



Award Winning Author

JODY A. KESSLER

THE CALL

An Angel Falls Novella

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~Ghost Hunting with Chris Abeyta~

Jody A. Kessler

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The Call

Chris Abeyta breathed in the cool alpine air surrounding Tava Mountain. The majestic peak towered over him like a monolith to the Gods. All around him the San Juan Mountains were awakening and greeting the morning. The first day of fall had a crisp nip to the air but the sky was mostly clear with a positive outlook for warm weather.

Chris had chosen to rise before dawn and make the trek up to his favorite spot on the mountainside to greet the sun with a clear mind and to reset his intentions for the coming fall and winter. The spirit of the mountain now spoke to him with the characteristic beauty of the earth and sky and all that lay between.

His breaths came slow and even while listening to the breeze rustle the scrub oaks, whisper through the golden aspen leaves and blend with the chatter of the birds and squirrels. As the sprawling vista transformed from darkness to light he watched the rays of the sun strike the granite rock face above him and crawl down the mountain until he could feel its warmth upon his face.

His serene and peaceful moment was suddenly interrupted by the cell phone buzzing inside his vest pocket. Chris scowled and promptly ignored the call. As far as he was concerned, the importance of the despised electronic leash ranked lower than the mysterious sticky substance stuck to his boot heel. He suspected he'd picked up the manure while crossing the meadow on his way up to timberline but it was inconsequential. Shit on his shoe was a fact of life. It'd rub off soon enough. The phone inside his pocket, however, was a mistake he'd made by unconscious choice. If he'd remembered the blasted thing was with him, he would have left it in the truck, turned off.

He wondered why he even owned one as he let it go to voicemail. Business, his brain reminded him, and family—but mostly for business. If he wanted to continue paying his bills he had to operate his ghost hunting business like a professional. Much to his annoyance, his clients liked to be able to get a hold of him at their convenience, not his.

Switching gears, Chris tried to forget about the phone, and refocus his mind. When it didn't work, he rose from his perch on a boulder, chugged some water from his bottle, and set off, hiking back to his truck.

He descended the mountain, traversing over the sub-alpine terrain. As he passed through a dense section of coniferous forest the phone beeped letting him know he had a message

waiting for him. Before he had a chance to turn off the phone, he saw the dead body lying in his path. He stared down at it, surprised. The dead raven had not been there on his way up. He would have seen it. Chris knew this was not to be ignored.

He glanced around the forest and up to the tree tops before touching it. Silence surrounded him and he turned up his extrasensory perception. The forest is not normally a quiet place, but it could be at times, like right now. He sensed nothing unusual other than the unnatural stillness and let his guard down a fraction of an inch. Aware that ravens often have mates, he paid extra attention to the trees for any black eyes on him or the deceased bird in front of his boots. Nothing watched him and he accepted the fact that Creator had placed the bird before him for a reason, even if he was currently unaware of the reason.

The raven on the trail appeared uninjured, healthy and whole. He carefully flipped it over to see its underside, but could make no diagnosis on how it had died. If Creator wanted him to have raven medicine this day, he would take it with great care and respect.

Chris removed a small pipe from his backpack and packed the bowl with a sacred smoking mixture of his own making. Squatting down, he lit the pipe and blew the smoke over the bird until his bowl was empty. He said prayers for the raven spirit's safe passage to the afterlife before picking it up. Feeling

certain this raven's life was part of a higher purpose, he used his bone-handled knife and took the wings and feet. He placed everything in a canvas sack and set about burying the remains. With the head of the bird pointing west, Chris covered the body with dirt and placed stones on top of the grave in a circle with the four directions in the center. He sprinkled offerings of tobacco and corn pollen, and said one more prayer for the raven and another one of gratitude.

He gathered the canvas sack, his backpack, and checked to make sure his knife was secure on his belt. The unmistakable niggling of his heightened awareness and sensitivities toward the supernatural told him he would need the raven with him as a protector or as a possible messenger from the void. The voicemail alert sounded for a second time. As he hiked down the path toward his pickup, he reached inside his pocket with the intent of turning the annoying phone off like it should have been in the first place. Later, when he returned home, he would muster up enough mental fortitude to deal with whoever wanted him. He tickled the power button to wake it up but the screen stayed black. The phone was already off. He gave it a skeptical look, glanced down at the bag in his hand containing the remnants of the raven and dually noted the otherworldly synchronicities firing at him.

Chris glanced up at the overcast sky. Clouds the color of pale ashes had moved in without him realizing it. The sun,

brilliant and optimistic only an hour or two earlier, was now veiled by clouds. He reached in all directions with his mental and intuitive senses. Nothing spoke to him on any level, physical or spiritual, other than the odd silence. He moved on and saw his truck parked at the base of the hill along the forest service road. He set his objective to pay extra heed to the workings of the universe around him until the current mysteries revealed themselves, or until the signs slowed down and stopped. A single raven called in the distance and Chris listened for an answer from a fellow raven. When no other corvid responded, he knew the raven was confirming his intentions.

Inside his truck he powered up his phone and checked for the message that Great Spirit had alerted him of. A possible new client wanted to speak to him about a job. She didn't give any details other than her phone number and how she had found him. The otherworldly signs were too strong to be disregarded, and as much as he wanted to ignore the message for a day or two, he returned her call before leaving the forest. *What happened to the good ol' days when you could be left alone in the woods?* Listening to the phone ring, he decided he needed to move away. Somewhere where cell towers and sat phones didn't exist. Moving to Mars appealed to him on every level. Then he remembered even the distant planet wasn't exempt from spying satellites and intrusive human beings.

He kept the call brief and to the point. After hanging up, he held the damned device out the window and thought about chucking it into the bushes. He pulled his hand back in knowing he'd be at the store next week for another phone. Instead, he turned it off and tossed it inside the center console.

Chris pulled up in front of a red brick home with a tidy, drought-friendly xeriscaped front yard. The spruce-green front door was the only thing that made this nondescript home stand out among the average middle-class eighties neighborhood.

He double-checked the address number on the note he'd written and confirmed he was sitting in front of the right house. Mrs. Patricia Mancos received his number from a past client. His business seemed to be growing steadily and the referral was appreciated, but the phone message from Mrs. Mancos disturbed him on a deeper level. He wasn't quite sure why, except to say the woman's voice held a certain tone of distress and distrust that scurried over his flesh like furious ants. Chris didn't want to reject the case based on one message and a slightly disturbing short phone call with Mrs. Mancos. The consultation would give him the additional information needed to know if whether or not he would accept the job.

Mrs. Mancos answered the door with a weak smile and invited him in. She led him to the dining table and offered him a glass of tea or some coffee.

“No, thank you,” he said as he pulled out a chair and sat down on the cracked vinyl seat.

The smell inside the house hit him with mixed information. It said that the occupants had eaten, or were going to eat something from a slow cooker, someone smoked cigarettes, and the old carpet and outdated furniture gave it an aura and odor from thirty years ago. The décor, state of wear and tear, and overall ambiance of the house should have felt normal and comfortable to him, but it didn't. Chris had simple tastes and average standards. Even though Mrs. Mancos's home fit the bill for his “typical” clientele, the place vibrated with an undercurrent that kept him wary.

She fidgeted by the counter, picked up a glass, filled it with iced tea and then joined him.

“As I mentioned on the phone, my brother and I would like to hire you to find our cousin, Katrina Caldwell.”

“I am not a detective, Mrs. Mancos.”

“But you are a ghost hunter,” Mrs. Mancos said with certainty.

“That is true.”

“And you can communicate with the dead? That is what I was told.”

“In certain circumstances, I can. The departed must be cooperative for open communication. If your cousin is deceased and lost among us, I may be able to speak with her. If she departed and is with the ancestors, I will most likely not be able to find her. Letting spirits rest is a good practice. Unless there is a very good reason to call them, I will not bring her here for your entertainment.”

Mrs. Mancos pressed her lips together looking displeased, but also contemplative. “I am not looking for some party trick, Mr. Abeyta,” she said coldly. “My brother, Garrett, writes me emails or is calling me every day. He dreams of our cousin, Katrina. He’s certain she is haunting him and believes her soul is not at rest. This year is the thirtieth anniversary of her disappearance. Garrett doesn’t understand why she is coming to him now after all these years, but neither one of us question the ways of the Spirit World. He wants her found once and for all so he can sleep again. I think we would all rest easier if we could find out what happened to her.”

“We?” Chris asked, hearing the implication that more than the two of them were involved.

Mrs. Mancos fiddled with her fingers, her iced tea forgotten and sweating on the table. After a pause, she looked up to meet Chris’s gaze straight on.

“My husband, Billy, was with my brother and I the day Katrina disappeared in the mountains on a camping trip. The three of us were the last people to see her alive. Well, as far as we know.”

“And what happened to your cousin, Mrs. Mancos?”

She drummed the fingers of one hand on the table. “Will you please call me Patricia?”

He could feel her hesitating to answer and could see the somber cloud building around her and altering her aura. “I can call you Patricia if you like.” He cleared his throat. “If you want my help you must tell me what you know. I cannot be expected to help Katrina if I do not know the circumstances regarding her disappearance. Are you certain she is deceased?”

A flat expression replaced Patricia’s previous look of distress. “Her body was never found, Mr. Abeyta. That’s all I can tell you. We were young and misguided and we—all four of us—made a mistake. I believe it cost my cousin her life.”

“Tell me where she disappeared.”

“It was near South Mineral Campground. Is it possible for her spirit to still reside on Earth, or in this plane of existence, even after all these years?”

“It is possible,” Chris said as he watched Patricia’s aura closely. Her guard was up and Chris could see it like an iron gate around her. The woman was letting Chris in just enough

for him to see the entrance of her wall of protection and peek inside, but he sensed there was much more to this situation. “Ghosts have no real sense of time. There are circumstances where a spirit in a state of unease will never depart the premises of an unfortunate event.”

Patricia sat still as stone for a heavy moment. Chris decided to fill the empty space with a few of his own questions.

“Why did your brother not call me if he is the one having problems?”

His voice seemed to shake Patricia out of her silence.

“Garrett went to college out of state. Afterward, he was offered a job back east and he never came back. I don’t blame him. There are virtually no jobs here. At least in his field. When the dreams started, he began telling me about them and asking me to drill Billy with all the same old questions from back then.”

She shook her head as if to dispel the unpleasantness of the conversation.

“Why does he want *you* to question your husband? Why doesn’t he ask him himself?”

She shrugged. It was two non-answers in a row. Chris didn’t appreciate the deflection.

“Because he knows I have nothing new to tell him,” a dark-haired, tall man said as he rounded the corner and entered the dining area of the kitchen.

Chris rose from his seat as the man stepped forward and held out his hand. Chris shook it. “Chris Abeyta,” he said as way of an introduction.

“Billy Mancos,” he said, and released Chris’s hand. “Thanks for coming.”

Billy moved behind Patricia and rested his hands on top of her shoulders.

“I’m Patricia’s husband. I was the last person to see Katrina alive. Garrett is obsessed with her disappearance. He feels guilty about the whole mess and has for thirty years. I think the real reason he moved away is because if he lived here, he’d still be looking for her.”

Patricia’s mouth tightened with these words and she didn’t disagree with him even though her explanation about Garrett’s whereabouts had only to do with a job.

“Garrett’s driving me crazy with all his emails and non-stop insistence that I find a private detective to re-open the case. I don’t believe the cops and justice system will be able to help. The case is too old. Every resource available had already been exhausted with no success. You’re our final attempt at finding out what really happened to my cousin.”

“Tell me the whole story,” Chris said to them both.

Billy took a seat next to his wife and they recounted their weekend excursion into the mountains three decades earlier.

“It happened at the end of a weekend camping trip with a bunch of friends. The four of us wanted to do some extra exploring before leaving the area. Katrina got all worked up about something. I can’t even remember what it was now.”

Patricia interrupted her husband. “My cousin became irrational over virtually nothing. She was acting like a spoiled child and went off to pout. Unfortunately she never came back.”

Billy kept his eyes on his wife. He was tight-lipped, and Chris could feel the tension running through the man’s bloodstream.

“We went after her, but she was gone. It’s a horrible tragedy. We never meant to—”

Patricia cut off her husband again. “Katrina’s parents were in the middle of a nasty divorce that summer. It’s the reason they let her come stay with us for so long. I think her temper-tantrum the afternoon she disappeared had more to do with her unhappiness at home than whatever it is she was so upset about.”

“What was she upset about?” Chris asked, looking for more clarification.

Maybe they expected each other to answer, but the resulting silence made Chris's suspicions deepen.

Patricia filled the gap. "Katrina wanted me to be a go-between for her and a boy she liked. I wouldn't do it. He was older and she was leaving to return home soon. I didn't see the point."

Chris studied her face and knew she held something back. He didn't like it, but he kept reminding himself he was here to find Katrina not badger the truth from these two.

Chris took a few notes, mostly about the location of the incident. Then he rose, shook their hands again, and held back his observations and comments about the undercurrent of deceit and guilt in the room. Accusations wouldn't help him find Katrina and if he made any incorrect assumptions, he could severely jeopardize the case. "I will do everything I can to bring harmony to your cousin's spirit," he told them, and left to find the ghost of a sixteen-year-old girl.

The next morning, Chris woke at dawn and packed up his truck with the gear he needed to find Katrina Caldwell. He drove a couple of hours from his cabin before turning off the pavement and onto the road that led to South Mineral Campground. His

directions were to pass the campground and follow South Mineral Creek until the road ended at a trailhead. From there he had directions that were supposed to take him somewhere below the north face of Rolling Mountain and due east. It was a regular occurrence for him to not take directions at one-hundred percent accuracy from nearly everyone. The way people explained how to get somewhere usually frustrated him, especially when it came to following forest service roads through the mountains. He figured Spirit would guide him when the time came if he were meant to assist on the case.

The truck rumbled over another washed out section of road and he clung to the steering wheel as he maneuvered and bounced over what appeared to be a dry stream bed. When he arrived, there were already a few vehicles at the parking area. He had never been to this particular spot before, but he knew this trailhead led to a few Colorado mountain summits that ranked as a 14er or 13er and it was a popular hiking destination.

His directions from Patricia were to stay on the east trail for half of a mile or until he reached the south branch of Mineral Creek. She believed that was the closest spot where officials had lost Katrina's trail thirty years earlier. He double-checked his hiking pack, slipped the straps over his shoulders and set out.

As the sun reached its peak in the sky, Chris felt the nagging sensation of being inside a hollow chasm. He continued hiking deeper into a narrow forested valley and couldn't shake the feeling. His heightened extrasensory perception picked up on absolutely nothing. Clark's nutcrackers followed him, chatting and begging for something to eat. The nuthatches and squirrels scurried about in the trees, their tiny feet scratching and crackling against the brittle bark of the pines. He stopped next to a runoff stream and knew he'd been duped by the Mancoses.

If the information he'd been given held even a crumb of truth, a niggling of his sixth sense should have been triggered by now. He took a drink from his water bottle and tucked it back into the side pocket of his pack. There were two scenarios he had to consider at this point. One, Katrina did not travel in this direction. If she had, nothing of consequence related to her disappearance happened along this route. Or two, Patricia gave him bogus directions on where to find the missing girl. If number two was correct, then number one was as well.

Chris turned around and headed back to his truck. He didn't like being lied to and couldn't understand why someone would pay him to hike around in the woods for no reason. He set his mind to determination level ten—the highest level. He would find out the facts behind this case. A raven cawed from far off to the west. It was a good sign that this new direction would lead him to what he wanted.

Back inside his truck, Chris dug out his cell phone and switched it on. No otherworldly messages waited for him this time. He wasn't surprised, but thought it would be convenient if the stupid phone could send him text messages from Great Spirit and save him a lot of time and hassle.

As suspected, the phone had no service in such a remote location. He needed to make a call before exploring any more of the surrounding area. He could easily spend the next year of his life climbing the peaks and looking in every valley and crevice for a hint of a sign from a lost spirit. There had to be a better way to narrow down which direction to look for Katrina.

He retraced his path as he drove over the rough, washed-out forest road and returned to the pavement. From there, he turned north, knowing there was a small town not too far away and hopefully had an ever-present cell tower.

When he knew he was a couple of miles from the old mining town—now rehabilitated into a tourist destination—he checked his phone for reception. Two bars meant he could make a call. He found a spot to pull over and called Patricia Mancos. Taking the bull by the horns and being direct was the only way he operated, at least at first.

It was no shock when she or Billy didn't answer. Chris pulled out his notebook and proceeded with plan B. It took him three calls to find Garrett Sanchez in Lexington, Kentucky.

The man answered and Chris could immediately tell that Patricia's brother spoke on a cell phone. The sound quality was akin to speaking to someone through a screen of angry bees while driving a dump truck.

"Hello? This is Chris Abeyta from Colorado," he said again for the third time.

His blood pressure made the roof of his head feel like it was about to explode.

"What? Who?" Garrett asked again. "Give me a second. I can barely hear you."

Chris ground his molars and ruminated with disgust why he owned a cellular telephone. He wondered why anyone in their right mind owned one. He was sure the invention of the cell phone was the mark of the beginning of the end of human civility. Or maybe that had already happened long ago with the invention of the telegraph machine.

"I need to speak to you about Katrina Caldwell."

"Just a minute. I can't understand a thing you're saying," the man said in a chopped up and garbled voice.

Chris glared at his phone, pushed the speaker button, and waited impatiently.

The buzz and miscellaneous background noises lessened and Garrett finally spoke relatively clearly through the connection.

“Who’d you say this was?”

Chris cleared his throat. “My name is Chris Abeyta. I was hired by your sister, Patricia, to find your cousin, Katrina.”

There was an empty pause and Chris immediately thought the call had been dropped. He lowered the window of his pickup truck and was about to hurl the phone out into the road to be run over by the next passing vehicle when he heard Garrett respond.

“Umm. Yeah. Right. How’s everything going?”

“Not well. I need to ask you a few questions. Do you have a minute to talk?”

“Sure. I’m sorry about the bad connection. You caught me on the job. I work weird hours. I’m surprised you caught me.”

“That’s fine,” Chris lied. He hated the spotty call, but he was grateful to have found the correct man with little trouble instead of having to wait a day or two to track him down. He was also glad he’d asked Patricia for her brother’s full name and location. She had hesitated in giving him the information, but he’d told her that every detail mattered in cases like this. She’d given her brother’s name and city and said her brother was unreachable by phone most days when he was on the job site. Garrett had just confirmed that so he knew Patricia hadn’t lied about everything. Chris hadn’t pushed for more information about Garrett during the interview thinking it was

inconsequential or he could acquire it later if need be. Now was later and here he was seeking out the brother.

“Your sister and brother-in-law told me I needed to look for Katrina south and east of South Mineral Campground. I have looked in that area and found nothing of importance. Can you tell me anything more regarding the location of her disappearance?”

Chris waited through another lengthy pause.

“South and east? No. I don’t think that’s correct. Is that where Billy told you to start looking?”

“No. The information was given to me from your sister.”

“Huh. Patricia must be confused. She never was good with directions. I’m sorry. I wish I was there with you, but I’m contracted out on this job and I can’t leave until February. There will be too much snow up in the mountains by then and you’ll never get in. Listen, Mr. Abeyta, these dreams I’ve been having about my cousin are keeping me from sleeping. They’re dark and creepy. I’ll be mostly asleep and then I’m frozen to the bone and surrounded with beating wings. Katrina’s face will be in front of mine, or I’ll hear her crying. This has to stop. If you can do anything to help, you’ll be saving my sanity. I’m going totally crazy. It’s going to cost me my job.”

“I understand,” Chris said. “But I can’t do anything if I don’t know where to begin looking.”

“When you get to the parking area at the trailhead, head south for a quarter of a mile and then turn due west. Patricia must have said east, but she meant west.”

Chris took more notes as he asked a few more questions. Garrett was a hundred percent more helpful than his sister, and he wondered again why Patricia had hired him instead of her brother.

“Why didn’t you call me instead of having your sister do it?” he asked before ending the call.

“Oh, well,” Garrett hesitated as if thinking about it. “Patricia offered to take care of it since she lives closer. She said she had heard of you and what you do as a ghost hunter. I thought she could handle it. I’m sure she just made a simple mistake with the directions. Call me anytime if you have any more questions. Actually, could you call me when and if you find my cousin?”

“Will do,” Chris said and hung up.

Chris headed back to his starting point at the trailhead and climbed out of the truck once more. A few yards down the trail, he received a positive sign from Great Spirit as the normal easterly winds changed directions and blew southwest. The mountain grass swayed and rippled with the sudden strong

breeze. The grasses, wildflowers and tree tops pointed directly at Rolling Mountain as if telling him he was now going the right way.

Twenty minutes later, Chris found a unique rock formation jutting out of the side of the mountain. Before venturing toward the rocks, he peered south and saw the collapsed and half rotted timbers of an old mining head frame about seventy-five yards away. He moved closer to the stone crags, crevices, and stacked boulders and believed he'd found the location of where Katrina resided. Nothing ghostly or undead spoke to him directly, but he could sense the presence of a spirit at unrest just as clearly as he could feel the light breeze brushing his skin. The gut feeling he was moving in the right direction was the usual sign he waited for when working a case. It never failed him. The area also matched Garrett's description—which was remarkably different than Patricia's version.

He searched and climbed over the rocks looking at them from different angles and perspectives. They loomed over him as if reaching out from the very core of the Earth seeking fresh air and blue skies. Jagged, crumbling stones with cliff faces and plunging crevices surrounded him. It took further investigating to find the exact location of where he could advance into the geological formation. After a few more minutes of searching, he found a place with decent footing and he began the descent. It was mildly daunting, but Chris was an experienced

mountaineer and he wouldn't let a little rock-scrambling stop him. He wedged himself into a narrow crevice, using his arm strength and feet to keep him from falling straight down. He kept going until he reached the bottom and found a narrow passageway through the rocks. Ten yards further, he saw an opening in the rocks darker than a void.

Before entering, Chris squatted down and retrieved the implements of his trade from his backpack. The energy inside a cave could be either of light or darkness. He wouldn't know for sure until he was immersed in it. He had a feeling about this cave, but he wouldn't assume anything yet. The area was a historical mining district and that meant the possibility of many things regarding place energy. Lost souls and disgruntled deceased inhabitants could saturate the old mine and nearby forest with their discord. If a tragedy happened here, other than Katrina's disappearance, it would be difficult to discern her energy signature from someone else's. At least at first. He hoped the distant past with the mining didn't interfere with his search for the girl.

With so much to remain aware of, Chris smudged himself with sage, said his prayers of protection, and pulled out the small medicine bag he wore beneath his shirt so it was visible. He unpacked the raven feathers he'd collected the day before. They were now separated from the wing bones and nestled inside a leather bag along with one raven foot. He silently

thanked the raven once more as he began the process of using the sacred objects for his own shamanic and spiritual purposes.

He unfolded the red cotton flannel and carefully removed the small bundle. The raven foot was wrapped with a string of multi-colored beads. He unwound the beads and the foot swung gently through the air. Chris rose to find a place in the rocks where he could hang it over the entrance. There was nothing to tie it to, so he found a loose stone and used the rock as a weight on the end of the string. The claws dangled in front of the cave entrance and Chris felt assured that the raven would protect him and guide him if the need arose.

He kept the bag of feathers close to hand as he slipped around the raven foot and entered the cave, his flashlight leading the way. Eight feet past the entrance the cave widened into an old mineshaft. It was pretty much what Garrett described to him, and after thirty years he guessed not much had changed other than the extra layers of dust. The timbers supporting the shaft looked undisturbed and as strong as the day they were installed. Chris removed a feather from the bag. He stuck the quill end of the feather into a crack on a support beam to his left so the feather stood straight out. Stopping every fifteen to thirty feet, he positioned another feather the same way, always sticking out so they were visible from one feather to the next by shining his flashlight.

After a few handfuls of feathers, he knew he had ventured far enough. The air inside the mineshaft altered and was somehow fresher, although it now carried a scent that reminded him of moss and lichens after a summer rain. Chris quit leaving a trail of raven feathers and hunkered down close to the floor. He waited and listened while keeping the flashlight pointing down so the ray of light was only a small pool around his boots.

Breathing in the cool air he knew water must be near even though he could not hear or see it.

“Katrina Caldwell, show yourself.”

Silence answered, but the hair rising on his arms and the back of his neck spoke loudly enough.

“It is time to come forward and join your ancestors,” he said, encouraging her but also commanding her.

Even being deep inside the mountain, an unnatural stillness settled around him. His breath stopped moving as he waited knowing this was the calm before the storm. A female energy came forward slowly, and then all at once. She darted by him and then disappeared again. The air moved like a soft whisper, touching his cheek and sending the scent of wet stone and damp ground. It lasted less than a second before a gust of wind picked up the century of dust inside the tunnel and blasted him in a whirlwind of violence.

She screamed and the sound echoed over the rocks and bounced back at him from all directions. Chris gripped the medicine bag that hung around his neck, closed his eyes, and held his breath. He distinctly felt her feminine energy and heard her voice shrieking.

“Noooo!” it rang through the tunnels. “I hate you! Go away!”

The disturbance upset the mountain. Sand, gravel, and small stones began to trickle down the walls and fall from the ceiling. Chris edged toward a support beam and huddled next to it until the screaming stopped and the wind settled. The last thing he wanted was to be buried in a cave-in. Chances were fairly good, if not a hundred percent, that if the mountain collapsed he would never be found. The idea didn't sit well on his shoulders. He regained his feet and stayed composed.

“Katrina, do not be frightened. Show yourself so I may help you.”

“Not you!” she yelled back.

Chris set his jaw, determined to ferret her out of the mineshafts and settle this case. Great Spirit did not lead him here to fail. How he was going to succeed at this may be uncertain, but he wouldn't give up without trying his best.

“I call you forward. The ancestors implore you to join them. Great Spirit blesses this meeting.”

“Not. You. Leave me alone!”

He got a glimpse of her and saw her blonde hair and long limbs. She wore jeans and a tank top, and he could even make out the tiny glint of her gold necklace in his flashlight beam. This time her words were followed by a loud crack and the earth shattering somewhere farther down the tunnel. Chris covered his face with his arm, breathing into his shirt sleeve as more dust rushed past him. A new sound added to the crumbling of rock and trickle of gravel. It started as a slight vibration but quickly turned into a rush that reminded him of water tumbling over loose stones at high speed. *Was he about to drown?* The idea was even worse than being crushed. What followed next was almost pleasant compared to the idea of rising water. A colony of manic bats soared by him in a flurry of beating wings. They no doubt had been disturbed by the falling rock and shifting of the earth.

“You don’t want me. You only want to trick me. Get out of here!” she screamed.

The bats disappeared down the tunnel and took with them his light. They didn’t actually take it, the flashlight was still gripped in his palm, but with their passing the bulb went out. Chris thought he could actually feel the filament inside the tiny bulb burst with Katrina’s anger.

He paused for the length of time it took to close his eyes and call silently to the spirit of the raven. With eyes open there was no difference in the absence of light within the mountain.

Pure darkness was absolute in every direction. A poignant curse word teased the tip of his tongue, but he held it in with the knowledge that it would do no good. There was always a lesson to be learned in every situation and being confronted by a hostile spirit would surely teach him something new. He remained centered and focused, and peered in the direction from which he thought he had come.

Within a second he saw what he was looking for. The last raven feather he stuck into a support timber glowed a soft iridescent silver. Katrina was nowhere to be seen without his flashlight, but he thought he heard sobbing. Now that he had a better idea of what he was dealing with, he made the decision to return later and better prepared. Chris made his way slowly toward the feather and kept going from feather to feather until he reached the entrance once again. He retrieved his raven foot, wrapped the string of beads around it and packed it with the remaining feathers.

Before leaving, he acknowledged the raven magic he'd used with a reassuring pat of his hand on the bag. Then he glowered at the cave entrance with no little restiveness.

He climbed out of the crevice, over the rocks and hiked back to his truck formulating his next move.

“Come with me.”

“Umm... How about a hello?”

Chris watched Juliana’s brows stretch toward her hairline. She wanted him to play like a polite member of society, and make nice-nice with her, but she should know him better than that by now. He took her by the arm and pulled her onto the front porch. She stumbled out the door and out of his grip as he tried to escort her down the front steps.

“Hey, I know, how about not man-handling me and explaining what you’re doing here.”

“I need your help and you need to learn. It is a win-win for us both.” He walked off the front porch expecting her to follow. When he didn’t hear her steps echoing his, he sighed and turned back around. Juliana was not the type of person to follow someone blindly. She always had to have a hundred questions answered first.

Chris frowned and waited for the rapid fire interrogation to begin.

“So, you show up unannounced, grab me by the arm—without saying hello, might I add—and tell me it’s time for a lesson on the Spirit World?”

Her eyebrow was cocked along with the corresponding side of her hip.

“Yes,” he said, and steeled his resolve to wade through the morass of small talk. “This is not a problem, Juliana. You are my apprentice and it is time to go learn something of value.” He looked her over. “You look good to go.”

Incredulity and disbelief fluttered over her features. Chris understood she wanted more time to take in his request, but he believed she should get used to his way of working. There was no better way to adjust to a new situation than diving straight in.

He watched her swallow and lick her lips.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Ghost hunting. I have a case and I need a female.”

“No, no, and no,” she said stubbornly. “See this?” She pointed at all of herself.

He could tell she didn’t expect him to answer.

“This is me departing on the nope train.” She spun around and went directly for the front door. “It has a theme song too. It goes like this... Nope nope no. No way, no thank you, no how. Now go away and don’t come back.”

“Stop.”

“I only hear you saying, *run away as fast as you can.*” She held one hand up as if to halt him, even though he hadn’t moved from his spot in the driveway. Her other hand was pressed over her ear. She did stop retreating however.

He began to remind her of the many incidents that required his help without which she would have been in grave or mortal danger. “Juliana, I have saved you from spiritual possession, demons, spirits of an unfriendly nature, and death. I’ve protected your property which in turn kept you and your family from any number of devastating misadventures. Today, I am requesting your cooperation and the use of your climbing gear. If you choose not to—”

“Oh God,” she said with a groan.

He watched her place her palm to her forehead and press.

“Fine. I’ll come, but you should know I’m not the best translator for the dead,” she said, trudging down the steps.

Juliana tied off and began her descent down the rock wall. The tension in the rope felt good. Secure but giving. He’d shown her where he’d descended the crevice with no gear and they’d promptly agreed to use her ropes. When her arm broke through the first sticky strings of spider web, she almost reversed direction and climbed back up. *Chris could manage this case without her!*

“Spiders are definitely not part of the deal,” she said, and rethought his free climbing path to the bottom.

“They’re harmless,” he said down to her with his usual tone of impatience.

She clenched her teeth and took a shuddering breath through her nose. If Katrina’s ghost was down here, didn’t that mean her body was as well? A renewed sense of panic raced through her bloodstream, cold as ice, and chilled her to the bone. Chris thought he hadn’t found the body when he was here the day before, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t there. In Juliana’s opinion, it just meant he didn’t see it.

What was she doing?! This is insane.

Even with the mental lecture haranguing her incessantly, she continued to walk herself into the deathtrap. It wasn’t a deathtrap of course since she had the ropes and harnesses, but since her head was already playing games with her on this supernatural errand, she figured she may as well exaggerate it to the fullest.

Sunlight lit the crevice for a full twenty feet before the angle of the mid-day sun caught the edge of the rocks and cast a shadow against the stone wall. Chris swore the bottom was only about twenty-five to thirty feet down, so Juliana knew she was almost there as her head dipped below the line of light and fell into the shadows.

The repelling wasn’t her biggest problem with this adventure. The crevice in the rock formation eventually came to an end, but that’s where it met the old mineshaft. At some

point in time the ground must have caved in and exposed the tunnels adjacent to and below the rocks. Cave-ins and shifting earth were a somewhat common problem in the area and warning signs about opens shafts were posted along roadways and all over in these mountains. Juliana knew that even after a century or longer, sinkholes and old mines could appear in the forest at any time and to anyone's demise.

Chris gave her his word that he'd already scouted the path and it was safe.

She reached the bottom, unclipped and tugged the rope twice. "Your turn, Chief."

Chris joined her a few minutes later. "Have we ever discussed your nickname for me?"

"Hmm," Juliana tapped her chin with a long delicate finger and looked up at her hairline while trying not to smirk. "No. I don't believe we have, Chief."

He rolled his eyes, or at least Juliana considered it an eye roll even if Chris's expression barely changed.

"It's Chris. Chief is inappropriate on many levels. Number one being I hold no position in the tribal council."

"Alrighty then. If you insist on Chief Chris, I suppose I can start using that instead. Hey, how about Chief Christopher or Chief Abeyta?"

She thought she may have heard a growl rumble out of him as he passed by her, but he otherwise didn't reply to her teasing. She wriggled her shoulders to help settle her backpack and followed after him continuing to amuse herself with more name play.

"Is your name Christopher? How about Christian? Now that would be ironic. What's your middle name anyway? I bet you have a really cool secret Native name. I mean the name Chris is so common. What were your parents thinking when they gave you an Anglo name? Not that I should talk. I'm Juliana Katherine, but then again, I'm half Irish so it's not a huge surprise that I don't have a Native name." She paused to catch her breath.

This time she definitely heard a growl coming from Chris. "Listen, Ant, if you could stop babbling for one minute, I might be able to answer one of your questions."

"See right there. You called me Ant again. That is the reason I call you Chief. Seriously, Chief. If I have to have a ridiculous nickname, then so do you."

Chris's mouth turned down farther than she thought was humanly possible. She enjoyed tormenting him in these simple ways. It was just too easy. Running her mouth would guarantee Chris's disapproval, but hey, he was the one who dragged her out here to go ghost hunting and do other things that were probably going to be even worse. She wasn't a fan of her

current situation and talking helped keep her mind off of what they were doing.

Juliana lifted her brows and waited. Chris remained silent. She couldn't take it. "So, what is it? Which of my questions are you going to answer?"

"It's just Chris. My middle name is of no importance right now and that's all you get until you do what you came here to do."

"Then after I talk to your timid ghost girl you'll tell me the rest?"

"We'll see," he said.

She narrowed a green eye at him and stopped traversing over the uneven rocks. The opening to the abandoned mine lay directly in front of Chris. He switched on his headlamp and handed her a second one.

"She will speak with you," he said sounding altogether more confident than Jules felt. "Once I know we're near her, I'll hang back. You can stop any time you want, but if you can find out what happened thirty years ago, it will be good for everyone involved."

"Let me paraphrase one last time before I go in, just to make sure I'm not missing anything. You say she's hiding inside and is violent toward you, but you think she'll be fine with me because I pose no threat?"

He nodded soberly.

“And I need to find out how she died because she’s haunting some dude’s dreams in Kentucky?”

“Yes.”

“And I’m doing this because I have nothing better to do on a Thursday afternoon and I totally love talking to dead people.”

“Your sarcasm is not lost on me but we are running out of time. I don’t know how you feel about climbing and hiking in the dark.”

“I don’t know how I feel about it either because I’ve never done it before.”

“Then let’s go in so we don’t also have that experience today.”

She let out a little huff. “You know, I already consider you using guilt to make me come up here with you objectionable.”

“There is no guilt. You are doing what you need to do, as am I.”

“Whatever,” she said with defiant indifference. “If this girl freaks me out, I’m high-tailing it back to the truck.”

Chris smudged them both with sage and sweetgrass, sprinkled his sacred corn pollen on her head and on his tongue and prayed for them. He hung what looked like a bird foot over the entrance to the mine and went inside. Juliana scooted around the dead animal part and tried to ignore it, and her

distaste for such things. Chris's tools of his profession were not to be questioned or judged. He'd helped her in more ways than she could list with all kinds of problems involving spirits and supernatural entities. Just because she thought animal parts were gross, didn't mean they weren't beneficial for his shamanism. She prayed her lessons with Chris wouldn't involve dismembering anything that had a heartbeat and so far she hadn't experienced anything of the sort.

Broken stones littered the floor and she stepped carefully over and around them until she was past the entrance and swallowed by the dark. She swept the beam of her headlight left and right and up and down taking in the old timbers and hoped today wouldn't be the day they collapsed. "Do you have life insurance?" she asked.

"No."

"Neither do I," she said, not withholding her irritation and uncertainty.

"You are in my circle of protection. Now be quiet and focus."

She sucked in a long breath and realized the dusty air tasted weird, bitter, and not good. The smell vaguely reminded her of the bottom of her brother, Jared's, clothes hamper. She shut her mouth and continued forward taking shallow breaths through her nose.

“I’ll tell you when to call her if you do not feel her presence. You will not be able to see me until I am ready for her.”

“What are you talking about, Chief?”

“Go slowly. When it’s time, say her name. She will come.”

Juliana’s pace slowed to nearly a stop. *How was she going to be able to do this?* She decided she needed a theme song. Something that would give her the courage she was severely lacking. Something that lightened her mood by a thousand percent. She scrunched up her face and squeezed her brains. *Geez!* For the life of her she couldn’t remember how the Ghostbusters song went. She pinched her arm thinking it would distract her mind enough to remember it. *Urghh.* The only thing that came to mind under the pressure of wanting to actually use her mind’s catalog of music, lyrics, and other assorted theme songs was Scooby Doo. It was ridiculous but also helping. She hummed under her breath and said the lyrics in her head...*Scooby Doobie Doo, where are you...* It went on and her feet carried her forward. Chris didn’t remark at the humming, but he did grace her with another irritable “Chief Chris” look.

The feeling came over her with a solid whump. There was no ignoring it. Juliana knew she’d entered Katrina’s territory by the heavy coldness to the air and the unusual scent. If anything reached out of the darkness and touched her she would keel over and die. She just knew it. It’d be a simple death. Heart

attack. *No biggie*. But, she vowed she'd haunt Chris for the rest of eternity. She'd ask him ridiculous and pointless questions until he brought her back from the dead. *Could he do that?*

She mustered up her courage, took a drink of water from her bottle and then called for the girl. "Katrina, are you in here?"

Chris had warned her he would be unseen once they neared Katrina. Juliana didn't believe he had actually disappeared, but then again...he was Chris Abeyta and his shamanism was pretty much a complete mystery to her.

Katrina came forward only slightly less timid than a mouse. The hairs on Jules's body rose like miniature supernatural sensors. Katrina Caldwell appeared to be a typical teen-aged girl. She was thin, small-chested, and tallish. Her dark blonde hair hung just below her shoulders and she looked like she'd been crying.

Juliana worked her lips back and forth before finding her voice again. Did she really owe Chris a favor? She wasn't totally convinced this was worth a trade for all Chris had done for her. Okay, so that was a lie. Chris had saved her life and her soul. Yes, she owed Chris, which is the only reason she stood in this dark, dank, musty, and dusty mineshaft.

"Why are you in here?"

Katrina retreated a few steps.

“Sorry,” she said hurriedly, afraid the girl would leave. “I meant...Hi, I’m Jules. You doing okay? You look a little upset.”

“I’m not so great. How did you get in here?” she asked, and came fully into the circle of light.

“I’m here exploring the old mine. What about you?”

She shrugged and peered down the mineshaft back the way she’d come.

“Do you know how I can get out of here?” Juliana asked, in an attempt to keep the girl talking.

Chris suggested if she could get Katrina’s story, it could really help the case. Ghosts often hold onto their trauma. Getting it out of them can make a huge difference in helping them cross over. Juliana wasn’t sure if she wanted to know the sordid details, but she was here to help Chris. And now that Katrina was right in front of her, she began to feel sympathy for the girl instead of scared out of her wit’s end.

“It’s that way,” Katrina said, pointing her finger. “I got turned around in here once, but my friends knew how to find the exit.”

“Yeah? What were you and your friends doing? Were you out having fun or something?”

Katrina glanced around again and a slightly thoughtful look crossed her face. “We’ve been camping. It was a normal

weekend for my cousins and their friends, but since I'm here visiting from the city, it's all new and thrilling for me."

"Did you camp at the campground down the mountain from here? It's a nice place. I like the stream."

"Yeah, I like it too. It's been a great weekend. Well, until the end."

Juliana tried to smile, but it felt forced and awkward. She noticed the dark line on Katrina's arm and thought it looked like a cut. She didn't mention it yet.

"What happened to make you say it like that? I mean, the 'until the end' part?" Juliana was fairly certain Katrina didn't know she was dead. It was awful to think, but she had a strong feeling it was true.

"There was like ten of us camping this weekend. All teenagers and no parents. It was pretty great." She settled down next to the wall opposite Jules and crossed her legs. As she began to tell her story, she traced her finger around in the dusty floor of the tunnel. "My cousin Garrett and his best friend, Billy, managed to get a couple cases of beer for the weekend. They thought it was the greatest thing since the invention of the wheel. I thought it tasted like warm piss, but I drank it anyway. I didn't want them to think I was lame. It was totally wasted on me because I didn't even catch a buzz."

"So you went camping, but how did you end up inside an old mine?"

“Billy knew a place where you could get into the tunnels. He said he found it on a camping trip with his parents. He never told anyone about it because he knew his parents would freak out and forbid him to go inside. On the second day of the camping trip, he showed Garrett, Patricia and I the spot. He didn’t want the other kids knowing about it. I don’t remember the reason why, but I remember feeling really special that he let me in on the secret.”

Jules’s mind immediately jumped to how suspicious that sounded, but she kept quiet and let Katrina continue.

“We didn’t go through the entrance the first time. No one had a flashlight or anything, but the four of us made plans to come back the next day after the rest of the group left. We hiked back to our campsite and spent the rest of the day messing around. The guys fished or threw the football around and Patricia and I hung out and talked. I think we waded in the stream in our bikini tops and shorts and hoped the guys were checking us out. Later, we just chilled out by the fire and ate s’mores and marshmallows. I told her how much I liked Billy and I tried to convince her to drop a hint to him and see if he had any interest in me. She wouldn’t do it no matter how much I begged. I got really frustrated and told her she was being a crappy cousin.”

“Why wouldn’t she help you?”

Katrina shrugged and looked down at her shoes. “She was pretty vague at first, but then she said she didn’t want to get in the middle of it.”

“What did you do after that?”

“I don’t know. Not much. I pretended like I wasn’t watching him every second. Then after dinner I tried to joke around and flirt with him. He was nice to me, but mostly he was into drinking the horrible beer and burping the alphabet with the guys.”

Jules managed to keep her eyes from rolling—barely—and didn’t remark on how unattractive Billy sounded.

“We went to sleep late that night and all I did was lay awake and wish he would sneak into my tent. I even wondered if I should try to sneak into his, but I knew my cousin, Garrett, would be pissed off and probably tell my mom. He always acts like my older brother when I come to visit. I eventually fell asleep with the knowledge that the next day would just be the four of us and then maybe I could tell Billy in private how much I loved him.”

“Are you in love with him?” Jules asked. She couldn’t help but notice how Katrina went from using the word like to the word love.

Katrina smiled as if she couldn’t contain her happiness. It weirded Jules out. She couldn’t understand how a sixteen-year-old girl could fall in love with a guy who showed little to no

interest in return. She highly suspected Katrina's true feelings toward Billy were more in the range of intense infatuation and not really love, but Katrina was probably too young to understand the difference. How Jules understood this when she was only a few years older didn't exactly make sense even in her own mind. Many things regarding age and the wisdom that supposedly came with it didn't apply to her. Chris was the same way. It was likely one of the reasons they were friends. *Birds of a feather....* When it came to her and Chris, it was more like *weirdos* of a feather flock together. In the long and the short of it, she was all right with her strangeness. *Who wanted to be normal anyway?*

"We went back to the mine entrance after the rest of our group packed up and headed back to town. We told everyone we wanted to go for a hike before leaving. The four of us were riding in one vehicle anyway. Three of us were cousins and Billy was Garrett's best friend. No one questioned us.

"We only had two flashlights so the girls carried one and the guys carried the other one. We started down the first tunnel and I was pretty excited. I'd never been deep inside the ground before. I was a little nervous, but I didn't admit it. We found one collapsed passageway and had to turn around. Then we found a shaft that dropped straight down and that scared me a little. Billy and Garrett were walking in front of us and I thought about how easy they could have walked straight over

the edge and been gone. That's about the time I decided I'd had enough exploring and I asked if we could go back out."

She rubbed at her temples and I watched a range of emotions play across her face. Katrina glanced around the tunnel and then continued after she seemed more in control of herself.

"Garrett started making fun of me. He teased me for being scared and said I was too young and should have waited in the Jeep Wagoneer. He compared me to his sister and said Patty wasn't acting like a baby. It infuriated me. Patricia—I always call her Patty—laughed at his jokes and added a couple of her own. Then he switched off his flashlight and Patty did too. I took a step back and stumbled. I thought I was going to fall down the shaft and die. Instead I fell into the wall and scraped my arm. It hurt bad and I could feel the cuts and the blood. I couldn't stop the tears from starting.

"Billy spoke up then and told Garrett he should quit acting like an asshole and to switch the light back on. When they saw the cut on my arm, he looked like he felt bad about his teasing. He even apologized and said we should head out of the mine.

"It didn't turn out as great as I thought it should have. My arm stung and I was worried we wouldn't be able to find our way out. I mean, we didn't exactly leave a trail of bread crumbs or anything. In the end we really only made a few turns and we were back at the entrance in what seemed like no time."

“So you guys went in, fooled around, and then left. All that happened to you is a scrape on your arm?” Juliana asked, feeling like Katrina wasn’t telling everything.

“Yeah. I wanted to pull Billy aside the entire time and tell him how much he meant to me and then hopefully kiss him in the dark but I never got the chance. That part really sucked.”

“If you left with your cousins and Billy, how did you end up back here?”

“We made it to the entrance without any problem. I was really surprised to see how late in the day it was. We must have been wandering around inside for a couple of hours which would explain why I was feeling tired and my feet were sore. As we started back to Garrett’s Wagoneer I realized my necklace was missing. I pretty much freaked out. It was a fourteen carat gold locket on a chain that my parents gave me. It meant everything to me. As soon as I noticed it was gone, I knew it came off when I tripped and fell. I must have felt it come off, but I was too panicked to pay attention at the time.

“Anyway, I told them to stop and I had to go back inside for my locket.

“Garrett said he wasn’t going back in. He was hungry and tired of dragging two whiny girls around with him all day. Patty punched him on the arm and said something about not calling her whiny. She didn’t want to go back inside the mine either.

“I started crying again. I couldn’t leave it behind. It was the most valuable thing I owned and my parents were having a rough time. I couldn’t leave Colorado without it. I asked for the flashlight and Garrett handed one over. He said he’d wait for me but he wasn’t going with me.

“I really didn’t want to make the trek back inside by myself, but I was determined and I would if I had to. Thankfully, Billy stepped up and said he would go with me.

“I was thrilled. I was also tired but it meant everything to me that Billy would come with me. Then Patty said she was going inside too. I was surprised how she suddenly changed her mind, but by that point, I just wanted to find my necklace. I was still a little disappointed I wouldn’t be alone with Billy.”

“Okay, so you retraced your steps and then what?” Juliana asked.

“We started backtracking. Garrett said he’d wait for us. I apologized because he was so grumpy and I knew by the time we went back in and came out again it was going to be dark out. The hike to the Wagoneer was close to an hour long walk. I said we’d return as quickly as possible and the three of us went after my locket. Right before we turned into the next tunnel we heard a noise. I had no idea what it could be. None of us knew. It was like wind blowing dry leaves or water rushing over gravel. It didn’t make sense, but all of a sudden we found out what it was. Bats started leaving the mine. Patty flipped out.

She waved her arms around, swatting at them like she was fighting them off. She was shrieking and out of control. I tried to get her to crouch down and wait for them to pass, but she wouldn't calm down. The bat colony was unsettling, with their flapping wings in the dark, but her reaction was way worse. When they petered out, Billy walked Patricia back to the entrance and then we went in for my necklace.

“I was finally alone with him.”

She looked Juliana in the eyes and she didn't want to see the look on Katrina's face. It was happy and sad, but mostly heartbreaking. Somewhere in this story, her end was coming. Juliana felt it like a weight on her chest.

“At first we just walked, shining the light on the ground so we didn't trip over rocks or step in the guano. We were both listening for more bats, but there was only the occasional stray after the colony had left.

“I silently took his hand in mine and I about died of happiness when he let me hold it and didn't pull away. After a few minutes I said, ‘This is nice.’ and lifted our hands up a few inches. That's when he took his hand back.

“I'm sorry Katrina, you're too young for me. You're still in high school and I don't date high school girls anymore.”

“I got angry and said, ‘Billy, you're only a few years older than me. When you're twenty-three and I'm twenty it won't make any difference at all.’”

“He said, ‘But right now you’re sixteen and I’m nineteen and it does matter.’”

“‘Hardly,’ I fumed back at him.”

“‘Don’t Katrina. You’re my best friend’s cousin and it makes everything awkward. Just stop it.’”

“‘I can’t stop. I’ve never felt like this before about anyone. I think you like me too and you won’t admit it. I’ve seen you watching me this weekend.’”

“We kept walking as we talked. I was upset but trying to sound calm. I heard him sort of sniff at my declaration and I peered up at him in the semi-dark. He wouldn’t look at me.

“‘He said, ‘You’re wrong, Katrina. I haven’t been looking at you. Not like that.’”

“‘What’s that supposed to mean?’”

“‘It means I like someone else.’ He paused and then added, ‘Let’s find your locket and get out of here, okay?’”

“‘Who?’ I demanded and stopped walking. I wanted to know what girl had stolen Billy’s attention away from me. I wanted to know if I knew her, or if Patty did, so I could see her for myself.”

“‘It’s no one you have to be concerned about. Drop it, Katrina. Don’t make me regret coming all the way in here with you.’”

“I pouted and stayed silent as we turned the last corner and walked toward where I was sure my locket would be on the ground. I asked him for the flashlight. At first he didn’t want to hand it over, but I kept holding my hand out until he passed it to me. It was kind of stupid for us to let Patty take one of the flashlights outside with her, but we were all a little shaken up by the bats and we were in a hurry.

“I guess I shouldn’t have done what I did next, but I wanted him to know how I really felt. I kept thinking if I could just kiss him then he would kiss me back and it would be perfect and he would forget about the other girl and go out with me.

“I clicked the flashlight off. I heard him stop walking. You wouldn’t believe how dark it is in here without any light. It’s darker than anything you can imagine. A total void. You can’t even see your hand in front of your face.”

With that, Juliana’s head lamp went out. She froze and forced herself not to panic. Katrina was only playing some twisted game and she knew if she overreacted she could hurt herself. Juliana reached for her pack and began to slide it off her back so she could find the backup flashlight inside.

“Katrina, I don’t need to see the darkness to know how inky black it is. Can you bring the lights back up now?”

Katrina faded into view as if she glowed from within. She was a pale grayish-blue and the only thing Juliana could see inside the mineshaft.

“I reached for Billy in the dark and asked him to kiss me,” she said solemnly. “I told him it would be only the one time and I would never bring it up again. He didn’t tear my hand away from his shirt like I thought he might. I flipped the flashlight on so I could see his face. He looked kind of indifferent, but I thought that was better than being mad at me.

“Once, and then you drop it. Forever. I don’t want to date you, Katrina.”

“I didn’t answer. I leaned up and pressed my lips to his. I’m pretty sure he liked it, but then I took it farther and cupped him between the legs. He backed away, but I pursued him and held onto his belt. He forced me to let go.

“No! You’re crazy. Stay away from me, Katrina Caldwell.”

“I threw the flashlight at him and yelled, ‘You liked it and you know it!’

“The flashlight hit his stomach and then fell to the ground. My breath caught in my throat as I realized that I probably just broke it, but I didn’t, and my shoulders sank with relief when the light stayed on.

“Billy was so angry. He starting telling me I was a crazy bitch and was backing away. I knew he liked me and I couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t admit it. I snatched the flashlight from the floor and turned to search the last section of the shaft to find my locket. I thought I saw it in the beam of light and started for it.

“I walked away from him and said something like I was going to tell Garrett and Patricia he kissed me and felt me up as soon as we were alone together. I’m not sure why I threatened him but he took it seriously and said, ‘Screw you. You will not, because I’ll tell them what you did and they’ll believe me because I’m not a bat-shit crazy girl.’

“Then he was gone. I saw him walking away holding up a lighter he must have had in his pocket. I picked up my locket, saw the broken clasp, and put it in my pocket. I sat down and started to cry. Billy broke my heart and I needed a minute to calm down. I was sure he would come back for me when his finger started to burn from holding the lighter, or he would at least call back to me so I knew he was at the other end of the tunnel. I’m still waiting for him to come back.”

Juliana blinked and felt mildly stunned. She had stopped searching for her backup light and watched Katrina’s unearthly blue glow instead. She really didn’t understand she was dead? How had she gone from crying in the dark cold tunnel to being a deceased teenager? Jules reached up tentatively and flipped the switch on her headlamp. Nothing happened. She hit it again and the light came back on.

“How long have you been in here?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe an hour or two.”

“And you never thought to go after him?”

“I think I tried, but I got confused. The bats returned and I fell down when one flew in my face. I don’t know. It kind of hurt.”

“What hurt?” Juliana asked with caution.

“When I fell.”

“Where’s your flashlight?”

Katrina glanced around, looking baffled.

“Would you like to go outside with me now?”

“Billy is coming back. Even if he doesn’t want to date me, I know he’s a decent guy. He wouldn’t leave me in here to die!”

She sounded defensive and her anger was rising. Juliana leaned back to put more space between her and the ghost. Her hand slid a few inches across the gravel and dirt floor of the rocky passageway and then went right over a ledge.

“Whoa!” she screamed and flung herself forward away from the chasm.

Katrina jumped up from her spot on the ground and eyed Juliana like she was a leper.

“There’s a drop off right there,” she said, shining the beam of her light on the spot.

It wasn’t visible at first because of the way the timbers and the rock walls cast their shadows on that part of the tunnel. It was also partly hidden by an overhang of rock. She looked closer and could see the opening wasn’t another tunnel. It was

large enough to crawl into, or maybe squat down and peer inside, or maybe accidentally fall into. An icy shiver raced over her skin as she thought about Katrina sitting down to have a good cry over a boy who refused to return her affections, had a bat fly into her face...and accidentally slipped into the small tunnel.

“There are shafts like that all over this part of the mine. They’re drains or air vents or something. You have to be really careful. Some are covered with metal grates but others are open traps. Like that one,” Katrina said thoughtfully.

Juliana swallowed hard and could feel the knot of anxiety in the pit of her stomach churning. She wanted Chris to intervene like right now. She didn’t know if she could convince Katrina thirty years had passed and it was time to leave the mine once and for all.

“So how about I lead you out and we can talk about something other than Billy. It may help to get your mind off of him.”

Katrina frowned and rubbed at her forehead. “Did you see him when you came in?”

“Err...no. My friend and I didn’t see anyone.”

“What friend?” she asked sounding suspicious.

“His name is Chris. Can I ask him to join us?”

“I don’t think that’s such a great idea.”

“I don’t understand you right now. Chris is my friend and he may be able to help you.”

“I don’t need help. I’m waiting for Billy to see what a huge mistake he made and come back for me.”

“Okay, well...” Juliana bit her lip and tried to think of how she could get through to this obsessive love-struck teen. She went back a few steps. “You said you were hurt. Chris is a doctor of sorts. You should let him look you over. Billy wouldn’t want you to be injured and suffering.”

Juliana could hardly believe how much she was playing along with this lunacy. *What the heck was she supposed to be learning anyway?* Chris had some serious explaining to do about her “lesson” on the paranormal—whether he wanted to talk about it or not.

“Billy sent me in here to help you.” Chris spoke from the shadows and Juliana jumped out of her skin. She gripped the wall, well away from the air vent, and held in the shriek of surprise.

Katrina rushed forward toward the sound of Chris’s voice. The blurred shape of her stretched ghostly body buzzed by Jules.

“Liar,” she hissed into the dark.

Juliana heard the rattle and felt a vibration begin to thrum in the air. Chris forewarned her of the bats that lived here and

she suspected they would be making an appearance any second now.

“He’s not lying, Katrina,” she said as she started edging toward the exit. “I swear to you. Billy and your cousins are desperate to find you.”

“Billy?” Katrina said with hope tingeing her voice.

“That’s right,” she said. “They want you to come out of the mine now.”

Juliana watched the pale shadow of Katrina’s spirit stop advancing down the tunnel. Her eyes were trained on Jules’s face and she tried her best to calm her features. Lying wasn’t Juliana’s strong point. She knew her face gave her away every time. She hadn’t actually told a lie and this helped tremendously. In all honesty, she really didn’t know if it would make any difference in this situation or not. Katrina was obviously confused by her current circumstances and if she assumed Patricia and Billy were waiting for her outside, that was all the better.

“They’re outside?”

“It is time to come with us, Katrina Caldwell. Your friends are waiting for you,” Chris said, and slid out of the dark and stood at the edge of the circle of light.

He was little more than an outline with the edges of his white T-shirt glowing in the dark. She swallowed and sweat

began to dampen her body. The rattling flutter had settled from the deeper end of the mineshaft, but she knew the bats could erupt in a shower of frenzied wings at any minute.

She watched Katrina take a few steps toward Chris and then stop again.

“Why doesn’t Billy come inside himself? Why did you bring this girl here?”

She looked back and forth between us, confusion and uncertainty morphing her expression. A sneer curled the side of her lip. “You’re lying to me. Both of you are fat stinking liars!”

Chris jumped into the pool of light and threw something powdery at Katrina. The ghost screamed as she flew to the back of the tunnel.

Juliana heard Chris grunt with frustration. She suspected his trap had failed. Then Chris’s boots pounded past her as he went after Katrina. She swung around and shined the light at him as he pursued the retreating ghost.

“Cowardice will get you nowhere fast, Katrina. Now is the time to face your fears. I call now for the help of the magpies! He tossed another handful of what looked like sticks and dirt mixed with black and white feathers into the dark ahead of him.

Juliana watched with equal horror and awe. The roar that followed Chris's actions was a mix of unearthly feminine screaming and of the stone and earth rumbling in protest to being disturbed.

"Get down!" Chris yelled.

Juliana hit the ground, flat on her stomach. She shielded her head and face by wrapping her arms tightly around her head. A squeak of fright escaped from her lips as she hugged the ground. The bats descended the tunnel. Chris told her the colony which lived here wasn't large and she had been stupid enough to believe him. It sounded and felt like a million bats the size of bullfrogs were swarming over and around her body.

Juliana had no idea how she survived through the horror of those passing minutes, but she somehow managed. When she heard or sensed Chris run past her, a part of her instantly realized she was being left behind.

When the flapping of wings and scraping of miscellaneous bat parts ceased, she rose from the floor and found her light still on. This helped marginally to stabilize her frantic heartbeat. There was no way in Hades she would stay behind in this haunted place alone. In one second flat, she gathered her wits, which were scattered from the mineshaft to Neptune, and ran after Chris.

“Stand here and don’t move,” Chris ordered as he shoved a talisman in Juliana’s hands. “Hold this. If she tries to pass by you for the mine opening, raise it into her face.”

He barked the directions at her and prayed she wasn’t so terror-stricken she couldn’t follow them. Juliana had made it safely out of the crevice without his help, but by the color of her complexion, a shade worse than puke-white, he didn’t hold much hope for her assistance. In truth, he no longer really needed it. She’d done what he needed her to do. But he didn’t want her presence to hinder his work and she was still somewhat better than having no assistant at all if she could hold it together.

Chris turned his back to Juliana and continued the process of moving Katrina’s spirit from this plane of existence to the next one. The resistance of this teen-aged girl’s will to remain planted inside the mine was pushing Chris’s limits of patience. His determination not to fail surpassed his urge to throw his hands in the air and walk away from the case.

The cuts and scrapes over his face and arms stung and itched. Katrina’s bats had done a number on his exposed skin. He was sure he appeared ghastly, which might help explain the grimace glued to Juliana’s face. The blood trickling down his cheek would have to wait. The time to aid Katrina was right

now, not after he took a five minute time out to nurse his wounds.

He centered his attention on the swirling mass of willow and aspen twigs, red clay powder, and magpie feathers. In the center of the commotion, Katrina rotated as if on a vertical spit. He'd trapped her and let the bats carry her out of the abandoned mine, away from the rocks and into the forest.

Synchronicity and signs had led him to this case and he felt it appropriate and ironic that Katrina had bonded so well with her bat companions. For Chris, the symbolization of bats was a constant reminder to Katrina to face her fears. She needed to discriminate what others told her and look for the truth behind the lies and stories her cousins and Billy had told her. Chris understood that even when Great Spirit sends a message, one must be able to recognize it. Katrina's mental instability made it difficult, or impossible, for the girl to understand the bats were there to help with transition and letting go. He wanted to help her navigate away from the dark and into a better place, but he had to act fast.

Katrina struggled against her restraints. Her spirit flailed and thrashed. Luckily the red clay dirt within the spiritual bonds had formed a nice paste over the girl's mouth. It resulted in a lot less screaming and cursing. The twigs and feathers whipped through the air like a cyclone and Chris kept back so as to not disturb the vortex.

“Ravens of the forest, I ask for your assistance now!” He let out a couple loud quarks followed by few long guttural croaks.

A raven answered his call and satisfaction trickled down his vertebrae when he saw the black bird circle over the treetops. If one raven came to him, he felt confident others would follow.

He bent down to his pack, stashed at the base of a pine tree and retrieved his hand drum. When he stood back up, he heard Katrina grunting and working her jaw against the clay within the confines of her rotating prison.

Ravens swooped overhead and coasted from tree to tree. Chris began to beat the drum in preparation for the ceremonial song which would help lift Katrina out of the heaviness of this dimension. It was the beginning of the process of opening a path for her soul to take. The ravens were able to travel between this plane and the void. Their energy added great value to his ceremony and would be the key to lifting her past the final barrier to enter the Spirit World. His gratitude for the corvids' help could not be expressed because it was so expansive. There were simply no words for the magnificence of Great Spirit and the creation of the All.

Katrina was nearly convulsive when he started his song to the keepers of the West. Simultaneously aware of her and of the power growing around them, he remained focused on his part of the ceremony and ignored the return of the bats. At first, the flapping of wings in his peripheral vision told him

more ravens were coming to his call, but the rapid beating of bat wings was so opposite from the graceful swoop of the ravens' that his attention became mildly diverted.

He knew if he stopped drumming and singing he would have to start over from the beginning. Based on Katrina's persistence to fight him every inch of the way, he did not want to forestall this any further.

The bats moved in closer to him and the cage of twigs around Katrina. All at once, he noticed the increase of gnats and insects tickling his face. They landed on his lips while he sang the song. They zoomed into his nostrils and bit the corners of his eyelids. Bats chased the bugs in every direction and he was once again surrounded by paper-thin wings and tiny clawed feet. Blinking furiously, he refused to let Katrina's bats stall him. The gnats were being ground between his molars and coating his tongue, but he kept singing.

When he finished the call to the West, he placed the drum on the ground and turned to check on Juliana. Her eyes were closed against the swarm of flying insects and she waved both hands around her head in an attempt to ward off the attack of bugs and bats, but she held her ground.

When Chris turned around, he saw Katrina's diversion working. The bats were inadvertently breaking up his shield keeping Katrina above ground. She'd also managed to work her mouth free of the red clay powder and screamed at him.

“Where is Billy? I knew you were lying to me! He loves someone else and not me. You’re both liars! Where’s Patty?”

Her body pressed against the remaining twigs and feathers. Bats darted and flapped around the cyclone, breaking it up little by little.

“Jules, keep your mouth and eyes closed!” he yelled. If anything went wrong in the next minute or two, he didn’t want her body and spirit compromised. Great Spirit knew she’d already experienced enough spiritual trauma this year.

Juliana didn’t reply and he didn’t have any more precious seconds to waste on her safety. He had to react now or Katrina would be lost again. He dove for his prepared satchel. When he rose, Katrina was right in front of his face. A large bat flew between them and he instinctively pulled back to protect his eyes from the wings. Chris must have gasped because an insect flew down his throat. It was a rookie mistake to breathe in with a malicious ghost hovering inches in front of his face, but he’d done it.

He coughed up the bug and watched an evil and bitter smile spread from cheek to cheek on Katrina’s young face. She saw her opportunity and entered Chris’s mouth, taking up residence in his airways and effectively blocking all air from entering or leaving his lungs.

Cursing himself for allowing her a way to enter his body, Chris remained as calm as possible and put aside all

distractions—Juliana’s panicked whimpers—apparently her eyes were open now even though he told her to close them—and the feeling of suffocation from Katrina inhabiting his mouth, nose, and throat.

His fingers worked at the satchel with steady competence. Now that Katrina was distracted by attempting to kill him, her control of the bats and their persistence on catching the swarm of flying insects lessened. This helped exponentially in allowing Chris to remove his tools from the leather bag.

The feeling of the smooth round stone in the bottom of the bag was an immediate relief. He popped it into his mouth and pressed the polished rock to the roof of his mouth, holding it in place with his tongue.

The minerals in the stone combined with the power he’d infused into the rock chased Katrina out of his system like a firestorm. Chris anticipated her next move and he reacted with super reflexes.

Katrina’s spirit dove for the crevice in the rocks, and her favorite hiding place deep inside the mine. Juliana’s mouth was clamped shut but her eyes were wide open. As fate would have it, his apprentice saw the ghost coming at her and raised the raven foot talisman into Katrina’s face. It stalled the girl just enough to allow Chris the second he needed to cast the raven feathers at her.

He spit the stone from his mouth back into the bag and commanded, "With wings of the sacred raven, go from this Earth and travel unburdened to your waiting ancestors!"

The ravens in the trees came down from all directions. A flurry of iridescent-black bodies and all-knowing eyes surrounded Katrina. Juliana flung herself to the ground and out of the way as the whoosh of air from the powerful wings fought for control and maneuverability around one spirit girl. Chris held a circle of protection around the immediate area and felt a deluge of both relief and anxiety engulf him.

He watched, listened and prayed as the ravens stripped Katrina of her fears and madness. Her imbalance would not pass into the next world. Chris could feel her psychosis shedding and it wasn't a pleasant feeling. Juliana was most likely experiencing it as well, but he knew in the long run it was good for her to get another experience under her belt.

"Embrace the peace of your true self. Travel with a clear heart, Katrina."

"Billy," she sobbed one last time.

"Move now! Go to your soul's dwelling place. Great Spirit embrace this girl!"

He raised his satchel overhead and shook it at the sky. The ravens rose above him, lifting with them the cleansed spirit of Katrina Caldwell.

“Magpies? Really?”

“You do not have to sound so doubtful, Jules. The magpie is an intelligent bird and a cousin to the raven.”

“What did the feathers do to her?”

Chris turned right onto the paved road that would lead them back to town. Juliana surprisingly didn't require any recovery time after Katrina's passing. She was definitely shaken but appeared in decent control of herself. He'd done a simple cleansing and prayer ritual for his spirit and for Juliana's and she'd held her tongue. Chris also needed minimum first aid applied to the scratches on his face and arms. Juliana helped him and seemed genuinely worried about the risk of infection. After washing his skin with bottled water, she dabbed on some antiseptic ointment from a first aid kit she carried in her backpack. Then they had hiked to his pickup truck in silence. Both of them needed time to integrate all that had happened with Katrina. Now that they had a few miles between them and the location of Katrina's departure, Juliana's torrent of questions had begun.

“The magpie moves on his own terms. He has an unusual way of approaching new situations. Magpies are good birds.”

“And...” Juliana prompted.

“I used the power of the magpie to build a nest of sorts to capture Katrina from her chosen home. Then I let the bats carry her outside. It was a hunch that it would be a successful tactic. Bats are powerful creatures of transformation. I knew they would seek the sky when the sun lowered. I could not release her spirit within the confines of the mine. Too much stone and not enough sky. The raven was sent to me for this case and I had to get Katrina to more of them.” Chris gave a nod of finality to close the subject.

He watched her bite her lip and take a breath. Juliana turned slightly in her seat and watched the road. To his surprise, she held the rest of her questions. No matter how annoyed he became with her at times, she was making out to be an excellent apprentice. Grateful for the quiet, he took advantage of the long drive to work through his own need for mental processing of Katrina’s case as they headed to the Mancos residence.

“I want you to pay attention, but leave the talking to me,” Chris said.

She crinkled up her face with mild discontent. “Whatever you say, Chief.”

“Juliana, we were getting along so well. Don’t ruin it,” he said with more contempt than he’d meant.

The long day and the fact that neither of them had eaten since morning wasn’t helping the tense situation. They had both agreed that even though food would help their crabby attitudes, neither of them had any sort of appetite. The stress and terror at the mine and now having to confront Billy and Patricia Mancos left them both uneasy.

“I’ll buy us dinner after we take care of the dirty details of this case,” he added as a way to help smooth over what he’d just said. Chris knew he could be too brash. The attitude of distrust and dislike for other human beings had been his way since birth. Sometimes he made attempts at getting along with people, but mostly he avoided other humans knowing it really was him. Regardless of his faults, he appreciated Juliana’s help today and he needed to at least pretend to show it. And, in truth he valued Juliana’s thoughts and opinions, but in this case he only wanted her to observe. If she did what he asked, she would soon see why she should remain quiet for this part of the job.

She tapped her shut lips and raised haughty brows at him as if to say her mouth was already sealed tight.

He knocked on the green front door and waited.

Billy answered and stood aside so they could enter. Patricia laid cold eyes on them, lingering particularly on Jules in an unwelcoming way.

“Let’s move to the dining room,” Billy said.

Chris explained that he had found Katrina and helped her cross over to the Spirit World. He didn’t give the details of how he practiced his sacred medicines, but assured Billy and Patricia that Katrina was now at peace.

“Can you fathom it, Billy? All these years...” Patricia reached over and placed her hand on her husband’s arm.

“Garrett is going to be beyond himself. Do you think his bad dreams will stop now?”

“I believe so. If he dreams of her now, it will only be in remembrance, not a visitation,” Chris said.

Many shadows crossed over their faces as Chris told them what he wanted them to know. Billy’s face and aura was a fair bit easier to read than his wife’s, but Chris was learning more and more about this couple by the minute.

“Did you actually speak with her?” Patricia asked.

Her concern didn’t range much farther than to only serve her selfish purposes. Chris knew this truth like he knew his shoe size. She worried for herself and her part in her cousin’s disappearance.

“Not much,” he said vaguely.

Juliana sat to his left and he heard her clear her throat.

“I communicate with the Spirit World in multiple ways. You should focus on her safe return to Creator. That is all that matters, Mrs. Mancos.”

“But did she tell you what happened after Billy left her inside the mine?” the woman insisted.

Billy’s fingernails turned white on the tips as he pressed his hands against the wood surface. Chris kept his gaze steady and his face blank.

“She did not. It was interesting finding your cousin at all. You neglected to tell me she disappeared inside the old mine. I went east first and could not pinpoint her location.” He paused and waited for Patricia to speak.

Her eyes darted right and then left, refusing to make direct contact with Chris. “I’m sure I told you she was inside the mine. That’s where all four of us were that day.”

“No. You did not say. It hardly matters now if you left out that part of the story. I found her. I did use alternative methods to remove her from the mine before performing the ceremony, but be assured it was successful.”

“Was she...umm...did she look okay?” Billy asked awkwardly.

“Just as you described her,” Chris said.

“I never meant for anything bad to happen. I just want you to know that. It was all a huge misunderstanding.”

The man’s face reddened as he tried to say something about Katrina or the past. It wasn’t coming out well. Patricia put a stop to her husband’s verbal fumbling.

“It was a horrible tragedy. We’re so grateful for your help, Mr. Abeyta. I need to call my brother immediately and tell him what you’ve shared with us.” She rose from her seat and urged Billy to rise as well.

Her plastic tone was almost too much for Chris to take. He’d like nothing better than to out her and her husband and tell them he knew everything. Even if Katrina’s version of events was slightly askew, he knew in the pit of his soul that the couple had been cruel to the girl because they were hiding their feelings for each other from her. And at the time, apparently from Garrett as well.

“You two were a couple and she didn’t know it,” Juliana said accusingly.

Chris gave her a flat look that warned her to be quiet.

Juliana shot him a look back that said she wouldn’t keep quiet. He sighed.

“Why didn’t you just tell her?” Jules asked.

Patricia turned to face Jules. Billy sat motionless in his seat.

“Garrett didn’t know about our feelings toward one another and we didn’t want him to know yet. He was going off to college and I wasn’t. We thought if we could just wait a few more weeks, then he’d be gone and we could date openly and we’d tell him later.”

“They don’t need to know all this, Bill,” Patricia said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

“But what happened after you left her inside the mine?” Juliana asked.

Chris knew Juliana’s flood of questions had risen and was now spilling over. Patricia didn’t want to talk about it anymore, but Billy looked like he needed to.

“I was angry. Patty and I went back to the Wagoneer. Garrett was past being pissed, but he wouldn’t leave Katrina alone. He went back to get her and I was going to go with him but Patricia wouldn’t let me. She was furious about Katrina groping me. I shouldn’t have told her at all but I was afraid Katrina would make up other more detrimental lies. Garrett showed up hours later and said he couldn’t find her.”

“That’s enough. None of it matters now. Katrina had an accident and that’s that. I’ll tell Garrett what you told us. Thank you, Mr. Abeyta.”

Juliana turned her green eyes on Chris. Her energy field harbored a mixture of emotions and a fair amount of anger.

“You’re all guilty, you know that. You left her in there because you were angry that she kissed your boyfriend. You abandoned your cousin,” she said to Patricia. Then to Billy, “And you kissed her and made her cry. In Katrina’s messed up way, she loved you. Yes, she had an accident, but all of it could have been prevented if you’d just told her the truth to begin with.”

“That’s enough, Juliana,” Chris said, rising from the chair.

“But—”

Patricia looked horrified by Juliana’s outburst. Billy looked like he wanted to be forgiven.

Chris didn’t want to speak another word to these people, but managed to say, “We’ll see ourselves out. Thank you for your business.”

“Lying is ugly,” Juliana said as they drove away from the house. “Mrs. Mancos didn’t even want you to find her and Billy... Gah! He’s missing a pair, isn’t he? I could feel their guilt and regrets like cold slime.”

“What happened to remaining quiet?”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Those people suck.”

“All three of them, Billy, Patricia, and her brother Garrett, played a part in her disappearance, but it was Katrina’s stubbornness and her own error in judgment that killed her.”

Juliana crossed her arms over her chest. “I guess,” she said with a pout.

“That is how I would explain it. Garrett perhaps was the innocent party in all this. I believe that is why she found him in the dream land.”

“Are you going to the police?”

“I have a friend who works for the department. I will make a report. Her body won’t be recovered based on where you thought it was located and chances are there will be very little left to find.”

“Bleh,” Juliana said from her side of the truck and shook all over like a dog ridding itself of water.

“Sounds about right,” Chris said agreeing with her distaste for human remains.

“Maybe they can recover the gold locket. I wonder if her parents are still alive.”

“I don’t know. What I do know is, people like closure. I have to call Garrett Sanchez and update him. I’m sure he’ll contact anyone who needs to know. He is the stable one in this trio. If my officer friend needs to talk to you, I will pass along your number.”

“Stellar,” Juliana said. “I think every cop in the county knows me by now anyway, so what’s one more interrogation?”

“It will not be an interrogation. You did nothing wrong.”

“You’re right, I didn’t. Besides, Billy and Patricia’s lies, or should I say, omissions of the truth should be exposed.”

“Lies often start out for one reason or another. Sometimes they can be justified. The Mancoses protected themselves. They had their reasons. After a long time the lies become truths. It is sad and dangerous. Even the story Katrina told you may be mixed with little white lies.”

Juliana let out a long heavy breath. “Is everyone unstable in some way?”

“Possibly. The best you can do is to not forget it.”

“Great. We’re all crazy. Just great.”

Chris let out a small snort. She wasn’t totally wrong in her assessment.

Juliana stared out the passenger side window. “It’s strange that the four of them have all existed with different versions of the same story. I don’t like it. The lies were twisted up with the truth and it makes it hard to discern what really happened.”

“I did not like this case from the moment my phone buzzed. It showed me that even though I can tell when someone is being deceitful, it doesn’t mean they are in the wrong. There

are times when doing what is right means putting your own feelings aside and doing it anyway.”

“Yeah, but it’s hard.”

“True. Katrina needed our assistance. That is what matters in this case.”

“I know, but, man...she kind of tried to kill you.”

“I’ve had easier cases,” he admitted.

“And what exactly was I supposed to learn from all this anyway?”

He didn’t answer. Instead he pulled into the parking lot of a diner. “Before we open that can of worms, we need to eat.”

After a quick bite to eat, they were back inside the pickup truck and heading toward home. Juliana had indulged herself on soup, salad and coconut cream pie. Chris had the open-faced turkey sandwich. Food had been the cure they both needed after the long, taxing day.

“Spirits can get stuck. Think of them as lost in their own minds even after the body has perished,” Chris said as they cruised down the highway. “It is not dissimilar to people who continue to repeat an unhealthy behavior over and over again.

The loop a spirit can be in is often much shorter or simpler and often very disturbing.”

“Katrina was stuck on Billy. When she died she could only think about the situation that happened right before her death. Is that correct?”

“Yes. I think she had a mild mental or emotional imbalance before she died inside the mine. When she had the accident it magnified her problem.”

“That’s really sad.” Juliana squinted her eyes as if it might help clear her inner vision. She took a deep breath and let it rush out of her in a long stream. “Did you seriously bring me with you to learn about ghost’s mental problems?”

“Take away from this experience the parts that speak to you. Lessons are often learned in a way that is separate from the intentions given by the mentor.”

“I’m not willing to accept that answer. What did you really intend for me to learn?”

“Experience, Juliana. That is your lesson. Now it’s up to you to learn something or not. You always seem to have a thousand questions. Since I am stuck with you inside this cab for the next hour, now would be the time to ask what you want to know.”

“*You* are willing to answer *my* questions?” Her look of skepticism could have been a caricature.

“It is a onetime offer, so do not get used it, Ant. Your help was needed and I am willing to pay you with my time. Remember, wisdom is always in the question.”

“Hmmm...” she said, making a thoughtful noise. “Okay, when did you start wearing vests as everyday attire?”

His silent pause and look of hopelessness for the future of mankind made Jules laugh.

“What?” she asked wearing joyful innocence on her youthful face. “You said I could ask you anything I wanted.”

Absurdity and impatience oozed out of Chris. Juliana’s impish smile widened.

“I don’t know when I started wearing them. Maybe in college,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Are you going to kidnap me again for your next ghost hunting trip?” she asked more seriously.

“Are these the kind of questions you ask when seeking to find wisdom?”

“Hey, I’m just asking what comes to mind in the moment,” she said innocently.

“Then I highly doubt you’ll be accompanying me on my next case.”

She stuck her tongue out at him—again. It seemed to be a recurring theme for the evening. He shook his head with annoyance but grinned back at her.

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About the Author

Jody A. Kessler's debut novel, *Death Lies Between Us*, is the winner of the Readers' Crown Award for best Paranormal Romance. She also writes historical time travel fiction, and contemporary fiction.

When Jody isn't navigating the terrain of her imagination and writing it down, she can be found exploring the wilderness of Colorado with her family, or in the kitchen baking cookies & brownies - and trying not to eat them all. She's passionate about continuing to learn and reads anything and everything that catches her interest. Jody is a Reiki master, and has taught Hatha yoga for over a decade.

She invites you to stop by her website and see what's new at:
www.JodyAKessler.com

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From the Author

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Read a Preview of

Haunting Me

An Angel Falls ~ Book 3

Chapter One: Hunting

Juliana

“The five elements are Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Ether (spirit or self). When you immerse yourself in nature the balance of the elements unite, bringing harmony to you and all that surrounds you...”

Urgghh, I groan. This isn't it either! I replace the book on the shelf and look at the measly few I haven't already browsed for their content. It had been a crapshoot to even look at the Wiccan books, but I wasn't having any luck finding what I wanted anywhere else. I should have listened to myself and stayed away from this section. Accusations of being a witch have brought me nothing but misery. Ashley Johnson died after accusing me and Corrine...well, Corrine turned out all right in the end, but the journey was torture. All it would take is one person who knows me seeing me perusing the Wiccan or

Pagan books — the rumors would be set ablaze like a witch at the stake. *Bad joke, I know.*

I back away from the bookshelf and my shoulders droop with resignation. From the corner of my eye, I see movement and turn to look. There isn't anyone. I would have sworn someone was there. My gaze shifts to the window, wondering if I caught the passing shadow of a bird or a tree branch blowing in the breeze. There's a stuffed purple chair below the window for reading. I trudge over to it and plop down, trying to unravel the knots I've created inside my brain. Closing my eyes, I rub my temples, making small circles with the pads of my fingers. Wiccan, metaphysical, new age, Pagan, Druid, self-help, aliens, sacred geometry. My head is reeling. Why did I even come here in the first place? A little research on angels and the afterlife has wasted my entire afternoon and all I have to show for my efforts is a new fixation on the possibility of having an out-of-body experience that can only be remedied by seven witches wielding amethyst crystals while chanting an incantation backwards during the Blood Moon. *This is not what I needed today.*

My brother, Jared, is at home with the Angel of Death, Marcus, hovering around him. I should be with him, not here searching for answers I'm not going to find. And, my first real date with my incredibly cute, perplexing, and unearthly angel boyfriend is tonight. Nathaniel's responsibilities and duties as

an angel don't exactly allow him to take off whenever he wants, but he said he'll pick me up later at my house. A shiver of anticipation runs down the back of my neck and tickles my spine. *He wants to date me. Me!* Like we're just a couple of ordinary college students hanging out. I know it's not a perfect situation. He's a celestial being, but he gets me. He makes me feel alive, even if he isn't. I like trying to figure out the puzzle of this connection between us. Besides, no girl in their right mind could possibly walk away from those smoky gray eyes of his. Least of all, me.

I hear movement nearby and open my eyes. A store employee is shelving a book.

"Not finding what you're looking for?" she asks as if she already knows I've struck out.

She's tall and willowy and her clothes appear to flow around her in a sea of blues and greens.

"Unfortunately, I'm not," I say, rising from the chair, ready to leave the Midnight Sage New Age Boutique.

"Can I help you find something? A particular book or author?" she offers.

"I think I've looked at everything."

"Well, in that case, don't forget to check the Beg, Borrow, and Steal cupboard by the front door. There are usually some books in there. You can take what you want, leave a donation,

or borrow and return. It's remarkable the treasures people leave behind," she says, turning back to the shelf in front of her.

"Umm, okay, thanks," I say, and squeeze past her, heading for the stairs.

Trotting up the squeaky old staircase to the main level of the converted old house, I decide I've had enough of this woo-woo metaphysical-ness for one day and intend on walking straight to my car, leaving my unanswered questions on the back burner. As I'm about to open the front door I catch a glimpse of a shimmering beaded curtain with a colorful painted sign above it that reads, "*Beg, Borrow, & Steal Cupboard.*" Below that in smaller print, "*Honoring the Karma system since 1991.*"

I pull my hand away from the doorknob and walk over to the cupboard, intrigued. Maybe my last name, Crowson, affects my personality more than I've ever given it credit for. Crows love glistening trinkets and shiny baubles, and I can't walk away from this beaded curtain. I raise my hand and let the smooth iridescent glass beads play in the halogen lights of the shop. I duck my head through the tinkling curtain and enter. Beyond the beads and through a dark painted entryway, I pull open a door and step into what might have once been a storage room beneath a winding staircase.

It's cozy and dark and totally surprising. Someone had a grand time painting this space with lots of deep purple, teal,

and black. A shadowy forest looms on one wall and a dragon flies past the moon on another. A Victorian shaded floor lamp casts a dim light into the little room and another purple armchair offers a seat as you search through the miscellaneous boxes and shelves. There's an eclectic mix of books on the first bookcase. I find everything from gardening and candle making to identifying constellations and werewolves, but nothing on angels or the afterlife. I keep searching. On the top shelf is a gently used scarf and hat collection and in the corner to the left is a bunch of rolled up and tattered posters. The other shelves are covered with tchotchkes and what looks like an entire print run of a magazine called *They Do Exist*. I raise my eyebrows with skepticism at the cheesy drawing of an alien with a bulbous head and enormous eyes on the cover.

One final look around before I leave this curious little nook and I see it. Half hidden in the shadow of the chair is a cardboard box full of books. I settle onto the cushioned seat and slide the box over to my feet. Immediately, I feel like I've found something interesting at last. Or at least closer to what I've been looking for. The book on top is titled, *Reincarnation in the New Age*. There are a few works about near death experiences. I get a chill that raises the hair on my arms as I see the last couple of books on the bottom. *Feast of Fire and Flame* — I don't even want to touch that one — and lastly, *Navigating Life, Death, and the Afterlife*. I grab the one about the afterlife,

and have a fleeting moment of doubt about my search. Is it wrong to want to know more about what happens after we die? Or is it only wrong because I want to know how to manipulate life after death?

I'm mulling over my secret motivations when I slap my palm to my forehead. I've lost all track of time! I'm frustrated that I don't know exactly how late it is, anxious to check on my brother, and beyond pee-in-your-pants excited to see Nathaniel tonight. I hurry to dig a bill out of my pocket and stuff it into the antique bubble gum machine, which is now a donation jar. I tuck the book under my arm and head out of the shop.

***Haunting Me* and the *An Angel Falls* series is available [here](#).**

More from Jody A. Kessler

The Night Medicine

A Historical Time Travel Romance

In 2012, Blackfoot tribal member, Dean Wolfsblood, is the reluctant guardian of a centuries old medicine pipe that makes time travel possible. When Dean's former Marine buddy, Badger Lowell, bribes him to take the arduous trip into the past, the last thing either of them expects during the "Night Medicine" ceremony is for an intruding grizzly bear to chase Kai, a beautiful and complicated Cree woman, into the past with them.

Upon arrival in 1868, the three unlikely companions discover deceit, murder, buffalo hunters, and a kidnapping waiting for them as they travel across mountains and plains to the gold mining town of Helena, Montana. As hidden motivations are exposed, secrets are revealed, and all well-meaning plans for their journey are cast away into the winds of time. Can they survive history and each other long enough to make it back, or will the past change their futures forever?

[The Night Medicine is available on Amazon](#)

Unwrapping Treasure

A Granite Lake Romance Novella

Paramedics Treasure and Bodie never imagined their Christmas Eve nightshift could turn into a dangerous and sexy holiday escapade that changes their lives forever.

Paramedics Treasure and Bodie arrive on scene at a routine emergency call and find an outrageous holiday party, a Christmas tree on fire, and an innocent life to save that nearly cost them their lives.

After escaping the chaos of work, they decide to spend their Christmas vacation together at a secluded lakeside cabin deep in the heart of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. With the snow falling soft, a warm fire in the hearth, and fresh cookies baking in the oven, an innocent holiday getaway quickly turns into a night of spontaneous passion with no strings attached.

Will Treasure and Bodie's hasty decision to spend the night tumbling between the sheets – and on the table, and the floor – prove disastrous or will their relationship develop into something neither of them saw coming?

Available on Amazon

~Thank you for reading~

