

COLD SIGHT

EXTRASENSORY AGENTS

LESLIE PARRISH



A SIGNET ECLIPSE BOOK

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Prologue

Thursday, 5:45 a.m.

Until last night, nobody had ever read Vonnie Jackson a bedtime story.

Though she'd lived for seventeen years, she couldn't remember a single fairy tale, one whispered nightie-night, or a soft kiss on the cheek before being tucked in. Her mother had always been well in her first bottle, her second joint, or her third john of the evening long before Vonnie fell asleep. Bedtime usually meant hiding under the bed or burrowing beneath a pile of dirty clothes in the closet, praying Mama didn't pass out, leaving one of her customers to go prowling around in their tiny apartment.

They definitely hadn't wanted to read to her. Nobody had.

So to finally hear innocent childhood tales from a psychotic monster who intended to kill her was almost as unfair as her ending up in this nightmare to begin with.

"Are you listening to me?" His pitch rose, her captor's voice growing almost mischievous as he added, "Did you fall asleep, little Yvonne?" But that mischief was laced with so much evil that it almost seemed to be a living, breathing thing, as real as the stained, scratchy mattress on which she lay or the metal chains holding her down upon it.

Most times, such as now, the man who'd kidnapped her spoke in a thick, falsetto whisper, his tone happily wicked, like a jolly elf who'd taken up slaughter for the sheer pleasure of it. Every once in a while, though, he got angry and dropped the act. Once or twice, when he'd said a word or two in his normal thick, deep voice, she'd felt a hint of familiarity flit across her mind, as if she'd heard him before, recently. She could never focus on it, though; never place the memory.

Maybe she was crazy. Maybe she just recognized the twisted, full-of-rage quality that made men such as him tick. She'd seen that kind all her life. She'd just never landed in the hands of a homicidal one. Until now.

"Sweet little girl. So weary, aren't you? I suppose you fell asleep, hmm?"

She shook her head. Even that slight movement sent knives of pain stabbing through her skull and into her brain. Whether that was from the drugs he'd been shoving down her throat or from the punches to the face, she couldn't say. Probably both. The pills he'd given her hadn't made the pain go away. Instead they'd intensified it, brought her senses higher until every word was a thundering crash, every hint of light in her eyes as blinding as the sun. And every cruel touch agonizing.

The first beating had hurt. The subsequent ones had nearly sent her out of her mind. Only the solid steel core of determination deep inside her—which had kept her going despite so many obstacles throughout her life—had kept her from giving in to the urge to beg him to just kill her and put her out of her misery.

"You must want to go to sleep, though."

"No," she whispered. "Go on. Don't stop. I like it."

Oh, no, she didn't want to fall asleep, as welcome as it might have been. Because it was while she slept, helpless against sheer exhaustion, lulled by his singsong bedtime stories or unable to fight the effects of the drugs, that he came in and *did* things to her. She'd awakened once to find him taking

pictures of her, naked and posed on the cot. Though his face had been masked—one of those creep maniacally smiling “king” masks from the fast-food commercials—he’d rechained her and scurried out as soon as he realized she was fully conscious. As if he didn’t have the balls to risk letting her get a good look at him.

Maybe he’s afraid you’ll escape and be able to identify him.

Yeah. And maybe a pack of wolves would rip him to pieces in his own backyard tomorrow. But she doubted it.

One of these times, she suspected she would wake up and find herself in the middle of a rape. So no, she did not want to fall asleep.

“I don’t know—we’ve read quite a lot. I’m worried you might have nightmares. Did you, last night after hearing about the little piggies who got turned into bacon and sausage patties?”

She suspected the story didn’t end like that. If it did, parents who called it a bedtime story had a lot to answer for. As for her nightmares . . . Well, she was living one, wasn’t she?

Vonnie swallowed, her thick, dry tongue almost choking her. “I’ll be fine. Please read to me some more.”

The words echoed in the damp, musty basement room in which she’d been imprisoned for three days now. Or four? She had been unable to keep track, even though she had noted the sunshine coming and going again through the tiny window in her cell. She had been too out of it, couldn’t make herself focus.

How long had it been since the night he’d grabbed her? And when had that been? *Think!*

Monday. He’d attacked her while she walked the long way home from a nighttime event at her new high school, to which she’d just transferred because they offered more AP classes than her old one. Mistake number one. Her old school had been a block from her crappy home.

“Well, if you’re sure, I suppose we can read a little more about those naughty children.”

Knowing he expected it, she managed to murmur, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, dear. I’m glad you like this story. It’s no wonder their parents didn’t want Hansel and Gretel—awful, spoiled brats, weren’t they? Most parents hate their children anyway, but these two were especially bad.”

If it wouldn’t have caused her so much pain, she might have laughed at that. Because he was saying something he thought would hurt her, when, in truth, he’d just reinforced what she already knew. Her mama had made that clear every day of her life.

Most parents would be proud of their kid for doing well in school, but not hers. All she’d said was that Vonnie had been stupid to transfer. Stupid to go to the evening event. Stupid and uppity, thinking getting into the National Honor Society mattered a damn when she lived on the corner of Whoreville and Main.

Normally she’d have been at work serving chicken wings and fending off gropey drunk guys by the time of night on a Monday. But no, she’d had to go to the meeting, had to act as if she was no different from the smart, rich white kids with their trust funds and their sports cars. She’d been cocky, insisting it was no big deal to walk home alone after dark through an area of the Boro where no smart girl ever walked alone after dark. Not these days, not with the Ghoul on the loose and more girls missing from her neighborhood every month.

The Ghoul—the paper had at first said he was real, then that he wasn’t. Vonnie knew the truth. He was real, all right. She just wasn’t going to live long enough to tell anybody.

“Hansel and Gretel didn’t know that the starving birdies of the forest were eating up their breadcrumb trail, waiting for the children to die so they could poke out their eyes,” he read, not noticing her

inattention. "It was dark and their time to find their way home was running out."

Time. It had ceased to have any meaning at all. Minutes and hours had switched places: minutes lengthened by pain, hours shortened by the terror of what would happen every time he came back from wherever it was he went when he left her alone in the damp, cold dark.

And Vonnie knew, deep down, that her time was running out, too.

"Did you hear me?" he snapped.

She swallowed. "Yeah."

"Good. Don't you fall asleep. I'm reading this for you, not for myself, you know."

She suspected he wasn't reading at all, merely Wes Craven-ing up a real bedtime story.

"Now, wasn't it lucky that they were able to find shelter?" he added. "Mm, a house made of gingerbread and gumdrops and licorice. Imagine that. Do you like sweets, pretty girl? Want me to bring you some candy? Sticky, gooey candy?"

She swallowed, the very thought of it making her sick. Not that she wasn't hungry, starving even. But the foul-smelling air surrounding her, filling her lungs and her nose, made the thought of food nauseating. She didn't like to think about the other smells down here—the reek of rotten meat, the stench of human waste. And something metallic and earthy, a scent that seemed to coat her tongue when she breathed through her mouth.

Blood. At least, that was what she suspected had created the rust-colored stains on the cement floor.

Those stains had been the first things she'd noticed when she regained consciousness after she'd been kidnapped. And ever since, they'd reiterated what she already knew: This guy had killed before and he intended to kill her. It wasn't a matter of if; only when.

There was no escape—she was chained, drugged, and had been terrified into utter submission. She had no idea where she was, or when it was, or if the door led to a way out or just another chamber of horrors.

Vonnie didn't even try to comfort herself with thoughts of escape. It did no good to pump herself up with the memories of all the other times she'd gotten herself out of difficult situations—put the blame through either her own gullibility or by her mama's greed.

Don't go there, girl. Just as much darkness down that path.

No, she didn't want to think those thoughts. Not if they were going to be among the last ones of her life. Because so far, at least, this nightmare hadn't included sexual assault.

"Well, maybe the candy shouldn't be too sticky," he said, tutting a little, like a loving, concerned parent, not that she had firsthand experience with one. "I know your jaw must hurt from when you made me hit you the other day. Maybe I could chew it up, make it nice and soft for you, then spit it into your mouth just like a mama bird with her little chick."

Though she hadn't figured there was anything left in her stomach, she still heaved a mouthful of vomit. But she forced herself to swallow it down. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing that his mere words had made her sick. Nor could she let him know just how disgusting she found the thought. Giving the monster ideas to try on her when she finally did pass out was a stupid thing to do, and Vonnie Jackson might be beaten and chained, she might be poor and the daughter of a drug-addicted prostitute, but nobody had ever called her stupid.

"Why was she doing it, do you suppose? Why did she want them to eat all those sweets?" When she didn't reply, his singsong voice rose to a screech. "Answer me!"

"Fattening them up," she said, the words riding a puff of air across her swollen lips.

"Yes! You're so clever; that's what they say about you. Such a smart, clever girl who was going to escape her pathetic childhood." He *tsked*, sounding almost sad. "And you nearly made it—didn't you?"

Yvonne? Oh, you came so close! High school graduation next May, then off you'd go to college on one of your scholarships, never to see your slut mother or the hovel you call home again. All that work, all that effort. Wasted."

She didn't answer, didn't even flinch, not wanting him to see that his words stabbed at her, hurting almost as much as his fists. Because getting out was all Vonnie had worked for, all she had dreamed for as long as she could remember. And the fact that this filthy monster had taken that chance from her made her want to scream at the injustice.

"Ah, well, back to our story. Yes, indeed, the witch was fattening them up," her captor said. "But do you know why?" He hummed a strange tune, repeating himself in discordant song. "Why, why, why? Do you know why?"

Her eyes remained open as she listened to that crooning voice deliberately trying to lull her into much-needed sleep. Her body wanted to give in to it, to let go. If she thought there was a chance she might never wake up, she would have gladly embraced the chance.

But she wasn't that lucky. And she knew she would regret it when she awoke and found out what he wanted to do to her. So Vonnie forced herself to shake her throbbing head, knowing the sharper the pain the less she'd be inclined to give in. "Why?"

He laughed softly, not answering. Just as well. She probably didn't want to know the answer to the question, given the way he was turning these nightly stories into tales from his twisted crypt of mind.

"You'll just have to wait and see. Patience, sweet . . ."

His sibilant words were interrupted by the sound of banging coming from somewhere above. Before Vonnie could even process it, she heard a clang of metal. The small sliding panel in the door, through which he watched her, talked to her, and tormented her, was slammed shut. The narrow column of illumination that had shone through it, one single beam of blazing light in the darkness, had been chopped away like the head off a snake.

Another bang from above. She tried to focus on it, tried not to let the relief of his leaving make her give in to exhaustion. That noise, the way he'd reacted to it, was important, though it took a second for her to process why.

Then she got it. He had been startled. The creature had been surprised out of his lair by something unexpected. Or someone?

Oh God, please.

Hope bloomed, relentless and hot. What if someone else was out there? For the first time in days she realized he hadn't taken her to the bowels of hell but to somewhere real, a place that other people could come upon. A mailman, a neighbor? Anyone who could help her?

An internal voice tried to dampen her hopes. That might not have been someone banging on the door at all, but merely a loose shutter or a tree branch. Besides, it was dark out, maybe even the middle of the night—no mailman worked these hours.

The police. Maybe they're looking for me.

It was a long shot. But long shots were all she had right now. "Help me. Somebody, help me," she whispered. "Please, I'm here!"

She didn't think about what he'd do when he came back. Didn't stop for one second to wonder whether he'd find some new way to punish her.

No. Vonnie Jackson simply began to scream as if her life depended on it.

Chapter 1

Thursday, 6:05 a.m.

Aidan McConnell awoke to the smell of gingerbread and the sharp, piercing sound of a woman's scream.

The scream ended the moment he opened his eyes. The smell did not.

It took him a minute to place the scent, which had invaded his head and his dreams as he tried to grab some sleep just before dawn on Thursday. At first, in those early moments between asleep and awake, he assumed he'd been dreaming of some long-forgotten holiday visit to his grandmother's house; her kitchen had always been rich with all the delicious aromas any sugar-deprived kid could desire. But when he sat up on his couch and realized the cloying, sickeningly sweet odor of ginger and spice was truly filling his every breath, he knew he wasn't dreaming.

He was connecting.

"Damn it," he muttered, not wanting this, not now, not again. Not so soon after last night's mental invasion. Bacon, for God's sake. The reek of fatty, greasy bacon had seemed to permeate every inch of air in his house a few hours ago, and now it was gingerbread.

Forcing himself to focus on his other senses, he stared at his huge, antique walnut desk, which sat in the dead center of the room. Its surface was hidden as completely as the top of a freshly buried casket. Files, notepads, research books, his laptop—they consumed almost every inch of space. A few random items finished the job: A coffee mug that read, "Psychics do it when they're not even there." A colorful sand pail filled with pencils in varying lengths. A paperweight. An old-fashioned wind-up clock that dinged violently when the alarm went off.

Aidan stared; he focused; he thought about the coolness of the brass on the clock and the heft of the stone base of the paperweight and the way freshly brewed coffee tasted when sipped out of that mug. He thought of the thousands of doodled sketches he'd made with those pencils, trying to capture the images he'd seen while mentally connecting with someone before they shortened and finally disappeared from his mind like a shadow at high noon.

It didn't work.

Spice. Cinnamon. Sugar. But bloated, vile, thick, and putrid like the remnants of a Thanksgiving pie buried in a garbage heap with rotting turkey and moldy stuffing.

He focused harder, rubbing the tips of his fingers across the grain of the leather couch, craning to hear the faint tick of that clock, staring at the desk, ordering his other senses to combine and smooth out the smell. But still the stench enveloped him. He could taste it now, the sting of too much ginger, the vile, rancid sugar melting on his tongue. His stomach rebelled.

Closing his eyes, he gritted his teeth, resorting to his oldest tricks against the familiar invasion in his psyche. He visualized a sea of sturdy cement building blocks. One by one, he began piling them up, erecting the psychic barrier between his mind and the one with which he was unwilling to connect. Building mental walls in order to protect himself wasn't just an expression when it came to Aidan; it was pure survival. He'd have gone insane long ago if he hadn't learned how to protect himself.

His maternal grandmother—the one who'd slipped him usually denied sweets—had taught him the trick when he was eleven or twelve. Teaching him how to survive in a world that didn't like kids who were "different," she'd given him just about every coping skill he had. She had been strong-willed, had fought for him when nobody else would and Aidan was too young to do it for himself. They made quite a team. The old woman had been different, strange, had seen things she'd never truly seen, known things she couldn't possibly know.

Like him.

In another era, she would have been burned as a witch. In modern-day Georgia, however, she'd been deemed a quack and hidden away like the proverbial skeleton in the family's closet. She was seldom spoken of, but would never allow herself to be completely banished. When she felt like it, she inserted herself into her family's lives, whether they wanted her there or not.

That was lucky for him. Because she had been the only one Aidan could talk to about his unexpected, unwanted abilities. The only one who'd understood and helped him. She was also the only one who had never called him a demon from hell when he was eight years old.

That'd been his oh-so-devout parents. Who said radical Southern Baptists didn't know how to raise a kid right? They'd reacted by locking him away with his grandmother . . . who made the best gingerbread. *That smell.*

"No, build, damn it!"

He mentally built—row by row, layer by layer, foot by foot. His head ached, but he forced every brain cell into submission. The cement wall was almost touching the clouds by the time the spiciness stench began to gradually dissipate like steam off a mirror. Until finally he could breathe again without smelling anything but the normal leather of the couch and the faintly old air of the closed-house in which he lived.

He could also think again. Unfortunately, his thoughts went to one place: Who was it? Who had he met, touched, interacted with in the past? Whose thoughts were filled with stink and rotting garbage. And gingerbread. Why was that person's mind consumed with it—so consumed that Aidan was overwhelmed by their thoughts, which translated into physical scents, from far away?

He didn't doubt he'd met the person with whom he was connecting. He'd touched him or her, perhaps just a faint brush of hand against arm as they passed on the street, but they had physically connected. The sensory reactions were never this strong without real, personal contact. Studying a photograph or holding an item used by someone he was seeking might bring a quick sensation, a breathful of odor, a flash of mental imagery. But for it to go on like this morning's nightmare meant skin-to-skin contact.

Thank God the scream hadn't rung in his ears for as long as the stench had filled his nostrils. *Maybe it wasn't connected.* Perhaps the scream had merely been a last remnant of one of his own forgotten nightmares. He preferred to think that, not wanting to imagine the scream was really happening anywhere else but in his own mind. Aidan didn't want to picture the screamer in agony, desperate for help. *His help.*

"Forget it," he muttered, not letting himself go down that path. He didn't do that anymore. Once crucified, twice shy. He did everything he could to stay in his own head these days, and stay out of everyone else's. Where he'd once used psychic ability, he was now quite content to use his own highly-tuned sense of intuition and reasonable deduction.

Right now, he reasonably deduced that the smell had been noticed and thought about by somebody he'd briefly met, somebody who was walking by a garbage dump. And the scream was a product of his own tortured memories running rampant in his dreams. Period. He refused to consider any other

options.

The sudden ringing of the phone came as a jarring surprise. First because it was so early, and second because he so seldom received phone calls. He liked it that way, having isolated himself in this old house in Granville when he'd decided to get out of Savannah after everything went down so badly last year. He rarely shared the number, and when he saw who was calling he heaved a heavy sigh. So much for staying out of the mind-hopping business. Because one of the few people in the world who could occasionally rope him into working missing persons cases again was on the other end of the phone line.

Julia Harrington hadn't given up trying to get him to come back to work for her, at least on a part-time basis. She knew him well enough to know he still had his fingers in a few pies out there, that he couldn't completely stay away from the world of crime solving, even if he did it without the "woo-woo" stuff, as she called it.

With this morning's incident fresh in his mind, he was tempted to just let the machine pick up. If he did, however, he'd be letting himself in for more calls, every half hour, around the clock, until he finally answered, and it didn't take any psychic abilities to know that. They'd played this game before. His former colleague was relentless about getting what she wanted.

"Hello, Julia," he said as soon as he lifted the phone to his mouth.

"How did you know it was me? Admit it—you're doing your psychic thing again, right?"

"Ever heard of a little invention called caller ID?"

"Oh, that. How mundane."

"Welcome to the twenty-first century."

Julia was one of the few people he kept in touch with from his old life. When everything had gone to hell with his last case, she'd been right there, standing beside him, ready to fight for his reputation if he asked her to.

He hadn't asked her to. Though he'd certainly appreciated the offer, Julia had her own issues. Even cop or no, she now owned a company called eXtreme Investigations, and led a team of psychic detectives. So she wasn't exactly the most staunch and upstanding of character references. Whenever her name came up, the media was almost as vicious toward her as they were toward Aidan. Almost. Had she been working with him on that last case, she might now be living in the old house next door, just as wary, just as vilified.

"So, whatcha working on?"

"I don't do that anymore; remember?"

"Yeah, uh-huh, sure you don't. I thought about you the other day when I saw a story out of Charlotte about an 'anonymous tip' that led police to the killer of a local carpenter."

He stiffened, wondering how she could possibly have connected that to him.

"Morgan."

Ah. Morgan. Of course. Julia's business partner definitely got around.

"Reasonable deduction," he admitted grudgingly.

"Nothing supernatural about it. I merely hacked into the case file, read the witness statements, and found some inconsistencies. It was all right there."

"Just can't stay out of it, can you?"

"If by 'it' you mean dabbling in cold-crime solving, I'll admit that I haven't lost my interest. But for the rest? Hell, yes, I can stay out of it. So you might as well not even start."

"Hold on, before you go getting your excuses lined up about why you can't come back to the real world, and have to keep wearing your hair shirt and indulging in self-flagellation—"

“That was a mouthful.”

“I’m just saying, don’t panic. I’m not calling to beg you to come back to work, or to lure you into working a *special* case, or even to pick your brain.”

He couldn’t deny a flood of relief. She didn’t want him for a job. He’d never worked for her exclusively, but he’d done a lot of contract jobs for Julia when she and her partner were getting eXtreme Investigations off the ground. Since his “retirement” she’d come to him a few times, strictly for advice—so she said—or trying to lure him into work via the back door of consultancy.

But not this time. Which meant she was probably calling to try to reengage him in a social life, like she had a few weeks ago when she and two of her other agents had shown up at his door. Aidan wasn’t the type who enjoyed surprise visits, nor did he ever go to beer-and-wings joints like the one to which they’d dragged him. Despite the fact that he’d almost had a good time, he had no desire to repeat the experience. Because even here in Granville, where he was a newcomer and a stranger, people knew him by reputation—and oh, how they did like to stare.

“Aidan?”

“Okay, so why are you calling?” he asked, not sure he wanted to know.

“I got a call last night from a reporter.”

“We don’t use that word anymore, remember?”

“Oh, sorry. I mean, I got a call last night from a lying, manipulative media cockroach.”

“Better.”

“It’s about the Remington case.” The words sounded like they’d ridden out of her mouth on a deep sigh, as if she hated to be the bearer of bad news.

“Wonderful.” Aidan lifted a hand to his face and rubbed at the corners of his eyes. Of all the names he didn’t want to hear ever again, Remington topped the list. “Go on.”

“He wanted to get in touch with you to see if you’d heard Caroline Remington tried to commit suicide last week, on the anniversary.”

“Jesus.” Aidan sagged against the back of the couch, a well of emotions surging through him. Anger, pity, frustration. Regret. Such regret. It was like his worst nightmare, only it just kept going and he couldn’t wake up from it.

“I know; it’s awful.”

He’d never even met Mrs. Remington; she’d been well protected by her husband from the minute their son disappeared. But from the pictures he’d seen in the paper, she looked like a pretty, fragile woman whose world had been shattered, leaving her confused and heartbroken.

“Is she all right?”

“Apparently. She took some pills, but her husband found her in time. I thought you’d want to know in case the cockroach from the morning news manages to track you down.”

Finding out his general location probably wouldn’t be too hard. He hadn’t made it a state secret that he was moving to Granville, fifty miles west of Savannah. Or that he was giving up his role as a prominent author, speaker, and expert on psychic phenomenon to become a hermit who growled at the world whenever it dared to intrude on him.

But at least his number was unpublished and his address unlisted. Anyone wanting to reach him would have to do some digging, and hopefully the reporter wouldn’t bother.

Wishful thinking. In his experience, there was no place too low for most reporters, no dirt they wouldn’t claw through, no muck they didn’t want to rake up.

“I hate that this is coming up again,” Julia said. “I’m really sorry.”

“I figured it would, with the one-year mark. Besides, I’m not the one you should feel sorry for.”

Caroline Remington is.”

First, for the loss of her six-year-old son, and second, for being married to a controlling manipulative bastard like Theodore Remington.

Thrusting the anger away, he forced himself to think of the fact that, even though he was a rich spoiled, overbearing asshole, Remington was also a grieving father. He had good reason to bear a grudge against Aidan. Whatever petty revenge he'd taken, using his contacts and power to make Aidan's life hell, it had been justified. After all, in Remington's mind, Aidan had been responsible for his son's death. And Aidan couldn't entirely disagree with him.

“Aidan?”

He sighed heavily. “As if I have anything to add on that subject? Haven't I said enough to and about that family?”

“It wasn't your fault.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He'd heard those words a thousand times in the past twelve months, since the Remington boy had been found dead, trapped inside an old antique freezer in his own grandmother's garage. At least, he'd heard them from his friends and colleagues.

From strangers, the media, the boy's parents? Well, their words weren't nearly as comforting as their attitude not nearly as understanding.

“You are not responsible; it was a tragic accident.”

“An accident,” he repeated.

Maybe. Probably.

Or maybe not. Sometimes he wondered. Though, of course, he couldn't voice his curiosity now. He couldn't ask the questions the investigators should have asked back then. Because he had zero credibility and nobody gave a damn what a disgraced former psychic thought.

“What you do isn't an exact science.”

“No, but if I had stayed out of it, maybe—just maybe—somebody would have thought about how much the kid loved to play hide-and-seek, actually done a proper search and found him in time, rather than going on a wild-goose chase into every orchard in eastern Georgia.”

All because when he'd focused all his thoughts and psychic energy on young Teddy Remington he'd smelled peaches. He'd also felt the brittle spray of rain on his face, the press of hard wood against his back, and the sting of splinters puncturing his skin.

“You're repeating your own bad press,” Julia insisted. “You didn't send them running around like a bunch of idiots. You told them what you were feeling and Ted Remington decided what it meant—that his son had wandered into one of the local orchards and gotten lost. You didn't put that boy in the freezer.”

“I sure as hell didn't help him get out of it,” he replied, hearing his own bitterness.

“Look, if the cops had been doing their jobs, it wouldn't have mattered if you had visions of a convicted pedophile snatching the kid.” Her righteous anger exploded through the phone line snapping and hot. “Searching everyplace he could have gone, including his own damn grandmother's house down the street, was the first order of business. They should have been fired for letting Ted Remington's money and influence browbeat them in the wrong direction.”

They should have been fired. And *he* should have been run out of town on a rail.

At least one of those *should haves* had come true. Not that he'd actually been run out of Savannah—he'd left of his own free will. But the effect was the same—Aidan McConnell was no longer in the psychic business. Never again would he let himself be responsible for the well-being of someone

else's child. Not ever.

~~He'd had misfires before. Like Julia said, it wasn't an exact science. There had always, however,~~ been some bit of truth, some small element that had been correct, just misinterpreted.

But in the Teddy Remington case? Nothing.

The top-opening, chest-type freezer had been ancient, unused for years. It had held no fruit, much less sweet, fragrant peaches, and the garage itself had smelled of nothing but stale air and mothballs. The unit hadn't been plugged in. It contained no moisture at all, so the child certainly hadn't felt the hard, punishing spray of cold water on his face. Rusty metal, sagging plastic—no hardwood, certainly no tree limbs, nothing to cause splinters. All wrong.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. Thanks for the heads-up," he told Julia. "I'll be sure to activate my electric fence and charge up the cattle prod."

"Ha-ha. No torturing members of the press, as tempting a target as they may be."

Considering how brutally the media had dissected him last year, stopping just short of accusing him of murdering a child, they were indeed a tempting target. Still, he said, "Got it."

"We've got a lot of cases, Aidan. Let me know when you're ready to get back to work."

"Let *me* know when you're ready to stop asking."

"Not gonna happen."

A bitter laugh emerged from Aidan's mouth and he shook his head. "Ditto."

Not gonna happen.

Thursday, 8:15 a.m.

As she typed her article on the community playhouse's production of *Annie*, Lexie Nolan somehow managed to refrain from punching her fist through the computer monitor. It took some effort, real willpower. But the urge faded when she reminded herself of a few pertinent truths.

First, it would hurt. She might slice off a finger, which would make typing a real chore.

Second, she wasn't using her own computer; this one was owned by the newspaper for which she worked. Considering the reporting pool for the *Granville Daily Sun* had a sum total of three creaky old desktops for use by the entire staff, she would not only have to pay to replace it, but would greatly inconvenience the other four reporters who worked here.

The main reason, though, was because punching anything—a monitor, a wall, the mayor—wouldn't change the fact that she'd gotten herself into this situation all on her own. It wasn't the PC's fault. Nor was it the fault of those chirpy, perky little orphans singing their guts out in the local musical. It was all her own doing.

She was the one who'd insisted on writing a story she knew would anger a lot of people. The one who'd convinced her editor to let her. The one who'd researched and worked seven days a week and sacrificed any kind of personal life for months. She'd poured her heart and her soul and every intuition she owned into what she'd been sure would be a shocking, sordid tale that would soon draw the eyes of the entire world to this small Georgia town.

She'd been so utterly positive . . . right up until the moment she'd been proven wrong.

So she was also the one who got to watch as her career blew up in her face. Lexie Nolan, the form

big-fish-in-this-little-reporting-pond had been busted down to guppy. She'd been demoted from her position as the hard-news reporter on staff to covering local theater productions and basket bingo fund-raisers.

And it was all on her head.

"Aren't you finished yet?"

Another punch-worthy target popped into her field of vision. But just as she couldn't fling her fist at inanimate objects, she couldn't pummel the smirk off Stan Brightman's face, either. The fact that the other reporter had enjoyed her downfall, and had been the one to most benefit from it, since he was now covering the crime beat for the paper, was just part of the biz. He hadn't stolen her job—she'd handed it to him on a platter of unprovable suspicion, unconfirmed rumor, and pure journalist frenzy.

"I think every little girl in town is in this show. Lots of names to get right or those stage mommies won't be happy."

"Oh, yeah, you definitely wouldn't want to get anything *wrong* in this one."

She forced a tight smile as the obnoxious man, who smelled of the ham-and-eggs special he'd had for breakfast, entered the cubicle. Stan was one of those middle-aged guys who thought a drooping mustache, sideburns, and a comb-over would prevent anyone from noticing his blossoming bald spot. The buttons of his disco-era polyester dress shirt bulged under utter duress.

He'd played the big-newsman-takes-newbie-under-his-wing game six years ago when she'd landed this job, right out of college. When that hadn't worked, he'd started hitting on her. Since that had been a no-go, too, he'd resorted to hating her guts and plotting her downfall.

That was when she'd started mentally thinking of him as S(a)tan.

"I'll be finished with the computer soon," she said, pretending she didn't know he'd come in here only to be a dick.

"No worries; take your time." His voice could serve as the audible definition of smarmy.

Stan clearly delighted in Lexie's fall from grace and she suspected that only the loss of her job would have made him happier. Stan had probably wallpapered his bedroom with copies of the retraction and public apology Lexie had been forced to write for the paper last month.

That retraction had earned her stares of hatred and resentment nearly everywhere she went. She'd terrified an entire townful of people. She'd not only blown her career; she had made herself a pariah in the process. Probably only one other person in Granville was more regularly vilified from under the blow-dryers at the Blow-N-Go Salon or across the aisles at the local churches. Considering that guy was a disgraced psychic who'd moved here from Savannah after being accused of costing a child his life, that wasn't much comfort.

She wondered what the locals would think if they knew how she really felt about what had happened, and her role in it. Because she wasn't the heartless fearmongerer she'd been made out to be. A big part of her had been relieved, hoping deep down that she *had* been wrong, that the missing local teenagers she'd written about were out there somewhere, safe and sound.

Something deep inside her, however, had never fully accepted it. A few questions had been answered, to the satisfaction of most people around here. But Lexie had a lot more. She just wasn't allowed to ask them.

Oh, how they haunted her, even now. Especially now. Because every single night, Lexie still went to bed thinking about those lost girls.

"Lex? I need you in here!"

Saved by the boss. "Guess I gotta go. Computer's all yours."

Rising, she saw by the quick narrowing of Stan's eyes that he didn't like her being called in to Walter's office. ~~Walter Kirby, the editor of the paper, might have bowed under pressure and demoted Lexie, but he hadn't fired her, and she remained his closest confidante on staff.~~

Stan had once floated the rumor that it was because something was going on between them. If he understood anything about their boss, he'd have long since realized that Walter, the father of four daughters, simply stepped into protector mode around young women he viewed as vulnerable. When he'd realized she was being subtly harassed, he'd put the fear of God into S(a)tan, and had taken Lexie under his wing as if she were his own.

So maybe it was quid pro quo. She'd given him her job, but Stan had contributed to the close relationship Lexie now enjoyed with their editor. She blessed that relationship; Walter was the closest thing to a father she had, since her own dad had passed away when she was twenty.

Stan pivoted, pushing past her. "Yeah, boss, I actually needed to talk to you about—"

"Later." Walter crooked a finger at Lexie, beckoning her into his office.

She recognized that stiff finger and Walter's frown. Something was bugging him, but she didn't want to worry. She had been playing the part of Good Girl Friday lately and hadn't done a damn thing to jack up Walter's blood pressure. Or to rescue her own savaged career.

It had been hard, almost painful, but she'd let it all go. Journalistic fervor was well and good, but in this economy, so was being able to pay her rent.

Besides, you were wrong; they're all runaways. Just runaways.

That didn't help. No matter how many times she repeated the mantra in her mind, she never felt any better about having given up on the poor kids whose story she'd tried so hard to tell.

" 'Scuse me, Miz Lexa," a voice said.

Lexie glanced over and realized her anxious, sneakered feet had almost met the business end of a sopping mop, which was being pushed by Kenny, the maintenance guy.

"Whoops. Sorry," she said.

He ducked his head, not meeting her eye, as usual, as if he knew how hard it sometimes was for people to look at him and not reveal the dismay the sight of his face usually wrought. "S'okay. Just be careful. Wouldn't want you to slip and fall. Somebody spilt coffee."

Kenny seemed to operate in his own world and was left alone, either because everyone sensed he was a bit slow, or because of the scars on his wrecked face and hands that made him an object of pity to those around him. The scars and that pity were probably why Walter had given him a part-time job when he'd shown up several months before looking for work.

"Will do. Have a good day, Kenny."

Stepping around Kenny's work area, she entered Walter's office. "Hey, boss." She kicked the door shut behind her, though it wouldn't stop Stan from trying to eavesdrop. The other man was a lurker. She had no doubt he stood right outside the office glaring at the closed door.

"What's up?"

Walter merely gestured toward one of the two stiff, uncomfortable chairs fronting his overloaded desk. Lexie lowered herself into one, but didn't prompt him. Walter always needed to bluster a bit before coming to the point.

"Stubborn kids," he mumbled as he walked around the desk and sat in his well-worn chair. He emitted a long groan as he leaned back, lacing his fingers together on his barrel chest.

"Problems at home?"

"Would it really have been too much to ask for one of my children to have been born without an estrogen?"

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