



The Return

By Cassie Laelyn

Chloe dragged me into the living room. Well, it was probably a living room at one stage. Now, dusty white sheets covered the two leather couches. Torn, ragged heaps of fabric hung from the windows, holding on by the last threads. Battery lanterns scattered the space, casting shadows on the faded wallpaper.

In the center, our friends sat on the tattered oval rug surrounding a Ouija board.

Drums thundered in my chest so loud I wondered if a band rehearsed upstairs.

Séances weren't my thing. Challenging the fates never ended well.

On the floor, Jessy swigged from a vodka bottle. She must've bought it inside when our small group ventured in here. For the hundredth time tonight, I wished I'd driven. That way, I could've left by now.

But something kept me here. A feeling. A strange sense something...waited for me.

No, not waited. Called for me.

Chloe tugged my arm again until we reached the others, where they shuffled to make

space for us on the floor.

“Who should we contact?” Jessy asked, passing the bottle to Chloe, who took a swig.

Fingernails scratched the back of my neck and I shifted on the uncomfortable floor.

Outside by the bonfire was way less creepy than in here.

I eyed the door.

“What about the original owner of the house?” Chloe said, offering me the bottle.

I declined with a quick headshake. I’d had a few drinks outside, and now that the buzz had begun to fade, common sense reared its ugly head.

“Yes!” Maddison’s grabby hands reached for the bottle. “Someone totally died here. I just know it.”

Through the door on the opposite side of the living room, a gloomy staircase led to a second story. The tug, that calling, intensified each time I peered in the direction. Something was up there.

Or someone.

Before I thought more of it, Chloe nudged me in the arm with her elbow. She tipped her chin to the board, and I reluctantly joined the others, placing one finger on the upturned glass in the center.

Thunder rumbled over the distant hills. Another warning I didn’t listen to. Outside, someone turned up the music, while partygoers sang along to the classic rock song.

The base vibrated through my belly, colliding with the constant quivers. “I don’t like this.”

Contacting the dead was one thing. But this felt pivotal, like changing destiny. As though one thoughtless party trick could unravel a choice made centuries ago.

“It’s only a little fun, Lena.” Chloe bumped my shoulder with hers. “Besides, you keep going on and on about this house. Now’s your chance to find out who lived here.”

Researching the public archives and conducting a séance were two totally different things, but I bit my tongue. Chloe was right. Ever since I'd moved here at the beginning of the year, I'd constantly felt drawn to the abandoned house overlooking town from on top of the hill. No one knew the previous owner, only rumors circulated at parties like these. Everything from a cult mass murder to a hot vampire haunting the house, waiting for his soulmate to find him. Of course, I much preferred that version. Far less gruesome.

All I knew for certain was that college kids threw lame parties here on the weekends to scare themselves. Or prove how brave they were.

Jessy cleared her throat. "We call upon whoever once lived here."

"Or who died here," Maddison added.

"Oh, I got it." Chloe waved her free hand in the air. "We want to know who's connected to this house. That covers all bases."

Poor spirits were probably so confused by the questions they wouldn't know which one to answer.

Finger on the glass, I stared at the center of the board, silently hoping it didn't move. It wasn't even a real board. Someone had drawn letters on a scrappy piece of cardboard. The drums thundering behind my ribs faded to a base beat when the glass stayed stationary over a blank space.

Still, we waited.

As the seconds ticked by, the lack of light heightened my other senses. White noise buzzed in my ears, making me hear things that weren't there. The house...groaned. A guy whispered, his voice weaving through the musky, damp air.

A soft rumble vibrated the floor. Madison flung her hand off the board with a squeal.

For someone who wanted to contact the dead, the girl sure scared easily.

"Did you hear that?" she squeaked, hand on her chest.

“Contacting the dead isn’t a joke. We shouldn’t be doing this.” I shifted back, ready to leave, when the glass suddenly darted to the letter ‘L’.

Madison scrambled away from the board. “Stop doing that Chloe, it’s not funny.”

Chloe and Jessy lifted their hands in the air. “It’s not us.”

Invisible hands squeezed my lungs.

Heart in my throat, I watched the glass slid to ‘E’... then to ‘N’, until it stopped on ‘A’.

Lena.

All three wide-eyed gazes snapped to me. No. At something behind me.

A gust of wind whipped my hair in my face. I scurried away from the board to stand. Holding my breath, I turned to the staircase.

A guy, around my age, dressed in clothes from another century, slowly descended the steps, his intense gaze locked on me while trailing his hand around the curve of the banister.

I stumbled forward as dizzy memories reared to life.

Giftng me eternal life...the fates rejecting our union...cursng my soul to wander the earth until I found him again.

At the bottom of the staircase, he paused by the window, the moonlight catching his features. Thick, dark brows drawn tight. Black wavy hair.

The drums in my belly fluttered away on a breath. I knew him. I would always know him.

“Nathaniel.”

In an instant, he appeared before me, capturing my face in his strong hands. “My love. At last, you found me.”

The End!

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