

VII

EVERYTHING YOU THINK YOU KNOW ABOUT GHOSTS IS WRONG. Dead wrong. Here stood no ectoplasmic transparency, no wavering will-o'-the-wisp in a cotton sheet. He looked . . . substantial. But seeing isn't believing. Feeling is. And oh, I felt him. Hard, callused, long-fingered hands with a potency only hinted at held on to mine as if life, or something like that, depended on it. The energy of his touch shot straight into my blood.

"My name," he spoke, "is Sinclair Youngblood Powers, and I was put to death on this very spot in the year of Our Lord 1769."

Which would explain the outfit. Tan frock coat and a collared shirt of coarse linen, neither one manufactured in China for Abercrombie & Fitch. I could appreciate a fashion risk, but was still, literally, spooked. *Fine*, I told myself, *he's a ghost* . . .

but he's also a guy. I knew how to talk to guys, flippant and flirty or matter-of-fact.

"I know," I said, levelly as possible, him being a convicted murderer and all. "I was there . . . recently."

That threw him—the way his head tilted, eyes darkening further—but he played it off. "Indeed?" His tone formal, the civility seeming to war with a savage kinesis that scared but also stirred me. "Extraordinary. You are quite the witch, my lady."

The word—witch, not lady—made me wince. Pesky psychic affliction aside, I never dabbled in any craft more formidable than crochet. "No . . .," I said, but with little conviction, since there was no denying I had just conjured him, firm and steadfast in his own frame—six feet, maybe six one. Since I'm pretty tall, I only had to angle my chin to study those eyes, finally in his boy's face, large, heavy-lidded, with uncharted depths.

"Oh, but yes," he refuted, upper left quadrant of his mouth lifting higher than the right as he revealed that white, wide smile—fitting, finally, in his boy's mouth, full on the bottom and carved on top. His teeth tilted slightly toward and away from one another—orthodontia a couple of centuries down the pike—which lent that wolfish quality. "I hear they expect a bountiful harvest in eye of newt this year."

What the . . . ? Great—a raised-from-the-grave comedian. "You are so funny," I deadpanned. It was the terror talking.

"And you, Miss Dice, are ravishing."

After our sprint I had my doubts, but I know how to accept a compliment. “Thank you,” I said, not surprised he knew my name; he must’ve picked up a few things hanging out with Pen for a month. “But just Dice will do.” Then I narrowed my sights. “So what’s your deal? You make a habit out of squatting in unsuspecting jock chicks?” He looked at me like I spoke Martian—he hadn’t picked up that much. “Let me rephrase: Is it your common practice to send your soul into the young ladies of Western Connecticut?”

“No, not at all,” he said at once, earnest as an arrow now. “This has been my sole opportunity in . . . tell me, my lady, exactly *when* are we?”

How would he know? Pen was no avid newspaper reader. I gave Sinclair the day, the date, the year, and let it sink in.

“*Whoa* . . . ah, is that the expression?”

“Mm-hmm,” I said. “‘Whoa’ would sum it up.” Ghost Boy was a quick study.

“I knew I’d come far but, again, whoa. Your manners in this age . . . the way you comport yourselves . . . the way you dress.” He gazed at me appreciatively. “I shall enjoy it here . . . now.”

There was a sense of entitlement to his tone. “Welcome to the twenty-first century, Sinclair Youngblood Powers,” I told him archly.

“Forgive me, my lady.” He was suddenly humble. “You mustn’t think I take advantage of your good grace . . .”

“Hey, it’s not *my* body you’ve moved into. It’s Pen’s.”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “Pen.” I checked to see if he’d glaze over with lust or turn all puppy-dog—the two ways guys generally respond to mention of Pen. Instead he grew somber. I guess he knew the girl differently; his predicament when it came to her was, to say the least, unique. His lips pressed thoughtfully, and his brows, which were thick but not bushy, drew toward each other. A lock of black hair fell forward on his forehead. How human he seemed just then, how almost vulnerable.

“Hey . . .,” I said. “Sinclair? I didn’t mean to be rude. When you said I would understand you . . . I want to, I do.”

Just then came a muted flapping, and I turned to watch an owl soar from a catty-corner tree and snatch from the open green some piece of prey—a mouse, a blind mole, a chipmunk. It was so fast, so perfunctory, so cutthroat, and so purely natural, it made me gasp, and as the intake of breath snapped my lungs, Sinclair pulled me closer. He, too, saw the night hunter make off with supper struggling between its talons. I turned back. His eyes were unreadable. I wondered what he saw in mine.

After a bit, he said, “It’s something of a saga. My story, that is.”

One of the benefits of largely absent parents: no one to enforce curfew. Although what Aunt Lainie and Uncle Gordon would say when Pen failed to appear at the appointed hour, I could only imagine. If I cared to. Which I didn’t. “I have all night.”

“Yes, but we can’t very well stand about all night,” Sinclair reasoned. “I’d like to remove my coat, lay it on the ground so you might sit. Which would require us to . . . you see, I believe it’s vital that we touch, if I’m to—”

“No problem,” I said with sudden assurance. “We can let go one hand, if we hold tight with our minds.”

And so we commenced this crazy minuet. We disengaged (my left hand, his right), and as I helped him lose the coat on one side, I noted the breadth of his shoulders and back. Then we re-engaged (my left, his right) and disengaged (my right, his left) to free him fully, laughing haltingly all the while.

“Very well, let us arrange the garment here on the grass . . .”

We nearly bonked heads with that maneuver, but we got it done, took both hands again, and knelt.

“Are you comfortable?” Sinclair asked.

“Reasonably,” I said.

“I could move this way—”

“Or I could—”

We laughed again. And then we were quiet. Until I said, “All right.”

And Sinclair Youngblood Powers proceeded to tell me everything.

