just lost her father; she wasn't likely pining for male companionship—let alone thinking about rekindling her infatuation with the local, single antique dealer. Still, Isaac vowed to remain close to Meg. The last time Val had cornered him, he'd been extremely grateful for his nosey, octogenarian neighbor; after all, two summers ago, Val had been jailbait at barely seventeen. But that detail hadn't thwarted her attempt to seduce him.

The six town blocks passed too swiftly despite the slight traffic jam at the edge of town. A dozen cars formed the line into Humphrey's parking lot, with more than a dozen already parked and sporting purple flags on the hoods. With no intention of joining the procession to the cemetery, Isaac pulled into the covered entrance of a sprawling Colonial-style house. In a glance, he recognized half the faces of the townsfolk meandering toward the doors via the covered porch and stairway. In its day, the home likely housed some of the most prestigious Bentwood founders, but like three other fanciful dwellings in town, the building had been renovated to accommodate the dead. A pity, that. In Isaac's opinion, the house probably quartered enough ghosts from the Civil War era, without adding any modern patrons. It could have continued as a fine private residence.

"You are coming in, too. Aren't you, hon?" Meg asked as she stepped out, joining him on the wide walk.

"I am, but . . ." He stopped short before admitting his preference to refrain from else. He should have pulled into the parade of cars. Meg would prefer to join the procession and express her full support to the surviving Farnsworths. She'd probably known both Victor and Cora for most of her life. "I'll join you after I pull in line," he conceded.

"I'll save you a seat then," she offered, and if not for several of her regular customers hurrying to join her, she might have witnessed his wince.

Truly, the last place he wanted to visit on a lovely spring Saturday morning was a funeral parlor, a captive audience to what could prove to be a long,

dismal religious sermon. If they'd scheduled this event in a church, Isaac might have justified skipping this ordeal with greater incentive. He hadn't stepped into a church in more than twenty years, and he could still see his mother's gypsy-black eyes flaming as she'd yanked him from Nan Duncan's grip. Phantom pain flashed through his arm as he recalled the ferocity of her clasp while dragging him, stumbling, down the Cathedral's stone steps.

Muttering a curse, he wheeled the sports car in a circle onto the street and waited in line as one of the funeral employees directed traffic. If Vic had merely passed away in his sleep, Isaac wondered if so many people would have attended this service. Was it curiosity? Or fear bringing the townsfolk out in force? Bentwood had its quirks, but he'd never considered it a cauldron of morbid curiosity.

Isaac pulled into the line, already four rows and five cars deep, with more vehicles pulling in behind him. At the fringe of the parking lot, thick tall hedges, as effective as a wooden fence, exploded with pink and white blooms, more vivid than ever Hazel's Rose of Sharon shrubs. Distracted, Isaac watched the glitter across his windshield, lost in the moment to appreciate the sun piercing the bows of trees to shade the lot from every direction. Perhaps, if he just remained in the car, he could ignore the gray mist spreading like cheesecloth over the sprawling colonial . . . but the thought of Meg anticipating his arrival within that haze spurred him from the bucket seat. Sighing, resigning, he snapped the driver's door closed and started toward the fog.

"Heya, Isaac," Milt Freshcorn called while veering toward Isaac as if homing in on a kindred spirit. Barely glimpsing at her husband, Trish, dressed to the nines in a skin-tight, short skirt, continued toward the crowd collected near the porch steps.

At a glance, Isaac identified the gang despite the abundance of black attire flowing from one body to the next. At the edges of his mind, he heard the whisper of low voices rising in a familiar cadence, but his attention riveted on Milt's grim, round face. Probably not much into his 30s, Milt already

wore a receding hairline, and with the military buzz-cut, his forehead and scalp glistened under the morning sunlight. Behind black-rimmed glasses, his brown eyes magnified with a harmless brown shine to earmark his jovial countenance. How he'd hooked Patricia—Trish—Hawthorne remained a mystery to most, but Isaac suffered no doubts—Trish had married him simply for his money and prestige. Milt knew it, likely from the start, and no fool was he to worry over that little detail. He doted on his wife, in love with her despite her being in love with his wealth. The joke, Isaac decided, was on her. She was lovely—very nearly beautiful—with her long dark hair and curvy, voluptuous body. She could have landed one of Tim's brothers and been set for life with the Spencers' wealth on par with the Freshcorns' prominence in Bentwood.

Thrusting his hand in offering as if they'd not just seen each other three nights ago over at Crowley's Bar, Milt waxed sober, stating, "Some shit, huh? There we were knocking them back, and there was poor Vic, falling on his fork and bleeding out."

So, the rumors carried, Isaac considered as he accepted the greeting and agreed, "You just never know."

"Ain't that the truth," Milt sighed sagely and strode alongside Isaac. "Gotta say, I was surprised to see you pulling in. Didn't think you knew Vic—shit. You probably know Cal though, huh? He's about your age."

"Don't know him well," Isaac admitted. "Meg needed a ride. I dropped her off out front."

"Ah, well, that makes sense then," Milt idled and seemed to notice the crowd looking in their direction.

Not immune to the attention or oblivious of their audience, Isaac spotted Jen Andover with no trouble at all. With her neon blond hair puffed and feathered in a dying fashion, she fairly glowed within the circle of the black-clad bodies.

Under his breath, musing, Milt commented, "Boy, are you gonna have your hands full."

That his wife was as interested as the other four young ladies in the mix, Isaac suffered no doubts, but Milt seemed oblivious—thank the good Christ. The last thing Isaac needed was a fistfight in a funeral parlor . . . A parking lot, though?

Beneath a wave of thick, dark waves, Isaac's brow furrowed with the question looming in his mind, and his attention riveted on the young man currently attached to Jen Andover. Ice cold, the fury poured over him as he locked gazes with Cal Farnsworth. The fellow wore an ill-fitting suit with the material rumpled from his broad, slumped shoulders. Shaggy, his cornflower hair hung about his rugged, rounded face like a mop on a scarecrow. But his eyes—icy pale blue eyes staring past Jen's blond head—countered any comparison to that innocuous fellow of the corn. What exactly he'd done to incense Cal, Isaac had yet to discover . . . although it might have something to do with the lad's little sister. As Isaac recalled, however, he had tried letting Valerie down gently with her tender heart in mind. Despite his reputation, he drew the line at bedding children—and married women, he added with a fleeting glance to find Trish eyeing him rather than her husband.

Separated or divorced was an entirely different matter, and his attention snagged on the woman striding on a parallel path through the line of cars. Lynn Kreider was a whole other kettle of fish with a smile to melt butter and pale brown eyes the color of honey. She worked at the bank—which was, undoubtedly, how she knew the Farnsworths. She'd married a local boy, a hoodlum as Isaac had heard, and the idiot had run off with a motorcycle gang, leaving her with a young son and a shitload of bills. She'd done all right, however. Her son, twelve-year-old Wade, was one of the most inoffensive children Isaac had ever met, as pleasant-natured as Tim and Donna's two youngsters, DeeDee and Tee.

With his thought, he wondered if either Tim or Donna would be here, and in a quick scan, rejected the possibility since neither emerald pickup nor blue SUV stood in any of the lines.

“Hi ya, Isaac,” Lynn offered while joining him and Milt. Her natural smile dimmed by the grim event ahead, but she still appeared pleasant with the whisper of a dimple at the corner of her lovely lips. Her eyes flashed a hint of interest and amusement—undoubtedly in tune with Isaac’s quick scan and appreciation for her slender anatomy, enhanced in a conservative black slacks and jacket ensemble.

Not strangers by any stretch, Isaac offered his hand and brushed a quick kiss on her cheek, receiving a chaste kiss as he squeezed her hand lightly. “Good to see you despite the circumstances,” he said in his inherently deep voice.

“Same here, hon,” she returned. And in a catty move that Isaac sincerely appreciated, she slipped her hand about his arm, staking her claim to accept his escort toward the group clustered in the fog. The collection ahead might doubt Lynn’s claim, but no one in that close-knit fraternity would create a scene or verbally accost her. Later, Isaac knew, at least three of these five young women would pay him a visit—probably en masse, with Jen leading that procession into his shop.

Perhaps he would close early—or merely leave Elaine in charge of the store for the day. His single employee preferred working alone, anyway, although there, too, he wasn’t sure what he’d ever done to set her on edge. He made her nervous. That much he knew. Just as he knew, he turned up the heat in all five young women—and one young man—with little more than a twitch in his mustache.

No questions or curiosity remained over that fact. Trish Freshcorn remained the only young lady in this ensemble he hadn’t visited at least once. And the half dozen males were of no interest beyond sharing an occasional beer.

Meg and Tim were probably right. He should rein his carnal appetites or set a higher standard for his choices. How the hell could he help it if he was easy? He’d never deceived a soul by suggesting he sought more than a pleasant evening and physical release—whether it began with dinner and the

symphony or a home-cooked meal and B-rated flick. The latter of which had often become an annoyance. Thankfully, Jen Andover could be easily distracted from her infatuation with old movies since he shared her company more often than others.

Convenience and availability—she lived less than a half block from his shop with her father's hardware store directly across from Megs. Unwittingly, he glimpsed her endowments, compressed and lifted, mounded like overripe melons, and served on a black, shimmering platter. Her present ensemble of clinging black miniskirt and strapless halter-top clearly advertised her merchandise, along with her satisfaction guarantee. What one saw was what one got with Jen Andover, and losing a family member might offer an occasion for a discount if her curvy attachment to Cal's rumpled suit was any indication.

Behind his somber expression, acknowledging Jen with a nod and glance, Isaac suffered the paradox of his internal musings while he tempered his reaction to Cal's intense, angry shine. The lad clearly held a grudge against one Isaac Bently, but this was neither the time nor the place for discovery. Isaac offered his hand with his cordial, "Cal—my condolences. I'm sorry for your loss."

Perhaps the fellow was in shock—or he'd drown his misery in a whiskey bottle to create that high shine. He broke his hand free from Jen's grip long enough to accept the offer. "Yea—thanks."

Lynn broke away to clasp Cal's hand and offer her sympathies; Jen visibly eased away from Cal, gravitating toward Isaac as her eyes flashed down and rose. The appreciation and promise of *later* blazed in her blue eyes under thick black lashes.

Not the last silent invitation or promise, merely the first. Isaac received several more lurid appraisals as the small group parted, granting access to the steps where more bodies lingered within the mist. With a wink and a smile, he could likely gain company and return to his car . . . and it was already too late. With a funhouse effect, the slanted sun rays shimmered on the cloying

haze. Already, like heavy dew, the dampness clung to his face and hands, but no one else appeared to notice.

Jen's voice carried, commanding gently. "We should probably go in now, Cal."

The others agreed by action, closing ranks, following.

If there was such a thing as a good turnout for a funeral service, this one qualified with a crowd gathered in the front parlor and clogging the entrance to the viewing room. Voices droned, a steady hum vibrated the heavy, floral-scented air, and to Isaac's further discomfort, he realized the mist had breached the walls and permeated the interior rooms. Like apparitions in a fog, the familiar faces loomed around him, and he needed all his faculties to respond to the greetings and somber conversations. If not for Lynn on his arm, he might have skipped the podium . . . not at all certain whether he signed his name—any name—on the guest book before lifting a memorial card.

In his hand, the image of Victor Farnsworth quivered as if breathing, his pale eyes captured for all time with an expression of bewilderment on his craggy face. In the photo, he wore a suit—and appeared younger than the last time Isaac had seen him. They'd been standing on the porch, Isaac leaning on the pillared porch post; Vic perched sidesaddle on the rail—haggling the price of a Griswold skillet from a box of whatnots that he'd lured Isaac to his farm to buy. A trade . . . the skillet for a crystal bowl that Cora had been eyeing in Olden Time.

Cora stood at the head of the closed casket with her two younger children on either side. She'd aged considerably over the past three days. . . and she wasn't a young woman before then. She wore a navy blue dress on her stout frame with white lace fringing the collar and long sleeves to puff about her hands. Below the fringed hem, she wore thick beige hose and black flats, and in granny style, her gray-streaked brown hair topped her crown, pulled into a bun as dull as dirt. In perfect contrast, Valerie stood at her mother's right hand, her slight build conservatively wrapped in a stylish black skirt and gray

blouse with a black blazer setting off the highlights of her shoulder-length blond hair. She was pretty, in a plain, youthful manner, and only slightly more mature, with her rounded cheeks blushed too heavily and her lips too brightly rouged red.

Despite the vacant shine in her pale blue eyes, Isaac sensed her gaze tracking him as he moved into the receiving line. If he could skip this portion of acceptable protocol, he surely would, but he'd come this far. The only consolation was spotting Meg seated in the last row of a dozen, with an empty chair waiting beside her as promised.

Victor Junior, a slimmer, trimmer version of his older brother—and father—was first in the line nearest the casket and looked as if he'd suffered a hammer blow. Dazed, he accepted Isaac's handshake and spoke a canned amenity, offering his gratitude while oblivious to who stood before him. Which was just as well. Isaac couldn't recall exchanging more than ten words with the boy over the past five years and saw no sensible reason to change that fact.

Cora, on the other hand, had meandered into his shop at least once a month, and when she clasped his hands, he leaned over and brushed a kiss on her drawn cheek. "Terribly sorry for your loss, ma'am," he offered sincerely and might have said more if not for the flash of fire in his palms.

Shock, terror, grief . . . in lightning flashes, he suffered the rollercoaster of emotions, overlapping the freeze-frame images of Victor Farnsworth skewered on four deadly spikes of a pitchfork. *Impaled through his faded denim coveralls, he folded at the middle, his eyes sprung wide as his mouth gaped on a silent scream. Unmercifully, the tines drove him backward, ramming him against the wide support beam just inside his barn. Milk canisters clattered and rolled, spewing the raw white contents across the filthy cement. Flat out, Victor sprawled in the crud, his eyes rolling back in his head as the spikes yanked from the blood-soaked material, jostling him . . . and descending in a wicked thrust.*

Swallowing a thin breath, not quite a gasp, Isaac focused through the haze as Cora tipped her head, freeing one hand to touch her daughter as if in presentation.

“You’re knowing my girl, Valerie Renee,” she spoke in country dialect, straining to sound natural. “Val’rie, you ‘member Mr. Bently. He owns that big antique shop in town.”

“I surely do remember,” Valerie said as she smiled timidly, her shiny eyes too intent, too intense to appear as innocent as her soft voice conveyed. “Thinkin’ it’s been almost two years since the last time we met, though, huh?”

As he clasped her proffered hand, Isaac flashed the memory—her memory of throwing herself into his arms, clinging to him in the shadows of the alley behind his warehouse. His memories were never so vivid, so intense to feel her slight body pressed against him, one hand groping at his belt, her other grabbing her thin cotton shirt to yank it up her trunk. ‘Hold me—here! Just hold me—’ Snapping the memory shut, he managed a grim smile, offering the heartfelt platitude. “Truly sorry for your loss, Valerie.”

The crowded room should offer protection. As the saying goes—safety in numbers. But Isaac tensed as tears washed over Valerie’s eyes, and she launched against him in reflection of her memory. Clinging, she demanded an embrace to console her, but in a firm, gentle grip, Isaac clasped her shoulders, refraining from drawing her closer. If he’d ever been anything other than annoyed by a woman’s tears, he couldn’t recall the occasion and cursed his failings as he recoiled mentally, and physically. The young woman had just lost her father—and not by any innocent accidental circumstances originally bandied about town.

Only a day past, Tim had cautioned against believing the rumors, and his tense expression had evidenced the probability of violence. Tim hadn’t admitted or even alluded to the possibility of murder, but some things didn’t need to be spoken aloud. When an officer of the law warns against leaving

doors unlocked and security systems turned off, one could assume he wasn't worried about a visit from the Tooth Fairy or Santa Claus.

Thus far, Chief Sam Hayward and County Sheriff Taylor Grant had kept the circumstances under wraps. Still, Isaac had heard enough whispers about the unusual number of state police cars cruising through town to know the details were bound to leak.

What had brought this immense gathering? Morbid curiosity? Or a genuine out-pour of support for a local citizen with roots in the surrounding hills and vales?

In an odd turn, Isaac found Cal Farnsworth arriving, clasping his sister's quaking shoulder and appearing nearly desperate as his angry eyes fixed over her blond head. "I'll take her, now."

Gladly, Isaac might have shouted as swiftly as he accepted the help to extricate her from his chest. How she'd snaked her arms about his waist under his jacket, he wasn't certain. Carefully clutching her wrists, he sent her smoothly into her brother's arms, offering more platitudes to console her whimpering and sobbing.

Whether she welcomed her brother—then mother rallying around her—Isaac neither knew nor stuck around to be sure. Grateful for his escape, he navigated through the dark-clad bodies, too aware of hands brushing against him and patting his shoulder as he passed, as if he needed comfort—or approval—for dealing with the weeping young woman. He really should have thought this through and found Meg another ride. With the gray gauze-like smoke over the familiar faces, he knew his tension mounting on par with his discomfort . . . and neither could bode well in his regard.

Sidling between the folding chairs alongside Meg Price, he settled onto the thin cushion and managed a grim smile in response to the comely older woman's worried gaze.

"Are you alright, dear?"

"I've been better," he admitted, with his natural arrogance intact.

In front of them, Thelma Claymore, the preacher's wife, turned enough to spy him through her pop-bottle glasses, reached, and patted his knee in approval with a kindly smile. "I feel so bad for all of them. . . I'm glad you were there for Valerie when it hit her. I think she's only been hanging on by a thread."

Meg commented. "I'm sure they're all taking it hard."

By her bland tone, Isaac wondered how much she knew about that episode two years past. They'd never talked about it, but then, Valerie had begun hanging out at the Diner regularly that spring . . . and Meg and Hazel were friends. Not likely Hazel had kept those details to herself, not when sharing them would protect a single male neighbor with whom she maintained a friendly feud.

Alas, the funeral director stepped up to the waiting podium, and the conversations ebbed, with stragglers finding seats or taking positions on the sidelines. A packed house, to be sure, but Gilbert Humphrey, third-generation mortician, took it in stride. Short and portly, the fellow poised with his unnaturally slender fingers twined on the podium as if in prayer. When the audience quieted, save for a snivel and cough, he began simply. "On behalf of the Farnsworth family, I'd like to thank you all for coming to extend your sympathy and support at this most difficult time. After the service here, we'll proceed to Pine Hollow Cemetery. After the interment services, the family asks you all to join them at the Firemen's Hall for a luncheon prepared by the Women's Auxiliary . . ."

As Humphrey continued to speak, introducing Pastor Claymore to officiate, Isaac determined he would deliver Meg to the hall and beg off paying further homage to a gentleman he barely knew. Even after five years, he was considered an outsider and happy to be so. Picking a small random rural town in Pennsylvania U.S.A. had seemed like a fine idea . . . and who was he trying to fool? Nothing in his life had ever been random. He'd been born under one of those dark stars, where the fates had aligned in a wicked paradox to mess with the natural order of life—his life. He'd chosen Bentwood with

purpose, and as his gaze trailed to the shiny bronze box front and center, a prickle lifted down his spine.

Above that box, the gray haze had thickened, nearly obliterating the paisley print on the curtains behind the casket. If he tried—he refused to try. Whatever remained hidden inside that gray wall could remain hidden. He refused to acknowledge the presence of visitors from some blasted astral plane sitting atop that shiny box and chatting as if shooting the breeze . . .

They were not gathered en masse nor shooting the breeze atop Victor Farnsworth's mangled corpse. Only Victor, in all his mangled glory . . . for a split second, Isaac saw the red-stained coveralls sagging off the broad bloodied shoulders, the sadness in the drooping eyes, the twist of pain in the beard-stubbed lips. The fellow rested sidesaddle on the casket as he'd once sat on a porch rail, and he stared at Isaac now, as he had then, merely awaiting the end of the negotiations. He'd wanted that bowl for his wife—had likely begun the haggling with that end goal in mind, no matter Isaac mentioning silver as the traditional 25th-anniversary gift. Not a romantic, their Victor Farnsworth—but his wife liked that bowl. And loved the gift, Isaac knew. Which had nothing to do with Victor calling her to the front porch and thrusting the bowl in her hands with his gruff, 'Happy anniversary.' Definitely no romantic, this fourth-generation farmer . . . nor much of a haggler. The Griswold skillet had been worth more than the crystal bowl, but the expression etched on Victor's haggard gray face wasn't accusing Isaac of skinning him. Victor wanted something though—

The image vanished, and Isaac nearly cursed aloud over the lingering insanity in his mind. At times, he wondered about that—his sanity. He probably should have remained institutionalized for most of his natural life. He knew enough about most people's reality to judge his unnatural existence and curse the black forces to condone his conception.

Pastor Daniel Claymore had begun speaking, railing to the heavens for taking Victor from his loving family. For such a slim, slight fellow, his voice carried with the timbre of a tent-star evangelist, not quite reaching fire and

brimstone status but close enough when he spoke of the dead. A fine family man, Claymore professed and continued to mention the salt of the earth and sowing his fields like God, sowing His holy word.

What one had to do with the other, Isaac wasn't quite following. Victor was no saint. Had not likely attended more than a Christmas mass in any of the half-dozen churches or religious venues in Bentwood, despite his wife's affinity for faith.

His gaze listing to the bowed brown bun in the first row, Isaac recalled the ritual Sunday visits. Cora had never learned to drive, she'd confided to him once. Cal or Vic Jr. dropped her off in town on Sunday mornings and picked her up at the Diner every Sunday afternoon. Whether she was one of the faithful or merely needed an excuse to socialize once a week remained a mystery. As Isaac had heard and gleaned for himself over these past five years, she was a far cry from a socialite. By comparison, Hazel Handler was a social butterfly, and that octogenarian could barely walk between her gout and arthritic joints.

With the tension coiled through him despite his internal attempts at distraction, Isaac twitched only slightly in surprise as Meg's slender fingers curled over his fist on his thigh. In a glance aside, he managed a quivering smirk, knowing it was too late to deny his idiosyncrasies. She'd seen enough to judge him off balance, and by God's grace—or her own—she didn't hold it against him. Understanding touched her eyes, and her faint smile offered reassurance as if she grasped his discomfort within this charged atmosphere. She might not know a thing about his life before he arrived in Bentwood, but she'd breached his defenses to become one of the few people he considered a friend.

As if she'd spoken aloud, her words carried, 'I should never have asked him to come in here . . .'

Masking his curiosity behind his lash-shaded green eyes, Isaac wondered what she might know about him to chasten herself for such an innocent request. She rarely asked a thing of him. Not physically—although he'd

sometimes arrived in time to help her move crates or unload a pallet of flour. Not mentally or emotionally—although she'd often called him to join her for dinner when he could use some company. That he was most often considered a hermit since he was still a trifle young to be called eccentric remained a well-known fact. Between her, Tim, and Donna, he rarely spent over three days left to his own devices. Most Friday nights found him in Crowley's Bar and Grill or the Night Owl Pub, if not engaged in a serious game of 5 Card Stud in Tim's den, otherwise known as Tim's Cove. They could usually count on Chief Sam Hayward and officers Jason Simmons and Jack Riley to join them for a rowdy evening. Hanging out with three of Bentwood's finest had proven beneficial on those frequent occasions when Isaac stretched the legs of one of his sports cars. Safer, and easier on the wallet to forfeit a hundred bucks in a poker game than to pay the fines or lose his license when his lead foot overrode his good sense.

'I'm not asking him to take me to the cemetery . . . I'll just have him drop me at the Firemen's Hall . . . I can always say how I need to help out in the kitchen over there . . .'

Apparently, he wasn't hiding his discomfort well. Either that, or Meg had developed a sixth sense over the past several years, and that wasn't altogether impossible. As much as he tried to contain the monster, the bastard tended to break free . . . and he might have overstayed his welcome in Bentwood. Things could begin happening.

His heart thumped a leaden beat as he listened to Pastor Claymore's sermon winding down. In a slow scan of the surrounding heads, his heartache grew. He would miss this—the sense of neighborhood and family, and the camaraderie—nearly as much as he would miss Tim, Donna, and their little ones. DeeDee had barely begun to walk when she'd begun calling him Uncle Sax, and Tee had only been two months old when Isaac had first gazed upon his rounded cherub cheeks and immense bright eyes.

Feeling as if he'd already departed, his gaze distracted to find Jen's livid blue eyes watching him across a sea of wavering gray images and familiar

faces. He might even miss her for a minute, although he too often attracted his share of women just like her, loose and easy, with very liberal—or nonexistent—moral codes. Sexually frustrated or depraved, he had never been, not since bedding his first whore at thirteen.

He wasn't closing his shop early today, although, by the promise swirling in Jen's intent blue gaze, Elaine would man the shop solo for a few hours.

Meg's hand squeezed his fist, drawing his gaze to find the subdued amusement in her eyes as if she'd read his every thought. Leaning, drawing him to meet her halfway, she whispered in his ear. "Best be turning down the heat, honey, or that gal's liable to be sitting on your lap before the Reverend finishes up his sermon."

Flashing an innocent smile, he returned the whisper. "I haven't done a thing."

"Honey, just you showing up here in that fancy jacket has likely set a few hearts throbbing even without all that silver glitter."

"I knew I should have worn jeans," he muttered and caught Meg stifling a laugh and dipping her twinkling eyes as she withdrew. He might need a good romp in the sheets before this day was done. Things moved in the mist. Images, gliding or meandering, shifting and slashing . . . and the four prongs arrowed ahead, striking with a vengeance.

Victor Farnsworth—'Good wholesome family man,' as Pastor Claymore had professed—was the first.

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