

Laser Eve



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Odd Call

I didn't think but simply answered my phone. "Hey, Marita." I didn't immediately recognize her voice.

"Hey." I pulled my phone away and glanced at it. "Mickie. Hey."

She laughed. "Answered without looking, did you?"

"Yeah. I'm a space case tonight. How are you?"

"I'm good. I'm a woman on a mission tonight, though."

"Ah. So get right to business?"

"Yep," she said. "So. Seeing anyone?"

She tried to make it sound casual, but I instantly went on alert. "Oh, that is not a start to a conversation I think I want to have with you, Mickie."

"You could do worse than me, but that's not what this is about."

"So, it's about setting me up with someone else?"

"Trust me for two minutes."

"Fine, fine," I agreed. "I'm starting a timer."

"Right. Answer my question. Are you seeing anyone steady?"

"No, not lately."

"I'm putting together an event," she explained. "It's a little expensive."

"How expensive?"

"Three-fifty."

"Oh, shit," I said. "That's some event."

"You can afford it," she said. "How much do you trust me?"

"I'm not sure I trust you that much."

"I'm hurt. Have you ever heard of anyone accusing me of putting together a poor event?" The question was rhetorical. "I'm not sharing details, either."

"Damn, Mickie," I thought. "Why did you ask if I'm seeing anyone?"

"Because if you did, then I'd want you to bring her, but I'd have to meet her first."

"And it would be 700?"

“Yep.”

“Yikes. Well, I’m not.”

“Do you have a gown?”

“What kind of event is this?”

“One that requires you to dress to the nines,” she said.

“And will everyone else in attendance be similarly attired?”

“Yes.”

“All women?”

“Of course. I don’t do co-ed.”

“Is this another game of X-rated laser tag?”

“No comment.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. Well, it’s not at Laser Brains. It’s somewhere else, somewhere that was expensive to rent.”

“Ah, and thus 350.”

“And thus 350,” she confirmed. “Marita, if you don’t come, you’re going to regret it.”

“Mickie, is this a money-making event for you?”

“I’m hurt. Hurt, I say.”

“Is it?”

“Marita,” she replied. “I don’t make a dime from any of these events, in spite of the work I put into them. You know you’re going to come. Could we cut to ‘yes’? I have about fifteen more of these calls to make, and I don’t want them to take a half hour each.”

“Tell me the rest.”

“Say ‘yes’ first.”

“Mickie, don’t play games with me. Tell me as much as you’re telling us.”

“Everyone comes formal. Anyone who doesn’t put in a full effort will regret it.”

“Does that mean I’m supposed to get my hair done and all the rest?”

“No, but it means you put in an effort. Gown. Heels. Sparklies.”

“I got it,” I said. “Keep going.”

“And I’m partnering anyone who doesn’t come with a date. I’m accepting requests, both who you might especially prefer and who you would rather not be paired with. I hope you’ll give me some leeway.”

“Is this partners type partnering?”

“Consider it a blind date.”

“When?”

“Halloween.” She paused. “It might run really late.”

“Really late as in I should pack an overnight bag?”

“No overnight bags, and I’m arranging transportation.” Then she waited. I did, too, hoping she’d offer a little more. Finally, she said, “That’s all I’m saying until you say ‘yes’. Come on, Marita, you know you’re going to come.”

“Everyone coming will be dressed nicely,” I said. “Including my date.”

“Yes. Don’t make me beg, Marita.”

“You don’t care that much if I’m there, Mickie,” I said. “You just have a headcount in mind.”

“I have four people who asked if you would be there.”

“You do not! Jess doesn’t count. Wait. Have you talked to Jess?”

“Six people ago,” she said. “Don’t be mad at her; I asked her not to talk to anyone about it, and specifically mentioned you. I’m going to say the same to you. She’s coming. She knows you’re coming.”

“You’re awfully cocky.”

“But I don’t want you talking to her about it.”

“Who asked about me?”

“Not answering.”

“I presume they’ve requested to be partnered with me?”

“Not. Answering.”

“You’re a poop,” I said.

“I know.”

“Mickie, I’ll say ‘yes’ on two conditions.”

“No.”

“Just listen. First, you pair me with someone I’ll like, and not Jess, if it’s supposed to be a date.”

“I’m doing my best on that. It won’t be Jess.”

“And two, give me something to get excited about. A hint about the game. Is this a Halloween-theme event? Something, Mickie.”

“And you’ll stop struggling?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, but you also promise not to talk to anyone about this, especially the hints.”

“Multiple hints. Even better. I promise.”

“It’s expensive. I’m making you all dress up. It’s on Halloween. And in spite of making you all dress up, I think everyone is going to feel underdressed for the venue.”

“Oh, shit,” I said. I laughed.

“I consider that a ‘yes’. I’m going to invoice you. You need to pay it right away, Marita.”

“I will.”

“And we’re arriving altered. You’ll make an appointment for a few days in advance. I’ll send you a link when I invoice you. You don’t need to coordinate with anyone else.”

“All right.”

“Thanks, Marita. I’ll let you know about transportation.”

Arrival

I was so excited. Isis was picking me up in a few minutes. We'd only been going out for a while, and it didn't occur to me to wonder why I couldn't remember past dates with her. But we'd been going out for a while, and tonight was going to be special.

I checked myself once more. I was in a hunter green gown with a vee neck. The gown left my shoulders bare along with much of my back, but I had a matching wrap. Isis hadn't seen this gown, and I couldn't wait to see her reaction. I decided I'd let her see me without the wrap first, but I'd keep it close. I fussed with my hair for a few more minutes, and then the bell rang.

I hurried to the door then paused, collecting myself before I opened it. Isis was there, and I posed for her.

She stared, smiling at me, and then finally stepped inside.

She looked absolutely amazing. She was older than me, nearly ten years, but she looked fabulous, especially tonight. She was in her own gown, midnight blue with a matching fascinator in her hair. There was less of her skin on display than mine, but she looked fantastic. I stepped up to her and lifted my chin.

"Hello, Marita," she said in her lovely, alluring voice. She set fingers on my cheek and then lowered her lips to mine. I closed my eyes and accepted a lovely, lovely kiss. "You look divine."

"You do, too." I laughed. "Literally, Isis." She laughed. I handed her my wrap then turned around, letting her place it over my shoulders. I also had a long coat. I collected it then turned to her. "I can't believe this is all you're wearing. It's the end of October."

"I have a coat in my car, but I wanted to make a first impression."

I hooked her arm. "You succeeded."

* * * *

It wasn't a car. It was a limousine. The driver took my coat and handed us both in. I found Jess and Fidelia waiting for us. I offered cheek-kisses to both of them. "I didn't know you were dating."

"We're not," Fidelia replied. "We have two more stops."

At that, Isis sat down, set her hands on my hips, and pulled. I squeaked, landing in her lap. I decided that wasn't bad at all, and so I rotated, curling into

her, and let her pull me into a deep, deep kiss.

I didn't notice much of the next drive. But when Fidelia climbed from the car, I climbed from Isis's lap, sitting down next to her, but offering my hand. She kissed it, and we smiled at each other. I wasn't ready to tell her, but I thought I might be falling in love.

Fidelia wasn't gone long, returning with Jodie. She offered cheek kisses and then shared a long snog with Fidelia. I laid my head on Isis's shoulder and sighed happily.

Our last stop was to collect Marcelina. I didn't witness any kisses, but she held Jess's hand for the remaining duration of our drive.

After that, the drive was perhaps twenty minutes. Normally, I would have paid more attention, but all of us were focused on our dates. I found myself gazing adoringly at Isis, and she at me. We talked lightly, we touched lightly, and I was just so happy to be with her.

But then we turned off the main road, and it was Marcelina who said, "Holy shit! Where are we going?"

At that, we all looked out the darkened windows. I had no idea where we were, but we passed several gates leading onto presumably very large estates before pulling into a gate. From there, the road curved a few times, finally coming to a stop underneath the portico of an absolutely huge mansion.

It took a moment before the driver handed us out. Isis collected my hand, and six of us gawked at the mansion. The exterior was stone, three stories tall, with the top crenellated. It wasn't clear from the ground, but I would eventually learn there were actual battlements along the roof.

"Wow."

It was Isis that got us moving to the door. There were two uniformed women waiting, and they opened the doors for us with a "Welcome to Havermore Estate. Please enjoy your stay. Feel free to enjoy the facilities. Dinner is in one hour."

We stepped past them, the doors closing behind us. I thought nothing as they slipped a visor into place for each of us. Inside, we were in a massive foyer, open to the ceiling. There was a massive staircase immediately in front of us which then split left and right to arrive at the third floor.

"Wow," Marcelina said. "Are we the only ones here?"

“I find that unlikely,” Jess replied. She laughed. “I think the house might have swallowed them. Who has a GPS?”

“Who wants to go exploring?” Jodie asked. “I want to go exploring.”

“Not without me,” Fidelia replied, taking possession of Jodie’s arm. Isis already had my hand, but I shifted, taking her arm like Fidelia held Jodie’s.

“Wander together, or split up?” Jess asked.

“Together,” Marcelina replied. “This place is kind of spooky. I wonder if it’s haunted.”

“Don’t be silly,” Isis said, but I began wondering if Marcelina’s question really was as frivolous as it seemed. “Let’s start at the top.”

* * * *

We wandered. The corridors of the building formed a square, doors on both sides. Many of the doors were closed, and the closed doors we tested were locked, but many of the doors were open. The outer rooms looked out over the grounds, and there was a center courtyard visible from the inner rooms.

About half the top floor rooms, the ones we could visit, were either bedrooms or bedroom suites. Of the remaining rooms, some were bathrooms, and we lost count of how many. We found two libraries and two rooms that were configured for quiet conversations. One room held a billiards table and another had four tables suitable for playing cards.

It wasn’t until we approached the front stairs after completing one circuit that we encountered people, and then it was one of the women from the front door. “If you descend, dinner is nearly ready to serve.”

“Where do we go?” Isis asked.

“First floor, with your back to the entrance, take the rightmost main corridor. The dining room will then be on your left.”

Hosts

The dining room was as lavish as the rest of the house, which wasn't surprising. There were nametags on the tables, and it was Jess who found the table for the six of us. She sat down, pulling Marcelina down beside her, but Isis and I turned around, arms around each other, and surveyed the room. The room was filling, some of the women appearing familiar, but I didn't see anyone I recognized.

But then she nudged me, and we took our seats. It was only another minute or two before a white-clad server appeared. She set out two breadbaskets and offered a variety of beverages, and it wasn't long after that before she brought salads, and then our main courses.

It wasn't until we were contemplating our choices that we met our hosts, and only moments after that that I began to wish we hadn't.

It began with a series of bangs. All around the room, the doors into the dining hall began to slam closed. A few people screamed. Far more startled. I certainly did, and I looked around frantically in time to see the last door slam closed.

I hadn't seen anyone do it.

From other tables, several women jumped to their feet and ran to the nearest door. They struggled with it, but none of the doors opened. And then the lights began to dim, taking a second or two before the room was entirely dark, absolutely dark.

Another woman screamed, and all around us, people were speaking frantically. Then a clear voice called out, "Who has a light? A lighter? A cell phone? Anything."

Until then, it hadn't even occurred to me I hadn't brought my phone. "Jess, where's your phone?"

"I left it home."

We all had. From my right, I heard someone say, "What the fuck? You never go anywhere without your phone."

"I don't have it," said another woman. "What's happening?"

There was a fresh scream, and then someone saying, over and over, "Oh my god! Oh my god!"

I looked frantically in the dark, and then I realized there was light, light coming near the floor near each door. The light rose, and I found myself staring. It was my turn to scream.

“Ghosts!”

“Calm down!” someone yelled. I thought it was the same voice that had asked for a light. “Don’t panic.”

“You don’t panic,” said another woman. “That ghost is my date!”

The ghosts grew brighter, and then we saw, crumpled on the floor, each of the women who had rushed to the doors, her ghost hovering over her body, each looking somewhat confused.

And then... laughter.

“It’s not funny!” said the woman whose date had become a ghost.

“Silence!” someone yelled. We all turned, and at the front of the room, there was new light, light revealing two indistinct forms. The light brightened further, and I recognized the two women from the front door. But they were no longer wearing their uniforms. They were in their own gowns, both black and low cut.

And on each head, a witch’s hat.

“Look, lover,” said one. “New pets.” She snapped her fingers. All the ghosts in the room shifted their attention to the witch and then began floating towards her.

A woman screamed.

“Silence!” said the other. “The next one of you to make a peep joins our new pets.” At that, nearly all of us shut up, but one woman yelled, “You can’t do that.”

There was a thump, and a moment later, from my right, a new ghost began to rise from a figure, slumped over the table.

“We’re not joking,” said the witch. Then she cackled. “Darling, they look so scared.”

“Foolish mortals. To enter our domain on All Hallows Eve. Very foolish. Come, my pets.”

With that, the ghosts floated closer, and then, together, they each appeared to kneel down before the two witches.

My heart had begun pounding when the doors slammed closed, and nothing so far had changed that. I realized I was squeezing Isis's hand into a pulp, so I slowly released it and clutched her arm again. She clutched back, and I wondered if she was every bit afraid as I was.

"Oh, lovely," said one of the witches. "But darling, whatever shall we do with the rest. They look so delicious in their gowns and their fear."

"Maybe we should let them go." There was a pause, and then they both began laughing, the sound seeming to fill the entire dining room.

"Perhaps we should let some of them go," said one. "If they are sufficiently amusing."

"Oh, my darling," said the other. "Do you propose... entertainment?" She clapped her hands. "A competition. I do approve."

"Puzzles," said the first.

"Clues," said the other.

"They must... free their compatriots!" said the first. "Or remain our pets for eternity."

They both clapped happily, but then they looked at each other. "But..."

"We haven't taken enough pets. They must all have someone to win."

"Or more likely lose," said the other."

"Our pets, go forth and choose more pets."

"We must have one from each table."

The ghosts rose, turned, and began to float amongst the tables. One woman screamed, and the nearest ghost rushed to her. From the glow of the ghost, we all saw the woman collapse, and then a fresh ghost rose from her slumped body.

Some tables had already lost a woman, and those tables were passed by. We weren't not the nearest, and as we sat, staring in horror, the ghosts roamed the full tables. They appeared to examine each woman, and then a ghost would touch one of the women, and she would slump, a fresh ghost rising from her.

No one else spoke; no one offered herself.

Four of the ghosts reached our table. They looked at each of us, and then they centered on Jess. One reached for her, but I jumped to my feet, pushing my chair back roughly. "No!" I screamed. "Not her. Don't take her. Take me instead."

“No, Marita,” Jess said.

“You’re my best friend.” I looked at the witches. “Take me instead. Let her go.”

“Well, well,” said the witches. And then one stepped away, walking slowly towards us. I held my ground, but turned as she came to look at me. “A brave one after all.”

“Let Jess go. Let them all go. Take me instead.”

She shook her head and made a gesture. “Take her.”

“No!” I screamed, but then Jess slumped, and her ghost rose. “No!” I screamed again. I would have launched myself at the witch, but I couldn’t move, I couldn’t move a further muscle.

“So brave,” she said. She gave a laugh. “We’ll give you a fighting chance. We’ll give you all a fighting chance.”

“You killed her!”

“Not yet. Oh, she’s not dead yet, but if you don’t free her, she will be, and ours forever. What is your name?”

“I’m not telling you that.” She gestured, and Jess’s ghost began to shriek. “Stop it! Stop it! Marita. My name is Marita!” The witch gestured, and Jess’s ghost grew quiet. “Don’t hurt her. Please don’t hurt her.”

“You are here with this one.” She gestured to Isis. “But you beg for that one. She’s been your lover?”

“Best friends for as long as I can remember.”

“You love her.”

“Yes.”

She smiled. “Well then. How brave are you, Marita?”

“Not very.”

“Accept what I am about to do to you, and your group will have your first clue. That puts you ahead of these others.”

“I can’t even move. I think you can do anything you want to me.”

“I can, but it’s far more fun if you accept willingly.” She smiled. “This time, anyway.”

“Fine.”

“Make this pleasant for me, and it will be a good clue.” And then she stepped closer. I still couldn’t move, and that didn’t change as she wrapped arms around me or as she brought our lips together.

And then I could move. She kissed me, and while I was slow to respond, I knew I was fighting for Jess’s very soul. I kissed the witch, and I gave it everything I had besides. And so, she took a very long kiss from me, leaving me breathless before releasing me. “Oh, very nice. I do hope you lose. I would love to keep you.” Then she whispered into my ear, “There are actually seven floors to our home, and your first puzzle begins at one extreme or the other.”

Then she released me, but she guided me to my chair. “Come, our pets!”

From the light of the ghosts, we watched the witch return to the other. And then they all blinked out, from one moment to the next. There was a pause, and then the lights came back on, but only halfway.

Jess’s body was gone. They all were.

The doors slammed open, one after another, just like they had closed.

First Puzzle

About half the women ran from the room, some of them screaming about, “We have to get out of here.” Then we heard muffled banging and screaming, cries to “let us go”.

“The rest of you can do what you want,” I said. “I’m going to free Jess.”

“We’re all going to free Jess,” Isis said. “What did she say to you?” I repeated it, and then she asked, “What do you suppose that means?”

“I bet there’s an attic,” I said. “And a basement. Maybe a dungeon. But that’s only five.”

“Maybe a basement and a dungeon,” Fidelia suggested. “Six.”

“Roof?” Marcelina suggested. “Do you think that could be seven?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But she could have meant almost anything.”

“I bet we either have to go to the basement or the attic,” Fidelia said.

“We’ve been to the top floor,” Jodie said. “I didn’t see any stairs to the attic, and the doors were all locked.”

“Not true. The doors we tried were locked. We didn’t remotely try all the doors.”

“Let’s go,” Isis said.

As a group, we all turned. I clasped Isis’s arm, and Jodie pressed against Fidelia. But the five of us hurried for the central stairs, ignoring the woman trying to break down the front door. They didn’t seem to be getting anywhere. We left everyone else behind.

“Split up or stick together?” Isis asked once we reached the top floor.

“Stick together,” I said. “It’s not as fast, but we need to look out for each other. For that matter.” And I reached over and grabbed Marcelina’s hand. “Stick together. Fidelia, you and Jodie check the left doors. We’ll check the right.”

We went from door to door. It appeared all the doors that had been locked were still locked, and excepting bathrooms, every door that was closed was locked. We checked the entire floor, and then Jodie said, “Well, crap.”

“Basement, then,” Isis said. She tugged me towards the main staircase, but Fidelia said, “No. That one only goes to the main floor. Let’s try the back

staircase. That's probably the servant's stairs."

And so we all turned and circled halfway around the floor. These stairs were much simpler, and we descended. They ended at the kitchen, but there was a stout, wooden door, and when Jodie tried the handle, it opened, slowly.

We descended. The light grew dimmer, and I clutched myself to Isis, but we descended. At the bottom, I grabbed Marcelina's hand again.

Upstairs had been opulent. The basement was... just a basement. We reached a small room, perhaps ten-feet-square, with three other exits. "Which way?"

"Open them all." She moved to the right door. Jodie and Fidelia moved to the one directly across. We got to ours first and opened it. It was a corridor, the walls stone.

"This one won't open."

Marcelina dropped my hand and moved to the final door. "This one won't, either."

"I don't like this," I said.

"I don't like any of it," Fidelia said.

"There's that."

"I guess we go this way."

The corridor was narrow, but I grabbed Marcelina's hand. She was forced to follow along behind me, but we kept together. But we searched. There were rooms. Some were empty. Some were used for storage.

And then one of the ghosts appeared in front of us. Jodie shrieked, but Fidelia shushed her. The ghost moved closer, looking at us. She looked so sad, but she didn't try to touch us. Then she turned and began to drift away.

"Follow her," Isis said.

We did, until she disappeared through a closed door. Jodie stepped forward and opened the door, exposing another staircase down.

"Dungeon," she whispered.

We clustered together at the top. It smelled dank. The ghost had reached the bottom and was still drifting further. "Follow her."

We went down the stairs. There was a long corridor, and to each side, rooms. I looked into one and staired.

“Dungeon,” Isis said. “A real dungeon.”

We followed the ghost, but briefly looked into each room. Each featured some instrument of torture, straight out of some bad movie.

We reached a T-intersection. The ghost drifted right. We got twenty steps, and she passed through a set of bars and kept going.

We weren't able to follow her. Ten feet further, she passed through another, and another, four in all before coming to a stop. Then she turned and beacons us to follow her.

There wasn't a hinge. No handle. No lock. We searched. We tried lifting, pushing, shaking, but we couldn't figure out how pass through the gate.

“She's coming back,” Marcelina said. We all pulled away as the ghost reached us, but rather than following, she stepped into a little alcove a few feet on this side of the gate. She stayed a moment then floated out, but she pointed at us then pointed at the alcove.

“What does she want?”

Jodie stepped forward, looked at the ghost, and said, “She's trying to help us.” She moved to the alcove, standing fully in it.

And the gate began to lift, clattering its way up. Finally it came to a stop. The ghost turned and headed for the far end again.

“Ooh, two points for me,” Jodie said. Then she stepped forward, and as soon as she left the alcove, the gate began to descend again.

“Someone has to stay here,” Fidelia says.

“I will, then,” Jodie offered. She moved back into the alcove, and the gate rose.

There was a similar alcove before each gate. Fidelia held the second. At the third, I turned to Marcelina. “You take this one.”

“No,” she said. She clasped my hand. “Iris.”

My date didn't argue with me, but at the fourth gate, Marcelina and I came to a stop, our hands on the bars. Ahead was a dead end. The ghost was standing facing the far wall, but we could see through her, and hanging from a hook on the wall was a complicated skeleton key.

“Not so bad,” she said. “I'll get the key.” She gave me a little push to the alcove. I didn't argue with her. As soon as stepped fully into the alcove, the last

gate began to rise. It was still on the way when Marcelina ducked underneath it, and a moment later I heard her say, "Got it!"

A second or two later, all four gates came down, far faster than they had, clanging at the bottom. I gave a shout, and I wasn't the only one. "Not funny!" Marcelina complained. "Marita, let me out."

"I didn't move," I said.

"I didn't, either," Iris said. "Maybe it only lasts so long."

I stepped out, paused, and then stepped back into the alcove. The gate didn't move. "We're trapped." I ran to Marita's gate and tried to open it. It was just as stuck as the first one was. We worked on it together, but then I stared into her eyes. Neither of us spoke.

But then the ghost was beside us. I shied away from her, but she had my attention, and she pointed to my alcove. It took some encouragement, but Isis said, "Do what she wants, Marita."

I moved to my alcove. Once I did it, she smiled briefly, but then held her hand out in a "stay" gesture. Then she disappeared back where Marcelina was waiting. "She wants me to go back."

A moment later, the gate opened. I couldn't see Marcelina, but I could see Isis, and she stepped away. That gate opened. "Try it now," she called out. I couldn't see them from my alcove, but I heard the remaining two gates lift.

"Come on, Marcelina," Jodie called.

And then all the gates came back down again. But Marcelina appeared at her bars. Tears were crawling down her eyes, but she held the key to me. "The end of the hall is like the alcoves," she said. "The gates came down when I stepped off of it."

"Maybe if you run really fast."

"We won't all make it," she said. "I don't think I can make it to this one, but you'd have to stay where you are until I'm past you, and then Isis and Fidelia. Take the key. Free Jess." She held it to me.

"No," I whispered.

"Or we're all trapped."

"Take the key, Marita."

"We're not leaving her."

“Just do it.”

“I’ll stay,” I offered. “Marcelina and I can trade.”

“You need to free Jess,” she said. “Maybe they’ll let me go if you free Jess.”

I didn’t believe it, but I stepped over and took the key, then I clutched her hand. “Kiss me first,” she whispered. I did, through the bars, and caressed her cheek, and then she turned around and walked to the far side. She looked over her shoulder. “Go.”

With dread, I turned and retraced my steps. When Isis stepped out of her alcove, her gate dropped, leaving two between us and Marcelina, then three, then all four. We turned, looking down at her.

The ghost was kissing her, and then it lowered her body to the floor.

And another ghost rose. The two looked at each other then faded away.

“Fuck,” I said.

“Yeah,” Isis agreed.

Battlements

I held the key up. It was huge and heavy. One end was a complicated skeleton key and the other end was flat. Etched into the flat section was some sort of drawing.

“It’s a sideways floor plan,” Fidelia said. She pointed. “Dungeon. Basement.” Alongside the drawing for the attic was a symbol.

“What’s the star?”

“I think this is the key to attic.”

“It’s as good a theory as any,” Isis said. She took my arm. I clasped to her.

We climbed the stairs, and then faced each other. “It’s a lot of doors.”

“Then we better get started.”

“Let’s think about this,” I said. “Think about where the stairs might be. Staircases up are nearly always over more staircases up.

“Good theory,” Isis said. “The main staircase surrounds the foyer, and I don’t think there’s anywhere above it.”

“So it’s probably over these stairs,” I said. “Check the rooms on either side.”

Neither was locked, but we searched them, anyway. There were no hidden doors in the closets, or anything like that. We didn’t find any doors to open with the lock.

Back to plan A. We went out to the corridor and tried the key in every single lock. It didn’t turn, but we spent a long time at it. Finally, we turned to each other.

“Maybe it’s sticky,” Fidelia suggested. “And it takes a jiggle or something.”

“We suck,” I said. “And Jess is going to pay the price.”

“We need to search again,” Isis said. “Sometimes attic doors are in closets.”

“There are a lot of rooms,” Fidelia said. “We’ll be faster if we split up.”

There was a pause. They all looked at me; I’d been the one to insist we stick together. “Fine,” I said. “Isis and I will go that way.”

We searched. Isis took the inside rooms. I took the outside. It wasn't until we reached the very last door, a linen closet, that I realized...

"A door! Who has the key?" There was actually a door in the back of the linen closet. I could just barely see it.

"I do," Isis said, stepping out. She hurried to me. I began yanking things out of the way until I found a lock. I took the key from her, reached through...

And it turned.

"Go get the others," I said. I set myself to removing everything else from the closet, and then spent a minute figuring out how to remove the shelves. I was just pulling the last one out of the way and setting it aside when Isis returned with Jodie and Fidelia. They both looked in, and then it was Fidelia that stepped forward and opened the door, exposing a staircase.

* * * *

It was... an attic. "Now what?"

That was when Marcelina's ghost appeared. She hovered before us, looking at each. "The last time we followed a ghost, it didn't turn out very good."

"It got us this far," Isis said. "Marcelina? Can you hear us?"

She gave no indication, but then she turned, and we followed her through the attic. She led us to another door. Isis stepped forward, and the door opened with a creak. Past her was a short flight up, and cold air rushed in. "It's the roof," she said.

Marcelina floated past her, and we followed her, through the door, up three stairs, and onto the roof. And that was when I realized the house had a battlement. We moved to the edge, looking down.

"We can't get down that way," Fidelia said at the same time Marcelina's ghost drifted in front of us, then she began darting at us. We shied from her, and she drove us away from the edge. Then she calmed down and turned.

We followed her around to the back side of the house. And there on the roof was a table, and on the table were several small chests, the size of jewelry boxes. The ghost moved to one, pointing at it.

I didn't hesitate. I stepped forward and lifted the lid of the chest. Inside was an envelope, and from the light from the ghost, I could see, written in what appeared to be blood, "Team Jess."

“This one is ours,” I said. Marcelina’s ghost faded away. “Shit. Now I can’t read it.”

“Come on.” Isis grabbed my hand. The four of us retraced our steps, down the steps, through the attic, and into the corridor of the third floor. There, I opened the envelope and withdrew a small packet of papers. I folded it open and stared.

“Find the maiden,” I whispered.

“Fuck me,” Jodie said. “There was an iron maiden in the dungeon.”

“No,” Isis said. “This is totally fucked up.” I stared at the note. “We’re not playing,” she yelled. “Just let us go! We’re done playing.”

“Are you?” We all turned and then froze. The witch who had kissed me was standing ten feet away, watching us. “That’s not very entertaining. Not a single one of you is leaving before our game is over, and some of you not even then, perhaps.”

I took a half step towards her. She gestured, and I froze in place. She waved a finger at me.

“Tsk, tsk. Tell me why I shouldn’t simply claim the rest of you right now?”

“Because I kissed you.”

She moved closer, looking at me. “And I paid you for that kiss.”

“You’re not ready for your fun to end.”

She lifted a hand, brushing my cheek. I tried to pull away but couldn’t. “Leave her alone!” Isis ordered.

The witch pointed her free hand at Isis. “Silence.” Isis began making choking sounds.

“Please don’t hurt her,” I whispered. “What do you want?”

The choking noises stopped, and the witch turned her gaze back to me. She smiled. “Find the maiden, and then *you* will choose which of your companions accepts her embrace.”

“I’m not killing anyone. Maybe we should get out while we can.”

“How will you do that?”

“Knotted bedsheets and go down from the roof.”

“Interesting plan. Do you really think I’d allow you to do that? How will you feel when it is your own, dear Jess who claims you with a kiss of your soul, bringing you to me?”

“You’re just going to kill us one by one.”

“We haven’t killed anyone, yet,” she said. “We have simply separated their souls from their bodies. You have five seconds to agree to continue to play our games.” At that, several of the ghosts appeared behind her. They moved forward. “Four. Three.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one ghost approaching Fidelia, reaching for her

“Okay!” I agreed. “We’ll play. Please don’t hurt them.”

The witch gestured, and the ghosts stilled. The witch still had one hand on my cheek. She smiled. “You, I like.” I couldn’t take my eyes from her. She brushed my cheek with her fingers, but it seemed absentminded. Her next words filled me with dread. “I can’t let this rebellion go unpunished.”

Filled me with dread? I was already filled with dread. More dread? I hadn’t realized I had room for more.

“What are you going to do to us?”

“You weren’t the instigator.” Her voice turned cold, and her eyes flicked over my right shoulder. “She was.”

“Can you blame her for trying to protect us? Do you have any empathy at all?”

“Of course, I do! If I didn’t have any empathy, how could I possibly enjoy your fear?” Then she smiled. “One of you will strip down to your intimates and walk through the Pit of Despair. Until then, she can’t speak, and she sees nothing but the terrors of this place.” She made a gesture.” She caressed my cheek and began to withdraw.

“Wait! What is the Pit of Despair?”

“You’ll see.”

“How do we find it?”

“It’s in the dungeon, of course.”

“The other doors didn’t open.”

“Then here’s a hint: there’s a trick to the doors. If you need more help than that, then all of you will walk The Pit.” She leaned forward and kissed me,

briefly this time. “I enjoy watching you struggle, but I will enjoy making you my pet.”

Then she withdrew, stepping backwards until she, along with the ghosts, disappeared. A moment later, I found I could move. I turned to Isis, but glanced around, ensuring myself Fidelia and Jodie were still with us. I took Isis’s arm. “Can you hear me, Isis?” She nodded and turned vaguely in my direction. Her mouth opened, but no words came out. “We’ll take care of you. Jodie, help me. Fidelia, lead us downstairs.”

The Pit

Fidelia led us to the dungeon. Along the way, we heard distant screams, but I said simply, “We can’t help them.”

And now we were in the room with the three doors, all closed. Fidelia walked to the door opposite the stairs. It opened, well, not readily, as it was a heavy door, but it opened with no more struggle than expected for such a thick door. “Huh,” she said.

“Jodie, try the first door.” She made sure I had Isis then walked to the door. She struggled with it, but it wouldn’t open. Fidelia left her door open but went to the third, and it also wouldn’t open.

“I guess we go that way,” she said, gesturing to the open door.

“No. We figure out the trick,” I countered. “Close that one.” Fidelia didn’t argue. She walked back and closed the first door, and Jodie nearly fell on her ass as her door opened. “Of course. Only one can open at a time. Oh shit. If someone leaves one door open, we could be trapped. We’re lucky that didn’t happen earlier.”

“Pick a door,” Fidelia said.

“That one,” I said, gesturing to the middle door, the one she had just closed. Jodie closed the first door we used. Fidelia opened the second. “Leave it open. Jodie, help me with Isis.”

* * * *

We passed through more dungeon, some of the doors open, others closed. Jodie looked into each open door, but we kept going. Finally, we reached the end of the corridor facing another stout door. “Locked,” Fidelia said.

We backtracked and tried door three. This time, it wouldn’t open. Fidelia swore. We tried playing games with all three doors, but we were only able to open doors one and two. Then she said, “Of course. Come on.” She led the way back to door two, ushering three of us through before closing the door behind us.

“Hey!” I complained.

“I have a theory. Come on.” She stepped ahead and moved to the furthest door. She struggled with it, but she had it open by the time Jodie, Isis, and I arrived. She smiled. “It wouldn’t open while the doors back there were open.”

“Shit,” I muttered. “Fine. What’s inside?”

She looked and sighed. "A cave."

"Sounds like a great place for something called the Pit of Despair," I said. "Lead the way."

There was light, although not much, and it was of a decidedly red tinge. There wasn't room for three abreast, so Fidelia and Jodie led the way, looking over their shoulders from time to time to ensure Isis and I kept up.

The cave meandered, although not all that far. The walk took us three or four minutes, but then there was more light ahead. As we drew closer, we saw several of the ghosts waiting for us. Isis began to tremble, but I whispered reassuringly to her.

But we had found the pit.

The cave opened, becoming a roughly circular cavern, the ceiling ten or fifteen feet over our heads. There was a ledge and a short set of stairs down. There was a similar stairs and ledge on the opposite side. Waiting for us was the witch.

The ghosts floated around, some watching us, some exploring, two staying near the witch, although they all seemed to switch off which was doing witch.

"There you are," she said. She held up a vial. "One of you will strip down to undies and bra. You will come here, and I will hand this to you. It is the antidote to what I've done to Isis, and I promise you, it tastes absolutely terrible."

"I'll do it," Jodie said, but the witch gestured. Two of the ghosts flitted lower, their light illuminating the pit. Jodie screamed. Isis opened her mouth to also scream, but hers was silent.

The floor of the pit was moving, a mass of crawling bugs.

The witch cackled. "You didn't think something called the Pit of Despair would be an easy hike across the mall, did you?"

"Jodie! Take care of Isis. I'll do it."

"You really have a martyr complex, Marita," said the witch. "Not you."

"I can't," Jodie said. "I can't. I can't."

"One of us has to go into the iron maiden," Fidelia pointed out.

The witch said nothing, but then Isis began undressing. I turned to her, my heart breaking. Again. But then I took her clothes, steadying her at times. But

then I knelt before her and saw to her shoes for her. While I was there, I knelt forward and kissed the top of each foot. When I rose, she caressed my cheek and then pointed to the pit.

I had to help her to the stairs, but then the witch said, “She can see enough from there. Remember to walk, Isis. My little friends wish to greet you.”

Jodie began moaning, her arms wrapped around her, and she said, “Oh, god. Oh, god.”

“You’re not helping,” I said more harshly than I intended. At that, Fidelia turned to her date and wrapped her arms about her.

It was horrible to watch. Isis did well until she got about halfway across. That was when a monster of a millipede crawled up her leg. She began screaming wordlessly, brushing and slapping at her skin and dancing about. The witch said nothing, but when Isis made no further progress, I knew I had to help.

I tried talking, tried to calm her down. But she didn’t register my voice. Finally I shoved clothing into Jodie’s arms and began to undress myself. At that, the witch cackled, but she didn’t stop me.

Stepping into the pit was probably the hardest thing I’d ever done. Something squished under my foot. “Eww. Eww. Eww!”

I shuffled forward, stirring the bugs. They began crawling my legs. I swatted them away. “Eww! Eww!” But I made it to Isis. I swatted away bugs for her, for myself, and then I stepped in front of her and took her hands. She let me draw her forward. We made one or two steps, and then I had to chase more of the bugs away.

“Almost here,” said the witch. “Oh, it is so much fun watching you dance.”

We made it to the steps. I stepped up backwards, brushing the bugs off, pulling Isis up, swatting away the gross little monsters, swatting, brushing, and screaming a little, but then we were both free of the pit, and none of the creepy crawling chased after us.

I turned to the witch and held my hand out. She gave me the potion. I uncorked it and turned to Isis. I lifted to her lips and poured it down. She began making gagging noises.

“Drink it!” I ordered. “I didn’t go through this for you to spit it out. Drink it!”

She drank it, and then after a moment, her eyes focused on me. She reached for me and pulled me into a crushing hug. “Thank you.”

She held me, trembling. I think we were both trembling. But then the witch said, “How sweet. And just think. You only have to cross back. I wonder what I’m offered.”

I turned to her. “To show us another route?”

“Oh, no. You’re walking back through the pit.” But she gestured upwards, and several ghosts rose to the ceiling. It, too, was crawling with bugs, and as we watched, several of them fell, plopping into the mass below.

“No,” Isis and I both whispered. I turned back to the witch. “Please,” I said.

“You’re walking the pit, but I don’t have to allow any more to fall,” said the witch. She pointed to the feet. “Worship. Both of you.”

Isis was first. She dropped to her knees, lowered her lips, and began kissing one of the witch’s feet. I took a moment, but then I knelt beside Isis and began to kiss the other foot. The witch let that go on for a minute before leaning over and brushing at our hair. “How lovely. I like seeing both of you like this. But do remember this moment. I think we’ll be revisiting it.”

And then she stepped away. I looked over at Isis, and then we both rose. I considered a cutting remark to the witch, but instead I took Isis by the hand, and together we stepped to the pit. It was every bit as gross walking back, but nothing dropped onto us from the ceiling.

But I’d feel things crawling on me for the next hour.

Maiden

We had no trouble finding the iron maiden. Jodie, with few words, led us directly there. The doors behaved for us, and then we stood facing the torture device, holding hands, two-by-two. Finally, it was Fidelia who pointed out, “She said you had to decide, Marita.”

“I’ll do it,” Isis said.

“Let her,” Fidelia said.

I was of half a mind right then to push Fidelia into it and slam it closed. Instead, I released Isis’s hand then stepped forward, turned around, and lifted one hand holding four fingers up. Then I turned around, my back to them. “You each pick a number, one through three. Make sure you each get a different number. Tell me when you’re ready.”

There was a pause, and then Fidelia said, “You switch.”

“*You* switch,” Isis replied.

“I’m not switching.”

“For heaven’s sake!” I yelled.

“Fine. We’re ready,” Isis said.

“Two.” I turned around then looked at Jodie sadly. “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.” She stepped past me. The doors of the iron maiden were open. We all watched until Jodie said, “It’s not a real iron maiden.”

“What is it?”

“It looks like one, but there are no spikes.” She sighed. “I don’t know if I can just climb in.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again. I stepped to her, took her by the wrists, and turned around. She didn’t fight me, but she whimpered as I pushed her backwards. Then Fidelia and Isis were there. As I held Jodie in place, they began closing the doors.

I began crying. Jodie began crying. The doors closed, but there was an open door at head level, and so I watched as tears crawled down her cheeks.

Fidelia closed that, and the two did the various latches. Jodie began sobbing, and I was right behind her. Then her sobs turned into screams, screams, and I yelled, “Let her out! Let her out!”

Before anyone could move, her ghost rose from the top of the iron maiden. “It’s too late,” Isis said. “This isn’t your fault, Marita.”

Jodie’s ghost looked around, then we backed up as it approached us, floating closer. It looked at us, one after another, and then it stepped forward again. We backed up, bumping into another of the torture devices.

And the ghost wrapped Fidelia in a hug.

She didn’t scream, but she went limp before collapsing to the floor. Instead, I screamed.

And then Fidelia and Jodie’s ghosts were together, embracing.

I turned to Isis, burying my face against her. She wrapped arms around me, crooning softly.

When next I looked, Fidelia’s body was gone. Without words, Isis and I stepped to the maiden. We opened it, and Jodie’s body was also gone. Instead, waiting for us, was an envelope. Isis picked it up, opened it, and withdrew a single sheet of paper. She turned it to me.

Second floor.

Game

Jess was waiting on the landing to the second floor. Well, Jess's ghost was waiting. Isis and I arrived holding hands. Jess floated closer then rose up to look into my eyes. She nodded and drifted away, gesturing us to follow.

She led the way down the hall. We hadn't explored this floor, but when she passed through a closed door, we stepped forward and tried the handle. It opened easily.

It was, well, a sort of living room, I suppose. There were two sofas, angled to be able to watch a television. There was a coffee table, and on the table a pad and pen. Behind us, the door closed, and a moment later, the television came on.

It was the witch, and she was seated, looking out at us, several of the ghosts clustered about her. The witch smiled. "Well, it's time for a new game. This will be a logic game with a wager. One of you will play against my champion. If your champion wins, then I will release one of your companions to you. If your champion loses, the other becomes mine. Choose? Who will play, and who will serve as our wager?"

I turned to Isis. "Tell me you're good at logic games, because I'm not."

"I'm not bad," Isis replied.

"Well then."

"Excellent," said the witch. "Take your seats, one per sofa." She gestured.

I turned to Isis. "Kiss me first." I moved into her arms and didn't wait. She gave me a blistering kiss. I tried to enjoy it, but it was hard to ignore the situation we were in. The witch didn't rush us, but eventually we sat down. Isis picked up the pad and pen. And then Jodie's ghost appeared to assume a seat, and she had her own ghostly pad and pen. I groaned.

Jodie was very good at logic puzzles.

"There shall be no cheating," said the witch. "I will not help my champion. Marita, you will not help yours, or I shall declare you forfeit, and you will not enjoy the punishment." I nodded understanding. "I will state a set of conditions and ask two questions. Are you ready, Champion?"

"Ready."

"Marita will be pleasing seven lovers: Isis, Jess, Fidelia, Jodie, Marcelina, Mickie, and..." She placed her hand to her chest. "Vesta. She will do so one

after the other. These are the conditions. Isis will not be the first or last to receive an orgasm. At least one person must receive her orgasm between Mickie and Vesta. If Isis is first, then Marcelina may not receive her orgasm either immediately before or immediately after Jodie. Finally, Jess must receive her orgasm before Vesta. Do you need me to repeat that?"

"No."

"Good. Question one. If Isis is first, Mickie is fifth, and Marcelina is last, which of the following must be true?" She went on to offer five possible choices. "Second question. What is one possible order that fits these rules? Begin."

Isis and Jodie both began writing. The ghost shifted her gaze to me. "Do not be so frightened, Marita. If your champion wins. I will free someone to you, and we may have more games. Won't that be fun?"

"I don't know."

"But if my champion wins, then she'll take you to join me, and you'll be with your friend in service to me, my pet." She smiled. "I did enjoy when you worshipped my foot. I may allow more of that."

"Why are you doing this to us?"

"Because we can."

From where I sat, I couldn't see either pad, but I could see what was happening on the television. The witch, Vesta, was offering attention to two of her ghosts. I thought one more was kneeling in front of her, but I couldn't see what it was doing. "You can touch them."

"I can," she said. "And when you join them, you will feel their touch, and they yours." She smiled. "My pet."

I looked at Isis. She was writing frantically. Jess took a moment then wrote a little more on her pad before setting it in her lap.

"Pen down, Champion," ordered the witch.

"Not yet," Isis said. "I'm close."

"Pen down!" yelled the witch. "Or you are in default, and Marita will suffer." Isis lifted the pen then leaned forward and set it on the coffee table. She offered an apologetic look.

"However well you did, it's better than I would have," I admitted.

"Show your answers, my pet," said the witch. Jess lifted her pad. She had

circled, one of the answers and then written out a sequence of women. The witch smiled. “And yours, Champion?”

Isis lifted her own pad. She had circled the same answer to the first question, but she hadn’t completed a workable sequence.

“Well, I gave you a chance,” said the witch. “My champion, bring your good friend into my service.”

I didn’t try to resist. Jess slipped from her chair and knelt before me. And then she climbed into my lap. I could already feel her weight, and I could feel as she wrapped arms around me. I could feel as she kissed me.

And then my body slumped, but Jess took my hands and pulled me up from the sofa. I turned to see myself slumped on the sofa. I looked down at myself. I was translucent, ghostly white. And I knew in my heart I now belonged to the witches, both of them. But I turned. Isis was staring at me, tears crawling down her cheeks.

I floated over to her, but I was careful not to touch her. I crouched down. I tried to tell her, “I love you,” but no words came out. But I blew her a kiss.

And then Jess was beside me. She took my hand, and when she tugged, I followed. Together, we floated from the room.

Serving

Holding my hand, Jess led me through the house. We went downstairs and then floated through a closed door. Inside we found a large parlor. Both witches and countless ghosts were about, some of them kneeling, one massaging the other witch's shoulders. Some of the ghosts were embracing each other. Two were kissing, and on the other side of the room, it looked like three were offering mutual attention.

Jess led me to Vesta. Without a word from anyone, we knelt to her. That was when she said, "Worship." We both floated closer, each of us choosing a foot to kiss.

Time passed.

We ghosts served the witches, offering them attention or amusement. I spent some of the time sitting on the floor at Vesta's feet, leaning against her chair while massaging a foot, Jess doing the same from the other side.

From time to time, one of the witches would send some of us out of the room, intent on some task or another. The first time I was sent, it was to claim another woman and bring her to Mickie. The next, it was to guide three women to the Pit of Despair and then to help illuminate the pit by hovering over it, my ghostly light shining upon the wriggling creatures below me. All three refused to traverse the pit, and so Vesta claimed the entire group, but she assigned other ghosts to the women, and I simply returned to the parlor with her.

Then a ghost came back, and Mickie said, "Larue has failed me, and I am forced to release one of my pets. Larue must be punished."

We knew what to do. How? I didn't know. But Larue went from one ghost to another. At each, she climbed across our laps, pulled up her gown, and we each gave her three sharp spanks. But then Mickie took her into her arms and kissed her, the ghost snuggling into the witch's arms for a minute.

A few minutes later, Vesta sent me out. I didn't know where to go, but I ended in a room on the third floor, one of the gaming rooms. One woman was waiting, one clearly frightened woman. She was seated at a card table, a deck of cards on the table before her. I sat down opposite her. She looked at me. "Please let me win."

I would have, but then Vesta whispered to me, "If you play your best, your punishment for losing will be minor, but if I believe you let her win, you and all

your companions will be punished terribly. You'll wish you were back in The Pit."

"I'm sorry," I mouthed to the woman. She paused then nodded before picking up the cards. She shuffled and dealt. We were to play poker.

I picked up my cards. When I did, they became ghostly cards in my hands, the originals still on the table. The other woman raised hers. "Bet," she said.

I looked down. I had ghostly poker chips. I collected two and set them on the middle of the table. When my hand lifted away, the ghostly chips turned real. The woman looked at them then added two of her own. "How many cards?" I cocked my head, not sure what she was asking. "We're playing five-card-draw. Do you know how to play poker?"

I nodded, selected two cards, and set them down, separate from the three real cards. They remained ghostly. She dealt me two more cards, also separate from the three real ones, and I picked them up. Once I had, she brushed my seven real cards together into a pile. "Two for me. Bet."

I'd gotten lucky. I had two pair, aces and threes. But I wasn't feeling confident, so I only put one chip out. "I see your chip," she said, sliding out one of hers. "And I add three more."

I considered then called her bet. We each laid down our cards. I had the two pair; she had three sevens and collected the chips.

In all, we played only seven hands. She dealt for us, but she alternated who she was dealing for. I folded the second hand. I won a small pot on the third. She folded the fourth. Then she won a big pot on the fifth. I folded on the sixth. On the seventh, I had crap, and I think she did, too, as I bet one chip and she only called. I asked for three cards; she took one. I watched her as she looked at it, and she sighed.

I looked at mine. I'd kept a ten-jack, the two highest cards in my hand. I picked up an eight, nine, and queen. What are the chances? I had a straight, which I knew was pretty darned good. And she had sighed.

I pushed all my chips to the middle. When they turned real, she counted them out and then laid her own chips out to match. I flipped my cards over.

"Straight," she said. She began smiling and turned over her hand. Five clubs.

We had each gotten what we had needed, but her hand was higher. I sighed, my heart heavy. I had failed Vesta.

“Bring her to the dungeon,” Vesta said. “Her reward is inside the maiden.”

I stood and gestured. The woman followed me. I floated through doors. She had to open them behind me. But I led her down to the dungeon. At the top of the final stairs, she balked. “I’m not going down there.”

I shrugged. Not my problem.

“Keep going,” Vesta ordered. And so I turned and floated down the stairs. A moment later, I heard footsteps behind me.

I brought her to the proper room, floating through doors she had to open. Then I pointed at the maiden. She rushed past me, figured out the latches, and opened the device. Inside, a woman waited, and the two hugged tightly.

“Come to me, Marita.”

I floated up the stairs.

* * * *

I took my punishment, a copy of Larue’s from earlier, and then I spent the next several minutes worshipping Vesta’s feet.

Then Isis was there beside me, also kneeling before the witch.

* * * *

Vesta didn’t send me out again. I felt bad for having failed her, but she didn’t seem disappointed with me. Instead, I served her, doing anything she asked. For a while, she let Isis and me move to one of the sofas and encouraged us to share ourselves with each other. We didn’t make ghostly love, but we cuddled, we kissed, we touched.

Eventually, the witches caught all the women who had sat for dinner. They took their simple pleasures from us, their simple amusements, but at the same time, they weren’t cruel to their pets. Vesta let Jess and I hug as often as we wanted.

Then she gave everyone permission to rub my bottom and seemed amused when the other ghosts took advantage of it. Mickie offered two others, and then there were six of us whose bottoms were rubbed. I liked it, and I found myself squirming a lot.

But then Mickie said to Vesta, “The sun rises shortly, and our night of pleasure comes to an end.”

“We should keep them,” Vesta replied.

“We cannot.”

“Not even one? I like that one.” She pointed to me. “And you seem to enjoy those two especially well.”

“We cannot,” Mickie repeated. “Even we must follow the rules. It is time to say goodbye and return them to their lives.”

Vesta sighed dramatically. “If we must,” she said. She rose and stepped forward. They each moved amongst the ghosts, offering touches, quiet words, and a few kisses. And as they did so, we began to fade away.

When Vesta reached me, I knelt before her, but she knelt down, setting her hands on my shoulders, and lifted me. I rose to her, and we embraced, sharing one, final kiss. And then I felt myself fade.

Recovery

I came to awareness slowly. I heard others. I opened my eyes. I was lying on the floor. I started to sit up, and then Jess was there, helping me. She looked haunted, but she was no longer a ghost.

I looked around; all the women from dinner were there. Isis was sitting a few feet from me, staring straight ahead. Jodie and Fidelia were hugging each other. Some of the women were still lying down. A few others were crying. I looked at Jess. "Altered," I whispered.

She nodded.

I opened my arms, and she practically threw herself at me. We hugged tightly. I kissed her ear and whispered, "I love you so much." She hugged tighter.

It was a long hug, but slowly, together, we relaxed. Isis had a blank stare, but she was turned to me. I considered, then crawled to her. I sat down, facing her, and caressed her cheek. "Hey."

"Hey," she said.

"Are you all right?"

She shook her head. "No."

She looked terrible, tired, dark-eyed, and haunted. In other words, she looked about how I felt.

"I think," I said, "that Mickie is going to have a hard time getting people to come to her future events."

She shook her head. "That's not it." She dropped her voice to another whisper. "I begged her for you."

"You did?" That felt good to hear. "Really?" She nodded. "I'm not sure I understand, Isis."

"Oh, please," she said. "You're not that oblivious."

"Okay," I said. "But... You've never called me. Or anything."

"I'm a decade older than you." She offered a rough laugh. "I've never been a cougar before."

"You look great," I said. "Okay, not at this exact minute." She gave another ragged laugh. "I imagine I don't, either. But you looked amazing last

night.”

“Thanks,” she replied. “So did you.”

“If you called me, I wouldn’t duck your call, Isis.” I set fingers against her cheek and took a kiss. It was sweet and innocent, or so I thought.

I heard a door open. I stood, and I wasn’t the only one. We turned to see Mickie and Vesta walk in. At first, no one spoke. We stared at them. They looked around at us, and if they met any gazes, I couldn’t tell. Finally, Mickie said, “Well, I promised memorable. Can you believe the venue?”

It was Theodora who stepped forward, coming to a stop before Mickie, her arms folded. “You’ve never been that self-serving before.”

Mickie spoke loudly enough for all of us to hear. “I gave guidelines. Make a scary Halloween event at a haunted house.”

“They accomplished that,” Theodora said.

“Make Vesta and me into evil witches.”

“Two for two.”

“But make sure once the scary part was over, it was fun.” Mickie smiled, although it was tentative. “Who here hated the evening once we claimed you?”

No one spoke. I waited to see if anyone would say something, unsure how I felt, then turned to Isis. I kissed her cheek. “I hope you call me.” And then I walked towards Mickie, but stepped past her without a word.

“Marita.”

I paused, then spun, suddenly furious. “I thought I helped you *kill someone*.” I didn’t wait for a response. Instead, I turned and hurried to the front door, hoping our transportation was waiting. There was a coat rack, and I found my coat. Outside, drivers were waiting. They had signs with our names, and I realized I’d be going home with the same group as I had arrived. I stepped to my driver. “Which car is yours?”

Aftermath

Time has passed. Mickie has tried calling each of us. I've blocked her number.

But some things turned out well. Jess and I are as close as we've ever been.

Jodie called me about a week after Halloween and asked if I'd have lunch with her. I had a hard time saying yes, but when we met, she kissed my cheek and asked if we could be friends. So, there's that.

I thought I'd have nightmares; I haven't. Not one. So there's that, too.

As for Isis? We have a date tonight. It's casual, and I don't know if it will last. But I like the way she treats me, and we have a nice time together.

Jess is trying to get me to attend an event at Laser Brains. I'm not ready. But I know she's been after Isis, too. I guess we'll see. If they team up against me, I know I'll cave.

Maybe some strip laser tag wouldn't be so bad.