

Gifts and Curses

Jared ran as fast as his out of shape body could take him, feeling his fat ripple with every loping step. The hallway stood wide and long, all of the extraneous finery decorating the space blurred past him in color-coordinated streaks. His pursuer couldn't be more than a dozen feet behind, raw fear pushed his body forward.

A row of vases flew off of an end table, crashing to the floor behind his heels one by one as Jared tore past them. Jared kept his eyes forward and continued to run.

From behind, a shout of feminine anger caught up to his ears.

Shit! Jared's thoughts ran together, *she's right on top of me!*

Brilliant light shone from the end of the hallway, a surge of hope burned through his gut. If he could just get to the end of the hall, down the stairs and out the front door, then he just might make it out alive.

The sound of a chair being dragged across the marble-tile grabbed Jared's attention. Jared watched a chair move directly in front of him, shoved by an unseen force into the center of the hall. He didn't have time to move out of the way, he jumped up and over the chair, just like a hurdle when he used to run track in high school.

Unfortunately, Jared remembered only seconds too late that high school had been over ten years ago. Since then, the only track he visited involved drinking and betting on dog races.

In mid jump, the toe of his left shoe hooked underneath the seat of the heavy chair, knocking him off balance and sending him face first toward the hard floor. Jared managed to get one hand out in front of him to break his fall, he cried out as a quick shot of pain ran up through his wrist and into his elbow.

He rolled over in time to see half of an iron curtain rod come down toward his face, an ornate oak leaf at its end.

Gasping, Jared wriggled out of the way faster than he thought possible. A crack of iron on marble stung his right ear as he scrambled back upright.

They were out of the hallway. Jared faced his attacker, walking backward slowly. His eyes darted around, looking for any way out. He stood on the top landing of a broad, sweeping staircase that perched three floors high. Only a wooden railing separated him from a drop all the way down to the marble floor of the house's grand entrance.

Regina Ludlow gripped her curtain rod segment in one hand. She inched toward him slowly, like a professional fencer.

Jared opened his mouth cautiously. “Regina, please, we can tal...”

“Ha!” Regina cried, taking a swing at Jared’s skull.

He brought his arm up, blocking the blow with his injured wrist. The force sent stars into his vision.

“Holy shit!” Jared shouted in pain, instinctively gripping his injured arm.

Regina pivoted expertly on the ball of her left foot. Her blond pony tail bobbed once as she executed a perfectly formed side kick into Jared’s chest, sapping the air from his lungs and sending him into a backwards stumble.

Jared struggled for breath, he barely felt the wooden banister catch him on the small of his back before Regina managed to get both of Jared’s feet out from underneath him, sliding his center of gravity upward and pushing him into a back flip over the third floor railing.

Waving arms and legs wildly, Jared began to fall, head first, thirty feet down to solid ground. Oddly, as death approached, only one calm thought ran through his mind.

Why me?

“Get the fuck off my property.” Jared shifted his medium-sized frame into the center of his doorway. Defiantly, he folded his arms in front of his chest, trying to look as menacing as possible to the woman standing outside of his home.

Fine lines around her eyes showed her to be in her mid to late thirties, perhaps a good five years older than Jared. But the way the light-blue, velour jogging suit clung to some spots and hung from others, Jared could tell the woman was youthfully fit and no stranger to exercise.

“She said you would help me!” The woman’s eyes shone wetly, threatening to leak drops of moisture at any time.

“Look lady, I don’t know who told you this crap, but just forget it, all right? I don’t know anything about this psychic, mumbo-jumbo horse shit.” Jared tried to puff his body up by standing straighter, the intimidation severely handicapped by his SpongeBob Squarepants pajama bottoms. “Now go away, please.”

The first of a stream of tears fell onto her reddened cheeks.

“But she said...” Her words started as a protest, but mutated into something more like a plea.

Jared knew exactly what would come next. He sighed deeply and looked behind her to the empty suburban street.

“If you want a witch-doctor, or someone to talk to your dead land-lord,” Jared said, “try the *herbaria* by the liquor store. I’m just a regular dude, lady. So, please. For the last time, will you kindly go fuck yourself?”

A hot flicker of anger started in Jared’s chest. He could feel it about to happen; he was going to get locked into this lady’s drama. A tingle swept over his forehead, over the area known to the wishy-washy new-age types as the third eye.

The lady started in on him again, her words drowning in the tide of emotion that washed over Jared.

“I mean, is it money? Are you holding out for money?” She turned her palms up to the sky, the pitch of her voice rising.

“Yes. You got me. It’s money. You tracked me down - god knows how - so that I could extort money from you.” Jared’s face seeped disinterest. “God, you’re good. Too bad you figured me out. Now I’ll have to quit this life of crime. Goodbye.”

Jared tried to shut the door before he knew he wouldn’t be able to. Only a sliver of an opening remained when Jared lost the battle.

“Please help me,” she said.

Now she had done it. Jared let a moment pass. His forehead tingled uncontrollably, the sensation repeating on the crown of his skull.

“Fine.” He exhaled sharply and opened the door again. “Get inside, let’s make this quick. I have to be at work in an hour so I don’t have time to play around with you.”

The woman lightly brushed past Jared and walked into his living room. Jared shut the door and turned to the woman, who looked distastefully at the sparse furnishings of his living room. An old, brown, threadbare sofa sat opposite a television on a makeshift cinderblock shelf.

Jared snatched a cup of coffee from the TV shelf and sat down on the room’s only other furnishing, an aging red leather chair. He gestured for the woman to sit on the

couch.

“Do you have any more coffee?” She smiled sweetly at Jared.

“Yes.” Jared stayed seated, tapping his foot on the carpet.

“Okay.” The woman cleared her throat. “My name is Regina. Regina Ludlow.”

Jared shook his head, sitting forward in his seat. “Not really important. Just tell me what you’re after.”

Regina’s neck tensed quickly. She nodded in understanding. “Well, what can you tell me?”

“About you?”

“Let’s start there,” Regina said.

“Not much.” Jared wrapped his hands tighter around his cup. “You’re a hot mess of emotion right now, that’s all I can get. I don’t have time to wait for you to calm down, either. I’ve got to get ready for work.”

“That’s all right, I don’t need you to read me. I have a different sort of problem.”

“Oh?” Jared raised an eyebrow.

“I am a ‘hot mess of emotion,’ Mr. Hammond, because I lost my husband a month and a half ago.” Regina sniffled once. “Since then, I have found that my home is now plagued with activity that I cannot explain.”

Jared’s brow knit. “You mean your place is haunted?”

“Yes.” Regina nodded solemnly.

“And you think it’s your dead husband doing the, uh, the oogita-boogita?” Jared waved his fingers at Regina.

Regina looked momentarily scandalized by Jared’s lack of tact. “Yes.”

“What kind of stuff is happening?” Jared drank from his coffee.

“Voices, furniture moving, apparitions, doors opening and closing. Mr. Hammond, it’s all too much. Please you have to help me.” Regina leaned forward in her seat far enough to make him believe that had they been sitting closer, she would have tried to put a hand on his knee.

“I’m not in the ghost removal business,” Jared said.

“What business are you in?” Regina sat up straight.

“Retail. Provided, of course, that I can get to work on time...”

Regina's jaw set. The intensity of the tingling on Jared's forehead increased.

"Look," Jared rested his cup on his knee and rubbed at his temples. "I can refer you to some people who do that kind of crap. They'll come to your house and burn sage, make little circles out of salt and say prayers in made-up languages. It's a lot better than I can do."

"No." Regina shook her head. "I need you to come, and tell me what's behind this activity in my house. I need to know if it's Ronald, trying to reach me."

Regina sniffled again. "Ronald was my husband."

"I gathered that by the context," Jared said dryly. "I get off work about eight-ish. If you want me to come by your place, write down your address, I'll come over tonight."

Regina smiled. "Thank you, so much, Mr. Hammond!"

"But this is it." Jared raised one finger. "We have to agree, right here and now, that my involvement with your crap ends tonight when I go over to your house."

"Yes." Regina nodded as she stood from the couch.

"No guarantees, either. I'll try to figure out what's going on in your place, if anything really is. Chances are you're just crazy. Most people that make these kinds of claims are."

"Most people that claim to be psychic are a little crazy, too, no?" Regina smiled wryly.

"Yeah, well." Jared walked into his kitchen to get Regina a pen. "I never claimed to be shit, lady. You showed up at my front door uninvited, remember?"

Jared returned to the living room with a pen and a scrap of paper, which he handed to Regina.

"How did you find me?" Jared said.

Regina finished writing down her address and phone number. "I'm not..."

"You're not supposed to say." Jared pursed his lips and shook his head.

He took back the pen and paper and walked to the front door. Opening it, he made a sweeping gesture to the outside.

"Please," Regina said while opening her small clutch purse. "Let me compensate you for any difficulty..."

"No." Jared cut her off.

“But, this is obviously an inconvenience for you.”

“No doubt.” Jared waved her outside again. “But, I can’t take your money. Trust me that I want to, but I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’d say that I’d like to tell you some other time, but I really wouldn’t and I’m not going to.”

Regina snapped her purse closed. “Goodbye, Mr. Hammond.”

“See you tonight, lady.”

“Holy shit balls on ice...” Jared peered out through the filthy windshield of his Ford Taurus at the massive house growing larger by the second as he approached.

The estate looked like something out of a movie, a mansion with manicured gardens, well lit walkways and a circular driveway with a fountain in the center. He pulled up behind a row of three black SUVs and double checked the address and his directions.

Jared hustled to the massive front doors and rang the bell. Within moments the doors opened, a dark-haired woman wearing khaki trousers, a gray polo shirt and a huge smile appeared on the other side.

“Hi.” Jared inclined his head to the woman. “I’m supposed to see Regina.”

The woman eyed Jared up and down swiftly. “You must be Mr. Hammond. Welcome to Plentywood. I’m Genevieve, please, come in.”

Jared walked into another scene straight out of Hollywood. An expansive grand entryway sprawled in front of him, complete with a sweeping staircase that ran up the wall three stories high. A large gold and crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, spilling fragments of light over a polished marble floor.

“Nice digs.” Jared craned his neck to look up at the chandelier.

“Thank you. They’re waiting for you in the den, Mr. Hammond.” Genevieve motioned politely for him to follow her.

“They?” Jared said as Genevieve led him into the next room.

In what was the largest living room Jared had ever stepped in, a full-fledged television crew worked furiously. Bright lights erected on tripods gave the area an

almost painfully bright glow. A make-up artist worked swiftly on a grey-haired man, who sat on long couch and chatted with the artist.

“May I bring you a refreshment, Mr. Hammond?” Genevieve’s question brought Jared back from his survey of the room.

“Hell yes. How about a scotch on the rocks?”

“Sure.” Genevieve gave him an amused smile before leaving for the kitchen.

From the other end of the room Regina walked to him slowly, clad in a black turtleneck and holding her hands folded neatly in front of her chest.

“Mr. Hammond,” she said.

“Regina.” Jared quickly inclined his head toward the camera crew. “You renting out your mansion to the *Rock of Love* people?”

Regina let out a soft exhale. “No, Mr. Hammond. These kind souls are here to help as well, think of them as colleagues.”

“Is this the sensitive?” The handsome, middle-aged man from the couch eyed Jared as he approached Regina.

“Sensitive?” Jared stood up straighter, “Look, man, I may have cried at the end of *The Notebook*, but that doesn’t give you the right to make judge...”

“I mean psychic, Mr. Hammond,” the graying man interrupted Jared’s outrage.

“Oh.” Jared’s face turned red. “Right. Well... I was just kidding about that shit with *The Notebook*.”

Genevieve returned from the kitchen with a tumbler in hand, saving Jared from his prolonged embarrassment.

“One scotch on the rocks,” she said, handing the drink off to Jared.

“Thank you, Genevieve.” Jared gave the woman a genuine smile. Genevieve smiled back, not the overly large number she wore at the front door, but a smaller, closed mouth expression. She dipped her head and stepped back from the group.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Mr. Hammond?” Regina looked at the drink, then back to Jared. “I mean, while you’re on duty?”

“Duty? What am I, the fucking fire marshal?”

Jared almost took a sip before being interrupted by a new addition to their group, a clip-board toting man from the camera crew.

“Sir, we’re going to need you to fill out and sign the back of this form before we start shooting...” He pushed the clip board toward Jared, holding out a pen for him to take.

Taking a deep draw from the tumbler, Jared’s eyes traversed the width of the paper.

“Oh,” Jared said, almost choking on the end of his swallow, “Hell no. Film release? Uh-uh. Not a chance in hell.”

Jared turned from the group, shaking his head firmly. He found the closest armchair and took a seat.

“But, why?” Regina said, her face full of worry.

“You think I want every asshole in the country knocking on my door?”

The older gentleman approached Jared again. “Mr. Hammond, may I call you Jared?”

“Sure.”

“Jared,” the man said, “My name is Arthur Penfellow. You might have heard of my show, America’s Most Paranormal?”

Jared nodded. “I’ve heard of it.”

“Then you know that what we try to do is approach a paranormally active site from all areas and investigate the activity rationally.”

“Well, I’ve never actually watched it,” Jared said.

Arthur spoke in smooth tones, “That surprises me. Given your alleged abilities I’d think you’d be very interested. Why wouldn’t you watch it?”

Jared grimaced. “You think a guy that works for the DMV goes home and watches shows about license plates? Besides, I never said I have any ‘abilities’, she did.” Jared pointed at Regina.

“If you don’t care about it, what’s the harm in signing a release?” Arthur didn’t relent.

Jared laughed bitterly. “If only you knew.”

A long haired, light brown cat jumped up onto Jared’s lap as the two men talked. Jared took a look at his new companion and instinctively began scratching the animal on his cheeks.

“But, isn’t this what you do, Jared?” Arthur crossed his arms over his chest.

“No.” Jared sneezed, but continued to pet the animal. “What I do, is manage a craft store. This? This is bullshit I can’t get out of.”

“I don’t understand your attitude. Are you just worried about being exposed as a fraud?”

Jared took another sip from his scotch. He knew the man’s game. The champion manipulator had tried to play the nice guy, now he was going to challenge Jared and depend on him reacting in kind.

“Yeah,” Jared said. “I guess I am.”

The cat began to purr loud enough for Jared to hear over their conversation. Jared smiled at the animal while Arthur tried to formulate another tactic to get him to sign the film release.

Arthur took a third tactic, “What if we blur your face and keep your name out of it?”

“Fair enough.” Jared looked around to the two camera men in the room, who had already started filming.

“Mr. Hammond. Jared,” Regina inserted herself back into the conversation, sitting down on a couch opposite his chair. “Will you please help? Start whenever you can.”

Jared sighed. He cast his eyes behind Regina, Genevieve stood with her back against the wall along with two other members of the house staff.

Regina sat on the edge of the couch. She closed her eyes and cleared her throat.

“Are there any other presences here, Jared?” Regina said.

“The fuck?”

Regina opened her eyes to see Jared looking straight at her, his upper lip curled. He shook his head.

“It’s not a fucking séance. It doesn’t work like that,” he said.

“Well, how does it work?” Regina gave him an annoyed look.

Jared looked back down at the cat. “Sometimes, I just know things. It’s hard to explain. It’s like trying to describe how something smells without using other scents to describe it.”

“So, a sixth sense then?” Arthur arched an eyebrow, he angled his body enough to make sure the camera could capture his thoughtful expression.

“Why do you guys have to make everything sound so damn gay?” Jared’s eyes lost focus for a moment. The cat stopped purring, but remained seated on Jared’s lap.

Jared’s eyes popped up to Regina.

“You locked the cat out of your bedroom for the past week.”

Regina cocked her head slightly.

“It looks like you were mad about something, but he doesn’t really understand.” Jared’s eyes softened again. “Oh. I think I know why.”

Color drained from Regina’s face.

“You put some kind of collar on him. But it’s not really a collar, it’s like you took a necklace or a bracelet and you wrapped it around his neck.” Jared nodded to himself, his eyes still unfocused. He sneezed once, but didn’t let it break his concentration. “Yeah. Must have been, because the links in the chain were catching on his fur. He didn’t like it, so he worked it off of himself.”

Jared focused back in on the room. Regina sat on her couch, tight lipped. Behind her, the members of the house staff whispered to each other.

He took another drink from the scotch. “He hid it inside of a tall boot in one of your closets. I think the boot is suede and I’m guessing the closet is in your bedroom, because the god damn thing is bigger than my garage.”

“Well, what are waiting for?” Arthur spoke with a calm excitement directly into the camera. “What secrets does the closet hold?”

Arthur led an excited camera crew and the house staff out of the room. Jared could hear their tromping all the way up the stairs, presumably to the master bedroom.

Jared remained seated, as did Regina. The cat laid down fully on Jared’s lap, his purring resumed.

Regina’s face had become stone.

“You okay?” Jared said.

“Yes.” Regina nodded slightly. Her voice sounded soft and cautious. “I’m just eager to see what they find in the closet.”

Jared’s eyebrows knit. “Well, I can’t make any guarantees.”

Regina didn't respond. She leaned back into the soft cushions of the couch, keeping her eyes on Jared.

After a tense moment, muffled laughter drifted down to them from upstairs.

"I wonder what happened?" Regina raised one eyebrow to Jared. "Tell me, did Frederick tell you anything else?"

"Frederick?"

"My kitty. That's his name."

Jared couldn't help but feel like a grazing animal caught in a lion's crosshairs.

"I didn't know that was his name," he said. Jared thought for a moment. "It's hard to tell, but I think he responds to 'Boots'."

The cat opened one sleepy eye, which he promptly closed.

"Well, that's not his name. Nice try, though." A warm, relaxed smile began to spread over Regina's face.

"Yeah," Jared said. "Well, if you really want know, the only other thing I could get is that you need to stop having sex in front of him. It freaks him out."

Regina laughed once. "Really, more shock value? That's an obvious kind of prediction. Everyone who owns a pet has either been naked or even made love while the animal was around. I don't believe I'm so unique as for that 'insight' to startle me. The collar was amusing, though. Let me guess, you felt some missing fur around his neck and reasoned the rest out?"

Jared clicked his tongue and checked his watch. Footfalls echoed throughout the grand entry, growing louder until a cameraman entered the room, walking backwards. Immediately behind him came Arthur, with the rest of his crew and the house staff following behind.

Regina watched Arthur enter the room. With dramatic flourish, Arthur took a knee next to her. The house staff took up their place against the wall, moving quietly.

"We checked your closet, Regina," Arthur said.

One camera man stepped closer to the action.

"And what did you find?" Somehow, Regina's voice had gone back to soft and sweet. Jared coolly took another sip of his scotch.

Arthur made sure that he faced the camera as much as he did Regina before

responding.

“It would appear,” he said, “That things aren’t always as they seem.”

Arthur brought his closed hand up, between himself and Regina. Slowly, he turned his fist over, and opened it.

“Oh my god!” one of the house staff called out.

Inside his open hand rested a diamond bracelet.

Regina’s eyes locked with Jared’s.

Jared lifted his tumbler to her.

“Oh my god, Ms. Regina!” Genevieve couldn’t contain herself, she bounced over to her boss. “It was in the boot, just like Mr. Hammond said it would be. Boots hid it in his boot!”

“Boots?” Regina’s voice rose. She said the words carefully, “Who is Boots?”

“Oh,” Genevieve smiled, “That’s what we call Frederick sometimes. When you first got him we used to always find him hiding in that same boot when we’d clean your room. He’d get scared of the vacuum and just run right in there.”

“I see.”

For the second time in the evening, the pigment began to leave Regina’s face. She looked again to Jared, who responded only by swallowing the last of his drink.

Genevieve delicately approached Jared. “Would you like another one?”

“Don’t mind if I do, Genie.”

“Oh. My. God! How did you know people call me Genie?” Blushing, she took the empty glass back into the kitchen, looking back at Jared twice along the way. Her coworkers immediately followed.

“To be fair, that one I guessed.” Jared winked at Regina.

Arthur stood and faced the camera. He pivoted his head slightly to the left to give his face a more dramatic appearance.

“Truly, a shocking display of clairvoyance,” he said. “But can we be absolutely certain of its validity?”

“Are you going to do that all night?” Jared accepted his refreshed beverage from Genevieve.

Arthur ignored the question. “It’s time to put your skills – and mine – to the test,

Sensitive.”

“Seriously? You can’t call me something other than that?”

“A tour of the home,” Arthur continued speaking into the camera, “will reveal the secrets inside. Is it truly paranormal occurrences plaguing poor Regina, or is it something more mundane? Our investigation continues in a moment.”

“A commercial?” Jared said, “Did you just send us to commercial?”

“We’re still rolling,” Arthur said, “The editors have me do that periodically. Anyway, let’s check the house.”

Regina stood, she had regained her color and composure. “I’m so glad we’re ready to begin the investigation. How would you like to start, Arthur?”

Arthur placed a hand gently on Regina’s shoulder. “Show us where the activity is.”

A dour expression darkened Jared’s face. His eyes lost focus for a moment and his hand tightened around his class.

“Ugh.” Jared shook his head quickly and stood from his chair.

Arthur examined Jared’s expression. “Are you sensing something else?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Jared smacked his lips once. He gestured with his glass toward the grand entrance of the house. “Let’s get this shit over with.”

Arthur took the lead with Regina, while the camera and sound operators followed directly behind, capturing Arthur’s interview with the homeowner.

“Tell us about the incidents you’ve had here in the home since your late husband passed away.”

Regina cleared her throat and put a hand to her chest. “This is difficult, I’m sorry, Arthur.” She wiped a single tear from her left cheek.

“Please, take all the time you need,” Arthur said.

Jared paced slowly behind the cameraman. He sipped his drink and watched the conversation.

“In Ronald’s study, the door will open and shut on its own. I can hear footsteps across the floor, as well. In our bedroom, pictures have fallen off of the wall while I was in the room. Sometimes there are sounds throughout the house, like a person moving around.”

They ascended the stairs, forgoing the entrance to the second floor hallway and climbing to the third. Arthur's interview continued all the while.

"What if we don't find anything here tonight, Regina?"

Regina blinked once. "Maybe you won't, I suppose. But if you don't it's only because you weren't here long enough, my Ronald is still with me, here in the home we made together." She choked just on the last few words of her response.

Arthur patted her hand. The pair turned into the third floor hallway and began to walk down the finely decorated space.

A muffled cough echoed into the hallway.

Regina stopped dead in her tracks, freezing the progression of their entourage.

"Well, there's your spook." Jared took another drink and looked at the glass with puckered lips. "Damn, man, did Genie switch me out with some bottom shelf bullshit?"

Arthur looked back at Jared. "What do you mean?"

"This scotch is fucking disgusting. Tastes like the shit I normally buy. First glass was primo, and I gotta tell you, there's just no going back."

"About the ghost, Sensitive." Arthur said.

"Oh. Yeah, that cough didn't come from a living person."

"That's not possible." Regina said firmly.

Jared glanced at his hostess.

"I mean, I've never heard any voices before." Regina looked around the hallway nervously.

"Whatever." Jared shrugged.

A crash rang out from the room directly to their right. Regina jumped, raising a hand to her heart. Arthur yammered excitedly into the camera, waving his crew into the room where the crash came from.

Regina stood still while Arthur and his team moved past her into the room Regina identified as her dead husband's study. Jared moved to follow suit when he felt a delicate hand grip his upper arm.

The door to the study shut. Jared looked to Regina, her hand still wrapped around his arm.

"You don't want to check it out?" Jared said.

Regina's eyes traveled over Jared, he couldn't shake the feeling he had become an object.

"You really can do it, can't you?" she said.

Jared only stared back at her.

"Please," Regina smiled, "Can you come with me to my room and tell me what you know?"

Jared swallowed. His mouth felt cottony, pinpricks of static electric sensation coated her body. Jared's arm started to go numb where her hand touched him.

"You don't want to wait for Arthur?" Jared cast a significant glance to her hand.

Regina let go of his arm. "The important thing is my Ronald. Please, come with me. Help me."

Somewhere in his chest, the numbness growing from Jared's arm clashed with wild tingling from Jared's head. Tingling enflamed by the last two words of the woman's sentence.

Regina had him figured out.

Jared nodded slightly. Regina smiled again, this time the corners of her mouth turned up just a little more.

She walked softly down to the end of the hall, where she cracked open a set of double doors and led Jared inside.

"Shit!" Jared winced and grabbed at his stomach.

"Jared?" Regina asked.

Jared shook his head, looking around the dimly lit room. "I'm fine," he said, taking in the space.

Regina stepped closer to Jared, close enough for him to feel the heat coming off of her body.

"What do you know, Jared?"

"Not much..." The king sized bed he recognized from his communion with Boots. Some of the furniture had been moved from the time of the cat's memory, but not much. Shelves adorned with a multitude of framed pictures and other miscellany took up most of the wall space in the room.

His eyes settled on Regina's vanity, to a picture of her standing between a graying

man and a darker haired man who could have been his younger sibling. Jared walked to the picture and pointed to the younger of the two.

“Your husband was a handsome man.”

Jared took another sip of his scotch.

“That’s not my husband, Jared. That’s my brother in law.”

The liquid stung his tongue. Jared dropped the glass tumbler, it fell quietly into the plush carpeting. A bitter taste spread across his mouth and down his throat.

He coughed uncontrollably, falling to his knees on the floor of the room. Jared’s hands went once more to his stomach.

Regina backed away, Jared could barely see her as his vision went red and orange with each fit of coughing. Blood and saliva flew in gobs from his mouth, landing on the carpet and coating his hands, which tried feebly to stem the flow.

Jared’s chest shook and trembled, the coughing finally ceased. He exhaled one last breath slow and uneasy, a gurgle escaping his mouth.

Color returned to his eyes. Jared’s breath came back to him. From the floor, he watched the tonic of blood and saliva evaporate from the floor and his hands, turning into wisps of smoke before disappearing completely.

Taking in heavy breaths, Jared rose to his feet. He stared at Regina, who had backed up against her nightstand, watching Jared with a mixture of shock and horror.

“How?” Regina’s mouth stayed open.

At once a cacophony of hard surfaces scraping against one another filled the room. Jared watched every framed portrait of Regina’s gray-headed husband pivot, and turn toward her.

Silent pain took over Regina’s face. She bit her bottom lip and blinked away a tear.

“I’m sorry, Jared.”

“I don’t think I’m the one that needs the apology.” Jared inched toward the room’s only exit.

“No, Jared, you don’t understand.”

Regina shook her head, she brought a hand from behind her back. Jared gave a start before he saw that the hand held only a large handkerchief, which Regina held by

the corner, dabbing at her eyes.

She walked slowly to him, her shoulders slumped and her eyes full of tears.

Jared paused in his tracks.

Regina stopped directly in front of him, her body appearing for the first time to be small and frail. She held out her arms, handkerchief still dangling from her right hand.

Jared grimaced as she embraced him, sobbing.

With warm, wet lips she kissed his neck.

“I’m sorry, Jared.”

He didn’t have time to register the sound of rushing air, Jared only felt the explosion of moist pressure in between his shoulders, sending his back arching in pain.

Regina screamed, Jared twisted his head to find her clutching a bloody hand. Fragments of a vase that once sat on a bookshelf lie scattered among damp fibers of carpet. Flowers had been strewn on the floor, next to a handkerchief spotted with blood, and a knife with a four inch blade.

Jared’s eyes went wide.

Regina stared at him, her face taking on a feral glow.

“Holy shit...” Jared whispered as he backed away.

Every shelf in the room emptied its contents on the bedroom floor. Most objects flew toward Regina, others fell limply to the floor, but they all distracted her from killing him. Jared took the opportunity to run like hell.

Jared watched for the approach of the ground, but instead felt a jarring pain from his right foot, followed a brilliant symphony of delicate tinkling.

His eyes jerked upward, Jared found his foot snagged between two of the brass arms of the chandelier, the crystal ornaments all crashing into one another as he set the fixture off balance. His body swung with the chandelier, helpless to control the motion of the giant pendulum.

A rush of air by his ear sent Jared’s head turning, in the growing distance he could see Regina, recovering from a swing of her curtain rod, dangerously extending herself over the railing of the landing.

“Fuck me!” Jared cried out. The chandelier crested its swing and moved back

toward the crazed woman.

“Regina, don’t!” Jared screamed as he watched the woman ready herself for another swing.

He struggled to grab his leg and hoist himself on top of the chandelier, but found the act impossible.

Regina swung, her face contorted with the effort. Jared tried to move out of the way of shattering crystal as Regina’s club smacked against the light fixture.

She let out a startled gasp, her weapon rang sharply after contacting the brass of the chandelier, the ornate end of curtain rod lodging itself into a small portion the metal work that held the thousands of crystals in place.

The chandelier swung backwards, pulling a stunned Regina off balance.

Regina screamed as she fell, completely missing the chandelier. A sickening crunch bounced off of the marble surface as she contacted the ground.

Jared exhaled, his face turning redder every second he hung upside down from the chandelier. He watched as Genevieve, the other house staff, and the second camera man all stood, looking around the grand entrance in horror.

Jared called in sick, something he hated doing. But his leg screamed in pain every time he put pressure on it, not to mention the fracture in his arm that had to be cast in the emergency room.

He hobbled toward his front door, determined to stop the incessant knocking that he had been trying to ignore for the past ten minutes.

Jared swung open the door, wearing his best mean-face.

Genevieve and the two other members of Regina’s house staff looked at him with various levels of surprise.

“Oh.” Jared tried to manage a smile for the women even though his leg throbbed with pain. “Hi.”

“We’re sorry to bother you, Jared. We won’t be long.”

“It’s okay, Genie.” Jared grimaced, waiting for whatever requests the women would make of him.

“We don’t really know what happened last night. All we know is what we saw,

and what the camera got on tape, with Ms. Regina attacking you and..." Genie swallowed. "Well, I guess she had us all fooled."

"She had a gift," Jared said.

"I just don't understand why she brought you in if she killed Mr. Ludlow? Didn't she know you'd expose her?"

"The cops told me that they were still investigating his death," Jared shifted his weight on his good leg. "Me, the T.V. people, we were all just props to make her look like a widow, out of her mind with grief and trying anything to still have her husband with her. She never believed for a second that I was the genuine article."

Regina nodded in understanding. "I guess what you can do is pretty hard to believe."

"And now you need me to do something for you, right?" Jared braced himself against his door to take more of the pressure from his leg.

"No, it's not like..." Genie bobbed her head. "Not like that. At first when I saw you with Boots, I thought that it would be really cool be able to do what you do. But now..."

Jared gave her a half smile. "Yeah."

"Anyway, we didn't come here for that. The cops are still working on everything, but we're all out of a job and we're trying to tie up a couple of things before we move on." Genie nodded to one of her companions, who went to their car and returned with a cardboard box.

Peering inside the open container, Jared saw Boots the cat, curled up on a towel lining the bottom.

"I'm not sure..." Jared shook his head.

"Please?" Genie said. "None of us can take him; I don't even have a place to live since the police shut down the house. We know you'll take good care of him."

Knowing that Genie was being completely honest with him, Jared reluctantly agreed. Bidding the women goodbye and taking Boots with him inside the house, Jared flopped down on his couch.

The cat gingerly leapt from his box and walked up to Jared, lying next to the injured man.

Jared sneezed twice and scratched the cat on the cheek. He leaned back, tilting his head toward the ceiling.

“Whoever you are, you’re a really funny fucker, you know that?”

Boots stretched out while Jared nodded off, mumbling about gifts and curses.