

## CHASE

I hate that I'm starting this trip—an opportunity-of-a-lifetime trip—in such a shit mood. I try to shake it off, pushing my shoulders back and stepping across the threshold into the dim glow of the atrium's golden overhead light. The whole room is abuzz with activity as crew members, all toothy and bright-eyed, instruct passengers where to go, welcoming us for this lovely voyage across the Atlantic.

But my eyes turn into magnets, yanked to Chrissy as her knees buckle.

Emma is faster than me. My hands fumble with the camera, my throat closes with fear, confusion rattling around in my head, panic pounding out a manic electric beat in my chest. Emma's hands curl around Chrissy's waist, her eyes fly up to mine.

"Help," she gasps.

Forgetting myself and just about everything else except for Chrissy, I nearly drop the camera, but Kiki catches it before it hits the ground. It's still recording, and she motions me forward, indicating that she'll keep the camera rolling while I help my girlfriend.

We made a pact before this trip that we'd keep the camera rolling no matter what happened. Last October, when everything went down at the Hearst, we had so many gaps in the footage that we had a hell of a time splicing together a video that accurately painted the full

picture of that fateful night. The episode was popular because it was front-page news, not because it was our best work.

Kiki knows that camera footage is the last thing on my mind where Chrissy's well-being is involved, so she keeps the camera rolling as I fall to my knees beside my girlfriend.

The first thing I notice when I wrap my hands around Chrissy's bare calves is that they are ice cold. Dead cold. My eyes fly to Emma's.

"She's breathing," Emma says, her voice a croak of restrained terror.

As soon as we lift Chrissy up to carefully move her out of the flow of traffic, the crew manning the atrium take notice, their bright have-a-good-trip smiles fading into grimaces as they calculate the risk of letting the event erupt into a full-blown scene versus pretending that nothing's wrong so they don't alarm the other guests.

Gerald catches up fast.

"Oh no," he quavers. "Is she okay?" He rushes up behind me to spit the words at my neck. I cut my eyes over my shoulder to see him gesturing for some of the other staff to come help us.

"We've got her," I say, more indignant than is entirely necessary. But the staff circles anyway, like pigeons circling a discarded loaf of bread.

"Here, here," comes Mrs. Lawrence's soothing motherly voice, just as her hands shoot out with one of Kiki's herbal tinctures. This one smells strongly of rosemary, peppermint and eucalyptus. She waves it under Chrissy's nose as we manage to prop her onto a bench against the closest wall.

"Is this an act? Should we call an ambulance? Does this happen often?" Gerald is spiraling, his clipboard now a life raft to keep him from drowning in a sea of his own sweat.

"Unclench your butt," Emma says in a monotone. "This is par for the course when a hella gifted psychic medium boards a ship that is almost a century old and definitely haunted." She grins like the Cheshire cat that she is. Gerald turns the color of an overbleached hotel towel. Splotchy white and gritty.

Billie shoves the tincture closer to Chrissy's nose and it does the trick.

With a heaving cough, Chrissy comes to life, eyes wide, gasping for air. Her body is rigid, almost like she was just electrocuted by lightning. Her eyes dilate, and for a second she looks lost in her own body. The glance she gives the room is more than a disoriented once-over. It's like for a split second she doesn't recognize where she is.

I bend down and line up my gaze with hers. When her panicked eyes finally fix on mine, her lips quiver.

Relief washes over me.

"There you are," I breathe, tucking a long light-blond lock of hair behind her ear. Her eyes are shiny with tears that she blinks away. Her hand squeezes mine as she leans back against Emma's sturdy frame. Her already-pale skin is ghostlike, almost translucent.

"Hi." Gerald shoves into our moment shoulder-first. "Hi, wow, okay don't scare me like that, missy!" he scolds, but his playful tone fails to mask the quaver in his voice.

Kiki balks at his use of the diminutive *missy*. Chrissy ever so subtly furrows her brow, before letting her lips curve into a weak yet convincing smile.

"Let me call you a doctor," Gerald continues unprompted, pulling out his walkie-talkie and pressing the call button with a shaky finger. His knuckles are somehow even whiter than the rest of him.

"No, I swear—" Chrissy finds her voice just before he issues the call. Her eyes drift ever so subtly over my shoulder to where Kiki is standing with the camera pointed straight at Chrissy's face. "I'm fine. This is one hundred percent normal, especially when I'm tired. I just need to get some water and food in me, maybe elevate my legs."

But her gaze fixes right in the center of the lens. She wants the camera to know she's not telling Gerald the whole story.

She's saving that for later, for a dramatic confessional that will leave our viewers titillated.

Seriously, fuck Creep TV. Chrissy is a star.

Gerald drops the walkie-talkie to his side. Honestly, he looks relieved that he doesn't have to call a doctor, which would probably require him to write up some kind of incident report right at the beginning of the first voyage post-dry-docking of his beloved RMS *Queen Anne*, making the whole launch chaotic and messy as hell.

“Can you maybe show us to our room instead?” Kiki bats her eyes at him, always the charmer. Emma sucks her lips in to suppress a proud smile.

“Absolutely.” Gerald beams. The clipboard becomes his compass. “Please, follow me.”

He walks ahead of us toward the bank of elevators, and in the two seconds of space that follows, Chrissy mouths three words to the rest of us:

*Something is wrong.*

■ ■ ■

KIKI

After our VIP concierge Gerald finally gets us into our suite on the twelfth deck, he gives us a lightning-fast room tour before begging us to “please be careful.” And then with one last deer-in-headlights look at Chrissy, he all but sprints out the door.

I have a sneaky feeling we will have a hard time wrangling him for help in the future.

Chrissy is feeling much better now—at least there’s color in her face again. She’s still leaning heavily on Chase, but I think it’s less for support and more because she’s enjoying the proximity.

Mama starts squealing the second she steps into the room. Floor-to-ceiling windows and a balcony the size of an average stateroom. An art deco glass chandelier hanging in the center of the room is the only clear relic from another time. Other than that, the room has the chemical scent of new, new, new: new carpet, new paint, new furniture. A large flat-screen TV. A far cry from our days slumming it with a serial killer in a hostel room at the Hearst.

Personally, I’m just glad we’re not headquartered on floor fourteen. As we learned from the horror that was the Hearst Hotel, floor fourteen is just unlucky number thirteen in not-so-subtle disguise.

Of course, Emma points out that our suite has two levels, so the second level might *technically* be part of floor thirteen. I tell her that the second floor does not lead out to any kind of hallway, so we’re

safely stationed on floor twelve, end of story, thanks for playing, sweetie. Emma shrugs a *whatever* and her tummy rumbles to further emphasize that she has no interest in continuing this argument with me. The buffet calls.

I hear Mama's stomach growl too.

They lock eyes from across the room. It's love at first bite, and they are instant buffet buddies. It actually makes my stomach do a somersault to see this flash of connection between them, even if it's over something as minor as a cruise ship buffet.

"Hey, Chrissy, how you feeling?" Emma asks, hopeful and still maintaining eye contact with Mama. "Should we, maybe, get you something to ... drink or ... eat?"

Chase helps Chrissy to the couch and slides open one of the balcony doors to get her some fresh air. Chrissy doesn't even have to look back at Emma and my mom to know what's going on between them. You don't need a sixth sense to decipher that Emma Thomas has heart eyes for an all-you-can-eat.

"I wouldn't mind a grilled cheese and a Coke," Chrissy says, winking at me. I breathe a sigh of relief that she's feeling well enough to egg them on.

"One grilled cheeser and Coke coming right up!" Emma says, delighted to have a helpful reason to do what she loves most.

Without another word to each other, Mama and Emma throw their stuff down, grab their cruise cards—slash—room keys and all but skip out the door.

"Make sure you get some buffet B-roll!" Chase yells after them. "Gee, they wasted no time." He collapses with exhaustion on the couch next to Chrissy, handing her a bottle of water from his backpack to tide her over until they get back with sustenance.

She leans into him as his fingers lightly stroke the length of her hair. They are subtle with their PDA, much more subdued than Emma and I usually are. Though lately I can feel Emma pulling away in small ways. Barely detectable, but I'm me. I'm good at reading people, and Emma is not herself.

"Kiki?" Chase asks. I'm ripped out of my anxious swirl of thoughts and I whip my head around to see both Chase and Chrissy looking at me with wide concerned eyes.

“Sorry?” I ask, hoping they’ll repeat the question.

“Aren’t you going to go with them?” Chase asks.

I shake my head and force a smile. “Nah, I’ll just get in their way.” Besides, if they can hang solo for any amount of time, I call that a win. It’s not that they don’t like each other, it’s that Mama knows Emma mostly as my smarty-pants bestie, not my gives-me-butterflies girlfriend.

There’s a difference. And I want her to see that, almost as much as I want her to see the Ghost Gang is more than just a weird *little hobby*.

I slump down into the chair across from them, then unzip and kick off my lime-green glitter platform boots. My current braid color of choice is toxic-waste green. Unnatural green everything while I use my personal TikTok to raise money to fight climate change. A cause that Emma and I have both been super passionate about tackling together.

“She’s been having a hard time,” Chrissy says after a long stretch of silence. When she knows things she shouldn’t know about my inner world, her eyes are always dark and shiny, with just a touch of dreamy haze.

“Who?” I ask, trying to play it cool. I’m not cool, and we both know I know exactly who Chrissy is talking about.

“The nightmares are getting worse and now she can’t sleep at all,” Chrissy explains. My heart sinks. Why does Chrissy know all of this and I don’t? I mean, I know why, and it’s not like either of them want it that way, but it still hurts that Chrissy knows more about what my girlfriend is going through than I do.

I feel a pang of guilt that I’ve been overthinking my anxieties about having Mama on this trip and not focusing more on helping Emma deal with her pain.

Chrissy leans forward, resting her hands on the black tights she’s wearing under her ragged denim cutoffs. “Your feelings are still valid,” she says. I cross my arms like it will prevent her from knowing what’s in my heart.

“I wish she would let me in,” I say, because I’d rather we stay on the topic of Emma’s sleepless nights than on my own emotional turmoil. “All I want is to help. To understand.”

“Sometimes when the nightmares can’t reach you in your sleep, they find ways to torment you while you’re still awake.” Chrissy’s voice is low and ominous, and to be honest, it scares me.

I feel tears spring to my eyes. Emma has said nothing to me about any nightmares, even though I do know she’s had trouble sleeping. In the past few months, whenever I wake up after falling asleep at her house or at mine or on the road, she’s always wide awake, staring at the ceiling or her phone. I thought maybe it was just a coincidence. I’m a light sleeper, so maybe she was just waking up throughout the night and waking me up with her.

But I’ve also noticed the dark circles under her eyes getting deeper and deeper. I’ve noticed her drifting in and out of conversations, drifting off in the middle of sentences and initiating physical contact (cough—sexy time—cough) less and less.

Emma is in pain, and I feel totally clueless about how to help her. Even when we’re alone, she never acts like anything is wrong. She tries so hard to appear cool as a cucumber. Getting her to open up for a chat about feelings is like trying to crack a safe with a rubber mallet. I’m scared that if I confront her about the nightmares or, God forbid, try to convince her to talk to a professional about them, she’ll shut down completely.

And shut me out for real. Maybe for good.

The thought sends a shiver down my spine. Scarier than any haunting, ever.

“Not that I’m not worried about Emma,” Chase chimes in. Chrissy’s bony elbow juts into his ribs. “Ow, hey”—he leans away from her like he’s anticipating another attack—“it’s just that I’m a little worried about *my* girlfriend.” He pauses and gives her a pointed glare. “Who went full rag doll the second she stepped on board this boat.”

His smoldering gaze meets Chrissy’s and I can tell that he’s wondering if it’s safe for her to be here. For all of us to be here.

Silence hangs in the air. I know we’re all remembering the dangerous debacle that was our experience at the Hearst Hotel. Even though that episode did wonders for our channel, we’re not exactly dying for a round two, especially since round one almost killed Emma and Chrissy, and left all of us scarred for life.

But that was a living human threat. A killer with a physical body inflicting physical harm. Whatever is affecting Chrissy here is most likely paranormal, and as long as it stays that way, Chrissy can handle it. We all can. Right?

*Right?*

Chrissy lets out a sigh that sounds like a concession, but she gives me a sweet, reassuring smile. I force my lips to reciprocate. I know she has Emma's back, and she wants to help, even if it means trespassing on Em's thoughts to make it happen.

"I didn't faint," Chrissy says, then takes a hefty gulp of water as the words settle.

*Huh?* She sure as heck did. Emma caught her when it happened. Chase's narrowed gaze and puzzled expression confirms he's just as lost as I am.

"What do you mean? You lost consciousness, you collapsed. What else would you call it?" he asks, and his tone isn't the one he uses as *Chase, Chrissy's cinnamon roll boyfriend*. Right now, he's *Chase Montgomery, paranormal investigator*. He could be questioning her for the camera, except we're not filming. And maybe we should be.

"I'm still trying to make it make sense in my head," Chrissy says, tugging her legs up and hugging them to her chest. "I don't know what happened, except to *you* it looked like I fainted, but to me it was like ... time traveling."

"Time traveling?" I say in a high-pitched squeak.

She pinches the bridge of her nose, probably fighting back nausea. I grab my backpack and quickly hand over her ginger tincture. She inhales, steadying herself.

"When I stepped onto the ship, something was off—I was still here, and I could still see everyone on the gangway, but I wasn't on the new and improved *Queen Anne* like I should have been."

"Where were you?" I ask, goose pimples bubbling up on the back of my arms.

"Not where. *When*," she says. I rub my hands over my arms, trying to warm myself up, but it doesn't help. This is the kind of chill that rises from inside your skin.

"Okay ... *when* were you?" Chase asks.



“I was inside the *Queen Anne*, but she looked completely different. The wallpaper, the carpet, the lighting ... everything was dated and grayed out, like a black-and-white film. There were no people, just a clock with spinning hands until there were no hands at all. And then a brief but unmistakable flash of white.”

“The Lady in White?” Chase asks.

“I think so,” Chrissy whispers and barely nods, shivering again inside my coat. I make a mental note to pack a parka for her on our next trip. Chrissy runs cold, and these haunted old structures have insulation that is for shit.

“What does she want?” I ask, swallowing hard.

“I don’t know,” she says, flicking eyes so light blue that they almost look iced over back and forth from me to Chase. “But I have a feeling I’m going to find out. Soon.”

Welp.

All aboard our haunted vacay.