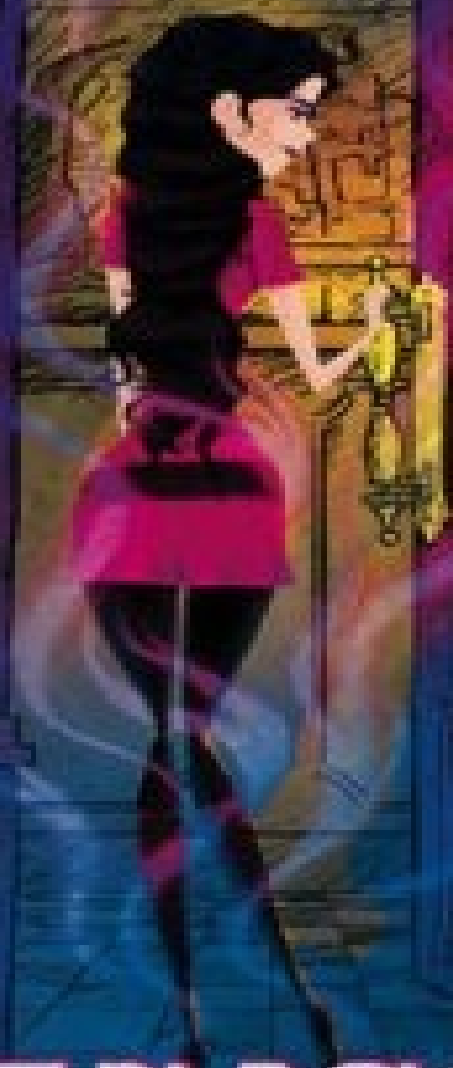


SECONDHAND SPIRITS

Love the vintage, not the ghosts.



JULIET BLACKWELL



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SECONDHAND SPIRITS



Juliet Blackwell



AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY

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Published by New American Library, a division of
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,
Ontario M4P 1Y3 Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)
Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India
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New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Obsidian, an imprint of New American Library,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Printing, July 2009

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eISBN : 978-1-101-08007-8
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*To Aunt Mem,
my first (and favorite) witchy woman*

Acknowledgments

As always, special thanks are due to so many.

To my wonderful literary agent, Kristin Lindstrom, who has inordinate, obstinate faith in my writing; and Kerry Donovan, for her ongoing support and editing flair, and for encouraging me to explore my witchy ways.

To the supportive, boisterous NorCal Sisters in Crime (y'all know who you are). To Sophie Littlefield for always egging me on, and to Cornelia Read, James Calder, and Tim Maleeny for poke dinner in bed, and long discussions of genre and mystery. I feel like I've been invited to sit at the cool kids' table.

To the warm and welcoming Come as You Are (CAYA) coven in Berkeley, California; the wonderful staff of the Sacred Well on Grand Avenue; and to all those witches, sensitives, and sorcerers who spoke to me and wish to remain anonymous. *Muchisimas gracias a todas las curanderas y brujas que me hablaron con confianza.*

To my mother's big, unabashedly Texan family for great expressions, bear hugs, and Southern food.

To my sister Carolyn—I missed you this go-round! Thanks for your unselfish help and laugh-out-loud suggestions. And to my sister, Susan, for her unflagging enthusiasm and novel suggestions.

Thanks to Jace, Shay, and Suzanne for their read-throughs and critiques. To Anna for *all* your help. And special appreciation to Bee, Pamela, Jan, Mary, Chris, Brian, the entire Mira Vista Social Club . . . and a thousand kisses to my guy Sergio.

And finally, a shout-out to Oscar, the suitably black cat, who insists that I *will* fall for his feline ways.

*Tis the witching hour of night,
Or bed is the moon and bright,
And the stars they glisten, glisten,
Seeming with bright eyes to listen
For what listen they?*

JOHN KEATS (1795-1821)

Chapter 1

Witches recognize their own.

So I could tell this customer was . . . *different* . . . the moment he walked into my store. Not mention the bell on the door failed to chime.

He was gorgeous: golden hair glinting in the light of the amber sconces, eyes the blue of a perfect periwinkle, tanned skin with just a hint of whiskers inviting one's touch. Tall and graceful, he had the too-perfect, unreal beauty seldom seen outside a movie theater. And we were a long way from Tinseltown. This was San Francisco, where "silicon" referred to computer chips, not plastic surgery. Here, people were only too real in their endearing, genuine lumpiness.

But what really drew my eye was the energy he emitted; to a witch like me, he was as conspicuous as a roaring drunk at an AA meeting.

The stranger approached, the lightness of his step suggesting a talent for sneakiness. I waited behind the horseshoe-shaped display counter and fingered the protective medicine bundle that hung from a braided string around my waist.

"Lily Ivory?"

"That's me," I said with a nod.

He placed an engraved business card on the glass countertop and pushed it toward me with a graceful index finger.

Aidan Rhodes—Male Witch
Magickal Assistance
Spells Cast—Curses Broken—Love Potions
Satisfaction Guaranteed
145 Jefferson Street, San Francisco

"Male witch?" My eyes wandered up, down, and across his muscular frame. "Are you often mistaken for a female?"

This was San Francisco, after all.

"Rarely, now that you mention it." A glint of humor lit up those too-blue eyes. "But most people don't realize men can be witches."

"Sure they do. They just call them warlocks."

He winced. "Warlock" means "oath breaker" in Old English, and calls to mind the men who betrayed their covens in the bad old burn-the-witches-at-the-stake days. Some male practitioners called themselves "wizards" or "sorcerers," but most preferred "witch." It was a solidarity thing.

There are as many different types of witches—the good, the bad, the magnificently venal—as there are familiars. Still, the vast majority of us are female. I had an inkling of the power of a traditional women's coven, but in my experience male witches were wild cards with a tendency to stir up trouble.

Nothing about Aidan Rhodes suggested otherwise.

“Cute accent,” he said. “You twang.”

“It’s not my fault. I grew up in Texas.”

“I know. I knew your father.”

“Really.”

“We worked together.”

“Is that right?” My tone was nonchalant, but my mind was racing. Aidan Rhodes was not overtly threatening, but if my father was involved, all bets were off.

I glanced over at my coworker, Bronwyn, who was across the room preparing a concoction for a middle-aged client with a nasty case of eczema and a nastier case of an unfaithful husband. The women’s heads were bent low as Bronwyn ground up dried herbs with a wooden mortar and pestle. They appeared absorbed in the task. Too absorbed. Aidan Rhodes, male witch, must have cast a cocooning spell. If so, they wouldn’t hear a single word we said; indeed, wouldn’t be aware of his presence at all.

“It’s not every day someone like you moves into the neighborhood, much less opens a shop.” Aidan’s long, elegant fingers caressed a pile of hand-tatted lace collars in the wicker basket on the counter. “A retail store, though—that surprises me. Unusual career path for one with your . . . talents.”

“Is there a reason you’re here?” I asked, upgrading the man from a curiosity to an annoyance. He wasn’t usually so abrupt with potential customers, but it seemed unwise to use the shopkeeper’s standard greeting—*May I help you?*—in case I inadvertently obligated myself to him. *There’s many a slip twixt cauldron and lip*, my grandmother Graciela had drilled into me. Words mattered in the world of spell casting, and a slip of the tongue could have dire consequences.

“As a matter of fact, there is. I brought you a housewarming present.”

“Thank you, but that’s not necessary.”

“I’m happy to do it.”

“I’m afraid I can’t accept.”

“Oh, but I insist.”

“I said *no*, thank you.”

“You don’t know what it is yet.”

“That’s not the—”

“Pleased ta meetcha.”

I whirled around to find a misshapen creature perched, gargoylelike, atop an antique walnut jewelry display case. He was small and bent, with a muscular body and scaly skin, a large head, a snoutlike nose and mouth, and outsize ears like a bat’s. His fingers were long and humanlike, surprising in their gracefulness, but his enormous feet had three toes and long talons. His voice was deep and gravelly.

“I’m your new familiar,” it said.

“I’m afraid not; I’m a so—” I turned to give Aidan a piece of my mind, but he was gone, the door slowly swinging shut. The bell had once again failed to ring. I swore under my breath.

“A so what, mistress?”

“Excuse me?”

“Before you started swearing you said you were a so.”

“I wasn’t swearing.”

“Were, too.”

I blew out an exasperated breath. “I’m a solo act. I don’t need a familiar.”

“You’re a witch, ain’tcha? Ya gotta have a familiar.”

“Says who?”

“It’s in the handbook.”

“There *is* no handbook. Besides, I’m allergic to cats.”

“I’m no cat.”

“So I’ve noticed. But I’m probably allergic to . . . creatures such as yourself, too. Run along home to your master.”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?”

“ ’Cause you’re my master now, mistress.” The creature attempted a smile, which took shape as a grimace.

“I’m serious. Now *scoot*.”

The grimace fell from his gnarled greenish gray face. Had it been possible, he would have paled.

“You don’t want me?”

“It’s nothing personal. I just don’t need—”

“Don’t send me away, mistress!” he begged, jumping down from the display case. Even at full height he didn’t reach my belly button. He dropped to his knobby knees and clasped his hands, gazing up at me in supplication. “*Please* don’t send me away. I’ll be good, mistress, I swear.”

“I can’t have a goblin in the shop!”

“I’m not exactly a goblin.”

“Gnome, then.”

“Not really a gnome, either . . .”

“*Whatever* you are, you’ll scare away customers.”

“Howzabout a pig?”

“A pig?”

With a sudden twist of his scrawny shoulders, he transformed himself into a miniature Vietnamese

pot bellied pig. He grunted, wagged his curly tail, and darted around the counter.

“Hey! Get back here, you—”

“Bless the Goddess, isn’t he *sweet!*” Bronwyn squealed, nearly knocking over a rack of 1950s-era chiffon prom dresses in her haste to cross the room. “Where’d he come from? I’ve always wanted one of those! George Clooney had one—did you know? They’re *very* smart.” Bronwyn scooped up the squealing swine and held him to her generous bosom, where, I couldn’t help but notice, he stopped kicking and snuggled right in, his pale pink snout resting on her ample cleavage. “What’s his name?”

I sighed. I had a million things to do today. Evicting a piggish gnome—or a gnomish pig—was not one of them.

“His name’s . . . Oscar,” I said off the top of my head, thinking of the *Sesame Street* character. The ugly little fellow seemed as if he would feel at home in a garbage can. “But he’s not mine. He’s a . . . loaner. He’s just visiting.”

Bronwyn and Oscar both ignored me.

“Oscar. Aren’t you just a *darling?* Aren’t you Bronwyn’s wuvey-dovey piggy-pig-pig?” She crooned to the creature in the high-pitched, goofy tone humans reserve for cherished pets and preverbal children.

Oscar snorted and rooted around in her cleavage. Bronwyn chuckled. I sighed.

A plump woman in her mid-fifties, Bronwyn had fuzzy brown hair and warm brown eyes. She favored great swaths of gauzy purple clothing, lots of Celtic jewelry, and heavy black eye makeup. The first time I saw her I couldn’t decide whether she was a delightfully free spirit or just plain nut. Shortly after I opened my vintage clothing store, Aunt Cora’s Closet, she had approached me about renting a corner of the shop for her small herb business. I welcomed the company: Bronwyn was a so herbalist and an amateurish witch, but she had lived in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood since its hippie heyday and knew *everyone*. She would be my entrée into a new and unfamiliar city.

Besides, Bronwyn had been one of the first people I met upon my arrival in San Francisco, and she had welcomed me with open arms. Literally. Bronwyn was a hugger of the bear variety.

Finding a safe place to call home wasn’t an easy task for a natural witch from a small Texas town. For years I had traveled the globe, and finally came to the City by the Bay at the suggestion of a parrot named Barnabas, whom I’d met one memorable evening in a smoky bar in Hong Kong.

“The Barbary Coast,” he’d said, gazing at me with one bright eye from his perch on the bar. “That’s the place for you. But be careful!”

“Of what?” I’d asked.

“The fog,” Barnabas had replied, holding a banana in one foot and peeling it with his beak. “Mark the words. Mark the fog.”

“What about the fog?”

“Mark the fog! Mark the fog!” he’d screeched. “Hey! Son of a bitch bit me! Whiskey! Whiskey and rye till the day that I die! Set up another round! Who’s buying?”

That was the problem with parrots, I had thought as Barnabas waddled off to harass the bartender.

They're smart as heck and never forget a thing, but they do like their booze.

I can't normally understand animals when they speak, so I assumed he was either a shape-shifter himself—like the pig currently snuggling in Bronwyn's ample arms—or I had been drinking way too many mai tais. But either way, I took the incident as a sign. I packed my bags and headed to San Francisco, a city that is home to so many beloved lunatics and cherished iconoclasts that for the first time in my life nobody noticed me. Or so I hoped. The unsettling appearance of Aidan Rhodes the male witch and Oscar the familiar might make keeping a low profile a challenge.

I watched as Bronwyn embraced the wriggling pot bellied pig with her typical unguarded openhearted enthusiasm, wishing I could do the same. I didn't know quite what to make of my new housewarming gift. What might a male witch want from me? And why would he bring me a familiar of all things?

The door opened again, its bell tinkling merrily as my inventory scout walked in.

"Maya!" gushed Bronwyn. "Come meet our sweet little Oscar."

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, what is *that*?" Maya recoiled. Twenty-three years old chronologically, but closer to forty on the cynicism scale, Maya had dark dreadlocks dyed bright blue at the ends, each edged with silver rings and cuffs, and an aversion to makeup because, she'd explained earnestly, it was "too fake." Why the bright blue hair didn't strike her as equally artificial I wasn't sure. Maya attended the San Francisco College of the Arts part-time, but her passion was visiting the elderly in her community and recording their stories for an oral history project.

I had met Maya a few weeks ago as she sat on a blanket on the sidewalk, halfheartedly peddling the 1940s-era beaded sweaters some elderly friends had given her in their attempt to "make a lady out of her." That quest was doomed to fail, but in the course of our conversation Maya and I discovered we had mutually beneficial business interests: Now she scoured her friends' closets and attics for inventory for my store, and I paid her a generous finder's fee.

"I believe it's called a Vietnamese potbellied pig," I said. "Apparently George Clooney has one."

"*Had* one," Bronwyn corrected me.

"Okay . . ." Maya said. "Why?"

"A friend couldn't keep it," I said. "It's only here temporarily. Sort of a foster situation."

"We *eat* things like that in my neighborhood," said Maya.

"Hush, child!" scolded Bronwyn, clapping her hands over the pig's ears and whispering, "He'll hear you."

"He's a pig, Bronwyn," Maya pointed out. "In case you didn't notice."

"He's not *deaf*. And he's a *special* pig. *I love* my little Oscaroooneeroo."

"Hey, whatever floats your boat," Maya said with a shrug and an enigmatic smile.

Today Maya was taking me to meet a woman who had lived in the same home for more than fifty years and who, according to Maya, had never thrown away a single item of clothing. That description was music to my ears. Hunting down high-quality vintage clothing was a competitive sport in the Bay Area, and elderly pack rats were my bread and butter. Besides, I was on a mission lately: I needed

find the perfect wedding dress.

Not for myself, mind you. Me and romance . . . well, it's complicated, to say the least. But Aunt Cora's Closet was my first attempt at running a legitimate business, and I was so determined to do well that I wasn't above giving the Fates a nudge. On the last full moon I anointed a seven-day green candle with oil of bergamot, surrounded it with orange votives, placed malachite and bloodstone on either side, and, after scenting the air with vervain and incense of jasmine, I cast a powerful prosperity spell. Two days later the fashion editor at the *San Francisco Chronicle* called me with a *fabulous* plan. Her favorite niece was getting married, she wanted to outfit the entire wedding party in vintage dresses, and could I be a doll and help her out?

As my grandmother always said, *Be careful what you wish for*. After weeks spent haunting estate sales, thrift stores, and auctions, I had managed to rustle up several options for each of the eleven bridesmaids, as well as a half dozen gowns that could be altered to fit the bride. But, anticipating bridal jitters, I wanted to have plenty of options on hand. Maya's lead on two more gowns, if they were in good condition, would bring the selections up to eight. Surely one would catch the bride's fancy.

The bridal party was scheduled to arrive tomorrow at two o'clock for a mammoth try-on session, and Bronwyn suggested I make the afternoon an event by closing the store to passersby and serving mimosas, which sounded like a good idea. I hoped. I wasn't what you'd call an experienced hostess.

In fact, as we used to say back in Texas, I was as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rockers.

"Lily, you ready to go?" Maya asked.

"Sure am."

I grabbed my 1940s cocoa brown wool coat from the brass coat stand near the register and pulled it on, securing the carved bone button at my neck. It was only four in the afternoon, but a wall of fog was creeping in, dropping the temperature a good fifteen degrees in the past five minutes. Late-afternoon or early-evening fog is not unusual for San Francisco since it sits on a thumb of land between an ocean and a bay. Still, recalling Barnabas's warning—*Mark the fog*—I wondered if the weather had anything to do with Aidan Rhodes's visit. Spooks loved the fog.

The thought gave me pause. If Aidan's witchcraft was powerful enough to command the weather, I would have to be careful around him.

"Go ahead and close up if we're not back by seven," I said to Bronwyn, gently tugging on Oscar's ear. "And *you* behave yourself, young man, or I'll send you right back to where you came from."

"Don't you *listen* to her, Oscar Boscar Boo. Mama Bronwyn won't let mean old Aunt Lily send you *anywhere*," she crooned to my would-be familiar as Maya and I walked out into the cool March mist.

Shape-shifting creatures and meddlesome witches aside, the quest for really cool old clothes must go on.

Chapter 2

When we exited the store we decided to leave my vintage cherry red Mustang convertible sitting on the curb, instead choosing to take the more practical purple van in the driveway. The graphics on the side read:

AUNT CORA'S CLOSET
VINTAGE CLOTHING AND QUALITY
ACCESSORIES
CORNER OF HAIGHT & ASHBURY
BUY—SELL—TRADE
IT'S NOT OLD; IT'S VINTAGE!

I steered while Maya guided me across town. Along the way, she gave me the scoop on what to expect.

“The source is Frances Potts. She’s lived in her home near Hunters Point for fifty-two years, even since she married Ronald. The Pottses lived together, one great big happy family, for years.”

“Potts, Frances and Ronald,” I repeated. “Got it.”

“Frances and Ronald had two daughters. They lost one as a child—so sad; that just seems so wrong, doesn’t it?—but the other married well and has a couple of kids of her own. Anyway, the in-laws died not long after the little girl, some thirtysomething years ago, leaving the house to Frances and Ronald. Ronald died not too long after that; don’t know from what. Must’ve been pretty young, don’t you think?”

“Seems like. So it’s just Frances? She never remarried?”

“Nope. And she inherited everything from her in-laws, including from her mother-in-law’s sister Bessie. And like I told you, Frances has never thrown *anything* out.”

My kind of woman.

“Where does she store everything?” Cloth could last for hundreds, even thousands of years if it was properly cared for. But as one soon came to discover in the vintage clothing business, that was a big “if.”

“The basement.”

My heart sank. Basements were rare in earthquake country—in a temblor the last place you want to be is belowground, where the trouble originates—and those that did exist were generally small and only partly finished, with the rest left in its natural state of dirt. Damp dirt.

“Don’t worry—everything’s hung up on racks; plus she’s got a dehumidifier down there. She has a bunch of costume jewelry as well, mostly from the thirties. I think it belonged to her in-laws. Oh, and a swell collection of old Chock full o’ Nuts coffee cans.”

Maya and I shared a smile.

“One can never have enough of those,” I remarked.

As we neared the Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood the environs deteriorated, piles of trash increasing in inverse proportion to the condition of the cars lining the streets. Most of the storefronts were boarded up, and the only sign of commerce—other than the drug dealers lurking in the alleys—was a liquor store, its dirty neon sign flashing,—QU-R. Seagulls announced our proximity to the bay, but there were no expensive waterfront homes here. In its heyday, Hunters Point had been home to a busy working port and a naval station. It now qualified as a Superfund toxic cleanup site.

Most of the homes were two-story stucco duplexes with peeling paint and crooked shutters interspersed with a smattering of 1970s bunker-style concrete apartment buildings. All in all, the neighborhood's ambience did not scream, “prosperous followers of high fashion,” and I wondered what we would find at the Potts residence.

To my relief, Frances Potts lived in a once-grand Victorian that must have been built when the neighborhood's residents were middle-class. It sat high above the street on a huge corner lot, encircled by a four-foot-tall stone retaining wall topped with a crooked filigreed wrought-iron fence. The yard was dense and overgrown, but the varieties of rare plants suggested it had once had a Mediterranean theme. A widow's walk topped the main turret. Cheap metal grates covered the first-floor and basement windows, and a rain gutter had detached itself from the eaves and hung limply near the front stoop. Bright green moss obscured the elaborate design of the old roof shingles; it would be only a matter of time before they rotted away completely.

Throw in some cobwebs and a ticket booth, and the Potts home would be a dead ringer for a theme park's haunted house.

We reached the broad wooden porch and Maya rang the doorbell, which we could hear echoing inside the house. I looked out over the disheveled garden, trying to quell my nervousness. After a childhood of being shunned, I always felt butterflies in my stomach when waiting on someone's doorstep, hoping for admittance. It still seemed like a minor miracle when someone actually invited me into their home.

A child's high-pitched voice rang out on the other side of the door: “Who is it?”

“It's Maya. Is that you, Jessica?”

The door opened wide to reveal a little girl, maybe seven or eight, with long, glossy black hair and huge eyes to match. Her grin took up half her face.

“Hi, Maya! I was just helping Mrs. Potts peel potatoes and carrots for her dinner. She's having company.”

“Yum,” Maya said. “This is my friend Lily.”

“Hi!” Jessica swung around and hopped away, holding her hands in front of her like paws. “Guess what I am!”

“A bunny rabbit?” I asked.

“A kangaroo!” She flashed a smile over her shoulder as she hopped down the shadowy hallway.

Maya and I stepped into the dim foyer and closed the door behind us.

“Jessica's a neighbor,” Maya spoke in a low voice. “I get the sense that her mom has to work a lot;

met her last time I was here.”

“Come in. Come in.” A petite, white-haired woman emerged through a doorway near the end of the hall and beckoned us into the kitchen.

The savory aroma of roasting meat greeted us in the bright kitchen, which featured high ceilings, large windows, and a worn terra-cotta tile floor. Old crockery, iron skillets, and copper pots adorned the shelves willy-nilly; huge mason jars full of flour, sugar, and pasta lined the green-tile counter. Stitched dolls sat high on a shelf along with several embroidered, heart-shaped pillows. A pan on the stove held raw peeled and quartered carrots, potatoes, and onions. A platter of sugar cookies sat under a glass dome.

“Mrs. Potts, this is Lily Ivory,” Maya introduced us.

“So nice to meet you. Please, call me Frances,” Mrs.

Potts murmured in a soft Southern drawl. I felt an immediate kinship to her, though I couldn’t put my finger on why. She wore a faded floral housedress, support hose, and fluffy pale pink slippers. Even her slow, deliberate movements she appeared to be in her seventies. But there was a nervous vitality to her . . . a simmering energy just under the surface. Hard to say. I’m sensitive to auras and vibrations but I’m no mind reader.

“You’re here to look at the wedding dresses?” Mrs.

Potts asked.

“And any other vintage clothing you might be willing to part with.”

“*Vintage*.” She laughed and waved a hand. “They’re just plain *old*. But they’re yours if you’d like them. I don’t quite know why I’ve squirreled them away all these years.”

“For my sake, I’m glad you did,” I said.

“Jessica, you’d best run on home, dear,” Mrs. Potts said to the girl, lifting the glass cover off the plate of cookies. “Your mother will wonder where you are. Take a cookie.”

“M’kay. Bye, Mrs. Potts! Bye, Maya!” With a sugar cookie as big as a salad plate in one hand, the little girl hopped toward the back door, then stopped and looked back over her shoulder. Her big, near-black eyes landed on me, and she hesitated before adding, “Bye . . . lady!”

Frances led us down a short, high-ceilinged hallway to a door that opened onto the basement stairs. Her descent down the creaky wooden stairway was slow and arduous. Weak shafts of late-afternoon light filtered in through the high, grimy basement windows, but it was impossible to see anything clearly. Near the bottom of the stairs Frances stretched to her right, reaching out in the darkness to a switch on the lights.

Women’s clothes—mostly high-quality dresses and skirt suits—crowded a rack that ran the entire circumference of the concrete half basement. Dozens of hats, pocketbooks, gloves, and scarves wrapped in plastic rested on shelves above the rack. In the very center of the room sat a stack of cardboard boxes neatly labeled MOTHER POTTS and BESSIE POTTS.

I had met a lot of people who held on to a lot of things over the years, but this was truly impressive.

As I stepped off the stairs and into the confined space, I was hit by a wave of dizziness. The a

reeked of moth-balls and cedar, and like most homes that had embraced a number of souls over the years, the room swam with sensations, both good and bad. But there was something more—an undercurrent of bleak desperation. This went beyond the average vicissitudes of a typical human life. I glanced over at the diminutive Mrs. Potts, wondering how her young daughter had died.

“There are the wedding gowns,” said Mrs. Potts as she gestured toward two ivory dresses hanging on the end of one rod. “I had them dry-cleaned.”

They were lovely, and in excellent condition. The older of the two was a 1920s flapper style made of Normandy lace, with a high neckline and long fitted sleeves. A sheer net-and-lace skirt fell from the drop waist, and featured at least seven inches of a floral embroidered area at the knee. The second underskirt then fell to a scalloped, embroidered hemline. Paired with it was an ecru net-and-lace veil with a flowered headpiece and an eight-foot-long lace-trimmed train.

The other gown was a tea-length early-1950s dress composed of two parts: a simple white satin sheath underneath, with a gauzy long-sleeved overdress that cinched at the waist before flaring out into a skirt made wide with crinoline.

Either dress might have to be lengthened with rows of lace or ruffles to accommodate my customer’s measurements, but that was simple enough. I felt a small thrill of success . . . and relief. Seeing into the future wasn’t one of my talents, but I had the definite sense that tomorrow’s bride fitting session would go well.

Frances took the simpler dress off the rack and held it up to her body with both hands, smoothing the fabric over the length of her torso and swaying slightly to make the skirt dance.

“Can you imagine? I once fit into this!”

“I have that very same reaction every summer when I put on my swimsuit for the first time,” I said.

Frances and Maya both laughed and nodded, and I felt a wave of pleasant surprise. This was the kind of “girl talk” I had never been privy to, much less a part of.

“Where are you from, Lily?” Frances asked.

“West Texas. A small town not far from El Paso.”

She nodded. “I’m from Louisiana originally, but I’ve lived here so long I’ve lost my accent.”

I smiled. I always think I’m losing my accent, too, until I realize people keep asking me where I’m from.

Next we turned our attention to Mrs. Potts’s impressive collection of everyday clothing. Maya was right to work opening boxes and pawing through “Aunt Bessie’s” things, many of which had been carefully wrapped in dry-cleaning bags. Storing cloth in plastic wasn’t the best plan, as it didn’t allow garments to “breathe.” Thus a lot of the fabric showed signs of rot and moth damage, but some of it could be salvaged. I had developed a careful multistep laundering process to gently bleach and clean even the most delicate silks and laces, and Maya’s mother, Lucille, was an excellent seamstress who helped me with minor repairs. Customers who sought out rare vintage clothing usually took a mend or two in stride as the cost of wearing such beauty.

I started flipping through the hanging clothes, at the oldest end first, noting a number of design names and labels from chic boutiques. Mrs. Potts must have been quite the clotheshorse in her day—

this was high-quality stuff. The garments were primarily circa the 1950s and 1960s, with a few that harked back to the forties. These outfits would sell well; the clothes of the postwar decades were very hot right now. I held each one of the articles of clothing in my arms for a moment before setting them into one of the Hefty plastic bags we'd brought with us. As I cradled them, I felt for their vibrations, sensed their history.

I reached for a deep red shirtwaist from the mid-sixties. As I touched it, I felt a physical shock, as though I had been scalded. This was the garment responsible for those dreadful sensations I had felt at the bottom of the stairs. Letting go immediately, I dropped the dress in a scarlet heap on the ground.

Mrs. Potts looked up from the box of once-white gloves she had been matching and met my eyes.

"Perhaps we'd better leave that one," she said.

"Yes, perhaps," I murmured as I hung the dress back up.

In the vintage clothes business, there was a call for items that gave off less-than-positive vibrations. Some people are drawn to darkness, not in order to replicate it but because of a kind of deep understanding of, even kinship with, the shadow side that helps them resolve to set things right in their life. After all, without shadows, things lose their definition, their contours. A lot of perpetually sunny people don't understand that. On the other hand, a truly dark item in the wrong hands . . . That could be dangerous. As I knew only too well. As an impetuous young woman I had searched for the truth about my father, and when I found it, I barely survived. Even now the memory made me shiver.

Still, I would never sell such a garment to a customer. No one wearing that dress would be strong enough to overcome its tremors of grief.

With a sense of foreboding I looked up to see that there was no longer any daylight peeking through the grimy panes of the high basement half windows. Glancing at my antique Tinker Bell wristwatch, I realized we had been down in the basement much longer than I thought. Evening was upon us.

A frisson of icy fear washed over me.

And then I heard it—a terrible wailing that turned my blood cold.

Chapter 3

Where are my children?

The keening cry sounded as though it were right on top of us. Everything else receded while I tried to fight off the terror and desolation of the wailing, clutching at my medicine bundle like a lifeline.

After a hideous moment, the crying subsided.

Maya was still rummaging through a box and humming an off-tune rendition of Bob Marley's "One Love," her butt sticking in the air. She hadn't heard a thing.

"What in all God's creation was *that*?" Frances asked, hand fluttering to her chest.

I looked at her for a long moment. Normal humans couldn't usually hear a demon's wail . . . unless they were marked for death.

"What was what?" I asked, not wanting to assume.

"You didn't hear that? I like to died just hearing such a sound."

"I didn't hear anything," Maya said, poking her head up from her task.

Frances gazed at me, sorrow and understanding in her eyes. "You heard it, though, didn't you child?"

I finally realized whom Frances reminded me of: my grandmother Graciela. In that moment her tone of voice sounded so much like my *abuela* that I wanted to hug her.

"Must have been a cat," I said.

Frances just stared at me. She knew it was no cat.

Another scream erupted then, this one sounding young and all too human.

Jessica.

The little girl's smiling face came to my mind, unbidden.

"I heard *that*," Maya said as she ran up the basement stairs. I followed on her heels down the hallway, through the kitchen, and out the back door into the cool evening.

A small crowd had gathered about a block down the street in front of a run-down white stucco duplex, the front door wide-open. A distraught woman had collapsed on the concrete stoop. A young tattooed man held her and seemed to be speaking, but the woman was inconsolable. Several children of varying ages stood nearby, wide-eyed and silent, some softly crying.

"My baby!" the woman screamed. "*M'hija!*"

"What happened?" Maya asked as we approached the outer ring of the crowd.

A skinny young blonde with the pallid complexion and hollow eyes of a drug user gave us the once-over, apparently decided we weren't a threat, and answered.

“Her daughter got snatched.”

“Snatched? You mean kidnapped?” Maya demanded.

“Whatever.”

“Did anyone see who did it?” I asked.

“Dunno. It was probably her dad or something.” The young woman shrugged and turned away. An intricate tattoo of a snake ran up her bare arm, and as I studied it the reptile seemed to come alive, turning to me and staring in challenge, its forked tongue lapping in my direction.

There was evil in the air. I reached for my medicine bag and mumbled a quick incantation.

Much more grounded in the real world, Maya whipped out her cell phone and dialed 911.

The people around us murmured in a mixture of English and Spanish, rumors and speculation already beginning to ripple through the crowd. As I watched them, external sounds fell away until I was able to hear only two whispered words rising above the rest: “*La Llorona*.”

My stomach fell. Those of us who grew up near the banks of the Rio Grande knew—and feared—*La Llorona*. According to legend “the weeping woman” was abandoned by the father of her children because she was of a lower social class, or because he fell in love with another woman—the details shifted depending on who was telling the story. This much was clear: The anguished mother took her children down to the river and drowned them, one by one, finally flinging herself in to join them in their watery grave. Now she haunts the banks of rivers and creeks, crying for her lost babies and abducting children who happen to be out at night, adding their souls to her brood.

La Llorona scared the *mierda* out of me.

“Maya, what in the world’s going on, child?”

Maya and I looked up to see Mrs. Potts clomping toward us, using a walker to arduously make her way down the uneven sidewalk. The crowd parted, letting her through.

“We’re not sure yet, but it looks as though a child was taken,” Maya said.

Mrs. Potts gasped and held her hand to her mouth, then looked to the woman on the stoop.

“But that’s Jessica’s mother. . . . You . . . you’re saying *Jessica* was taken?”

Maya and I exchanged looks.

“Maybe it’s a misunderstanding,” Maya said. “Sometimes kids hide, don’t they? I’ll go see if I can find out anything concrete.”

Maya started moving through the crowd, talking to the bystanders. I stayed with Mrs. Potts, trying to lend moral support with my presence. Maya was right; there could be some sort of misunderstanding.

I would be more hopeful myself if only Frances and I hadn’t heard *La Llorona*’s horrifying scream a few moments before in the basement.

As I watched the young tattooed man holding the sobbing mother on the stoop, his dark eyes focused on something across the street. Following his gaze, I noticed a small cluster of young men, all slouching in huge red oversize T-shirts and baggy jeans that sagged to their crotches. Strong, muscular

arms crossed over their broad chests or stuck deep in pants pockets. Each one of them glowered at the young man on the stoop. When the wail of a police siren finally cut through the noise of the crowd, the men roused themselves and loped off down the street, unhurried.

Looking back toward the stoop, I watched the young Latino glare at the retreating men as though he were shooting daggers at their shoulder blades. Even from my position twenty feet away, I could feel his anger, almost smell its acrid scent.

A police cruiser pulled up, prompting the majority of the bystanders to disperse. A uniformed officer approached the mother, while another began working the crowd, taking statements. When he reached us I told him that Jessica had been at Frances's house earlier, and gave him my contact information. Frances did the same. Afterward, since we had nothing more helpful to add to the investigation, Maya and I walked Mrs. Potts back home and sat her down at the kitchen table. I filled the kettle for tea, but Maya unearthed a bottle of whiskey from a crowded sideboard and poured a shot into three small juice glasses, saying it was "for medicinal reasons."

Frances suddenly looked every one of her advanced years, and then some. She sat in a straight chair at the old pine table, clearly distraught but trying to fight tears. My heart went out to her as she smoothed her helmet of thick white hair and toyed with the buttons on her beige cardigan.

"Could I call someone for you?" Maya asked, placing her hand on Frances's stooped shoulder. "Your daughter, perhaps?"

Mrs. Potts looked up. "No. No, don't call her."

"But you shouldn't be alone—"

"Don't call Katherine." She grabbed Maya's hand. "Please, promise me."

"Of course. Whatever you like," Maya assured her, taken aback by her vehemence.

"I just . . . don't want to disturb her," Mrs. Potts said. "She's got her own family to worry about. There's no need for her to come sit with a silly old woman. I . . . I'm expecting my lawyer to come for dinner, anyway. She'll be here any minute."

"A lawyer who makes house calls?" Maya asked with a ghost of a smile.

Frances nodded, and returned a shaky smile. "I bribed her with a home-cooked meal. Herbed pork roast tonight. I have my own little kitchen garden, you know; never did know a frozen vegetable could come close to the taste of fresh."

"You remind me of my Grammy," said Maya. "I'll never forget her rhubarb pie, straight from the garden."

As I watched them both trying to rally their spirits, I had a profound realization: When I made the decision to settle down in San Francisco, I promised I would stop keeping myself at such a distance from people. Somehow I had failed to intuit that Jessica was in danger, but at least it was in my power to protect dear old Frances.

I asked to use the bathroom. Frances directed me to turn right down the hallway, then right again.

The corridor was so dark I had to feel my way to the doorway, my hand finally landing upon the light switch. The powder room retained none of the historic charm of the rest of the house; it had been remodeled some time ago—probably in the seventies—in ugly harvest gold linoleum tiles matched

with avocado green fixtures.

I closed the door and started rifling through drawers. Collecting clothes wasn't Frances's only pack rat tendency; I doubted she had cleaned out this vanity since the Nixon administration. In one drawer were boxes of generic tissues and Q-tips, in another an old tin coffee can full of spare buttons, a freshener, another heart-shaped sachet, and shoe polish. Pushing aside an ice-blue quilted satin glove box full of seriously old tubes of mascara and pale cakes of powder, I finally found something I could use: a hairbrush.

Carefully extracting several strands of white hair, I wrapped them in a tissue, and tucked the little package into the back pocket of my jeans.

I flushed the toilet to complete the ruse. When I opened the door to the hallway the light from the bathroom streamed out, illuminating a series of framed family pictures on the opposite wall. There was a photo of a much younger Frances, beaming beside a man with a crew cut and horn-rimmed glasses; a girl in cat's-eye glasses and bangs cut straight across her forehead; and a slightly younger girl in a matching dress. The sisters were towheads, with that pale, wispy hair unique to young children and forever mimicked by hairstylists. On either side of the family portrait were more pictures of the children. There was a series of school photos of the older girl as she grew, but only one more picture of the younger child, this time with her mother. They were seated on a bench near the water. Frances looked very stylish in a hat and gloves, and was wearing the deep red outfit that I had dropped in the basement. Beside her sat a cherubic-looking girl about Jessica's age.

I took the photograph from the wall and cradled it to my chest, concentrating. Pain coursed through me. This photo had been held often, kissed, and cried upon. This must be the daughter who had died.

I rehung the picture, feeling a new level of resolve.

Frances had suffered enough. I had no idea why she had heard *La Llorona's* cry, but that demon would not nab two souls in one night. Not if I could help it.

I glanced down at my watch. I needed time to prepare a brew and cast my protection spell before the witching hour, when *La Llorona* would be strong enough to hunt down those she had already marked for death. Most folks think the witching hour is midnight, but in my experience it was three a.m.: the time between the night before and the morning to come, when humans were most vulnerable and the supernatural opportunities were ripest. The in-between time. When the spirit window opened wide between our worlds.

By the time I returned to the kitchen, Mrs. Potts's dinner guest had arrived.

"Lily, child, this is my lawyer, Delores Keener," Frances introduced us.

"Nice to meet you." She nodded with a warm smile. In her early forties, Keener was the type of woman often referred to as "handsome," the tall, solid kind who grew better-looking with age. She wore a beautifully tailored, immaculate cream-colored pantsuit and carried a maroon leather Coach briefcase overstuffed with papers. Her otherwise businesslike mien was belied only by her styled platinum blond hair, which lent her a rather incongruous, but not unattractive, bit of Marilyn Monroe glamour.

"Lily is here for all those old clothes in the basement. She seems to think someone might want them."

“Really? That’s great,” Delores said. “Frances here is like the Imelda Marcos of dresses.”

“How you do go on,” Frances scoffed, but smiled at the good-natured teasing.

“I was telling Frances how impressed I am with a lawyer who makes house calls,” said Maya.

“Frances and my mother go way back. And I never could resist pot roast.”

“It smells great,” said Maya.

“Delores, I must tell you the most dreadful thing that just happened . . .” Frances began.

As Frances launched into the sad tale of the past hour, Maya and I excused ourselves and went back down to the basement.

“Angling for a dinner invitation?” I teased.

“I’m just worried about Frances, all alone in this huge house after . . . after what happened. But suppose Delores will stay with her awhile.”

“Besides, that pot roast smelled amazing. Must be the herbs.”

Maya smiled. “Okay, I am getting hungry. I’ll admit it.”

“Let’s take care of all this, and then we can stop for a bite on the way back.” It was on the tip of my tongue to invite Maya home with me so I could cook for her, but then I remembered I had a spell to brew and a busy night of spell casting ahead of me. First things first.

We started hauling our seven Hefty bags of vintage clothing up the steep stairs of the basement, down the hall, and into the front foyer. The streetlamps shone through a stained-glass window near the parlor fireplace, casting jewel-toned light onto the worn Oriental rug. A sturdy oak grandfather clock ticked off the moments, the sound practically echoing through the empty rooms. Maya was right—how did Frances manage here all alone? This was a grand house meant to accommodate a big family with children running about, parents busily taking care of business, and grandparents spinning tales of their youth. It was easy to imagine a day a few decades ago, when the home would have been filled with music and the voices of three generations. Then again, it was just as easy to envision the desperate, tragic day Frances’s youngest daughter was lost forever.

Clothing is one of those things, like water, that you don’t realize is heavy until you deal with its bulk. Maya and I were panting by the time we lugged the last of our many bags out the front door, down the broad wooden stairs, along the cracked concrete steps to the sidewalk, and finally into the van. After our third trip I leaned back against the dusty vehicle, taking a breather.

I glanced down the street toward Jessica’s house. There were now several police cars, both marked and unmarked, in front of the duplex, but the crowd had evaporated. I got the distinct impression that Bayview- Hunters Point was the sort of neighborhood where most residents did not knowingly put themselves in the path of authorities of any kind.

Maya and I returned to the kitchen to say good-bye and found Delores Keener comforting a weeping Frances.

Feeling awkward, I watched as Maya hugged the elderly woman, busying myself by writing Frances a generous check. I pay a lot more than the average secondhand shop, in part to get the best stuff, in part to help out needy seniors. Besides, the truth was that I ran Aunt Cora’s Closet more for the sake

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