

# PHANTOM OF THE PROM

*By Linda Joy Singleton*

I wake up knowing today will be laughter mixed with disappointment.

When I volunteered to help decorate the infamous Wilshire Castle for the prom, I hadn't talked to Dominic. I didn't know that to him "prom" was a four-lettered word. The guy I love to the depths of my heart refused to take me to the prom.

*It's just a dance*, I tell myself as I slip into jeans and a baggy tee. I'll go anyway as an unpaid-and-under-appreciated volunteer. Manny, my editor and friend, might even pity-dance with me. Dominic won't be there but most of my friends will, and I *will* have fun. Without. Him.

No shock when Penny-Love—full name Penelope Lovell, my bestie and the royal highness of Sheridan High's social scene--drives up twenty-three minutes late. No apologies, just the question I hoped she wouldn't ask. "Where's Dominic?"

"The prom isn't his thing." I shrug like it doesn't matter as I slip into her car.

"But you've been going out forever. He has to take you."

"Not going to happen. But don't stress, I'll still go and help out."

"I was counting on his muscles today." Penny-Love taps her finger on the steering wheel, frowning. "The prom is tomorrow night which doesn't leave much time to get a drafty, dusty castle ready. This is a disaster."

"Tsunamis, tornados and earthquakes—those are disasters. A school prom doesn't even rate a number 4 on the disaster scale."

"It will if we don't get another strong guy." Penny-Love twists one of her copper curls. "My boyfriend can do most of the heavy lifting but he needs help setting up the turrets. The tallest tower is twelve feet high and made of corrugated metal. Can't you persuade Dominic to change his mind? I thought he'd do anything for you."

*I thought so, too*, I think sadly. *Has something changed between us? I hardly ever see him since his business took off. Dominic tends Nona's livestock early mornings then works till late horse shoeing for his clients. He makes time for everyone...except me.*

P-L glances over from the driver's seat. "Do I detect trouble in hot-and-sizzling romance-land?"

"No. We're fine. But—" I shake my head. "Nothing. We're great."

She doesn't believe me, of course, and what's worse is I don't believe me either. But I shove doubts aside as we arrive at the Wilshire Castle.

This year's prom theme is Castle Dreams. When the Wilshire estate offered us the castle ballroom for FREE (best four-letter word ever!), the prom committee back-flipped for joy (most of them are cheerleaders. Not me. I'm more of a mascot).

Prom is tomorrow night; cleaning and decorating will be a huge job.

A job I'd expected to share with Dominic.

But guess not.

I've only seen Wilshire Castle from a distance, so I'm surprised how sorrowful it looks up close; a graying shade of forgotten. It's supposed to be haunted. I've been able to see ghosts since I was a little girl but don't expect to see any today. Wilshire Castle is

only a few decades old; a reproduction of a castle, not the real thing. Still when we drive through wrought-iron gates, I shiver for no reason.

*Open your senses beyond the expected to see more than is visible*, a familiar voice speaks into my head.

“Not now, Opal,” I mind-talk to my spirit guide. I’m the only one who can see her so I have to be careful not to talk to her in public. She’s bossy and has so much attitude you’d think when she lived over 300 years ago she was a Mayan princess instead of a sacrificial peasant girl.

*Disturbing vibrations imperil your aura*, Opal warns. *Best heed my words or suffer a pyramid’s weight of regret. There is darkness ahead if you stray from silver threads of friendships.*

“Huh? Stray what?”

Beside me, Penny-Love unclips her seatbelt. “Did you say something?” she asks. Did I? Oops.

“Opal, not now.” I use my sternest mind-voice. “Pen doesn’t believe in ghosts but she does believe in crazy people and I don’t want her to think I’m flipping out.”

*What means this “flipping out?” Your language has no foundation of logic.*

I cover my mouth so I won’t laugh. I’m the one who usually needs a dictionary to decipher our conversations. For once I’ve confused Opal, and it feels good. I know she means well but my shivers are gone and I have no sense of danger. I tell Opal to leave, promising to be careful.

But really, what can be dangerous about decorating for a prom?

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Penny-Love’s new boyfriend Ransom is a nice guy. I’m surprised because she usually picks dangerous egotists wrapped in Trouble. Don’t even ask about her last boyfriend. But this guy is...well...sweet. Ransom is a polite southern boy; opening doors, offering to carry things and gazing at Penny-Love like she’s the queen of his world. It makes me a little sad because Dominic’s sweet to me, too. And I miss him.

We get to work right away—and man is there work! It’s like Wilshire Castle has been vacant for centuries, although Pen tells me it’s only been a decade. “Since the tragedy,” she says in a hushed tone as she hands me a broom.

“What tragedy?” My sixth sense must be off because I’m not picking up any otherworldly vibes. Only dust, which makes me sneeze.

“I can’t believe you don’t know.”

“All I heard is it might be haunted.”

“Ignore those ridiculous rumors,” Penny-Love scoffs. “Ghosts aren’t real.”

I could prove otherwise but why shock her with reality? Most people are content to live their earth lives without ever seeing a ghost. Not me. Spirits are my normal, and even though I complain sometimes, I love my special connection to the other side.

“So what was the tragedy?” I ask, reaching up to touch the patch of dark in my blond hair: the mark of a Seer.

“The dude who built this castle—Jeremiah Wilshire--murdered his wife. Everyone knows he buried her on this property, but no one ever found the grave so he wasn’t even arrested. He lived alone for years until he fell down the stairs and died here.”

My shivers return. Dizzy, I lean on the broom for balance. Darkness sweeps me somewhere else, back to another time in this ballroom, only the walls are newer with

gilded-framed paintings and high above the center of the ballroom glitters the most beautiful chandelier I've ever seen. A young bearded guy in a tux holds hands with a freckled red-headed girl wearing a lacy white gown. Bride and groom, I realize, warmed by the honey-sweetness of their love for each other. The groom draws his bride close, and she leans her head against his shoulder. They dance beneath the silvery shine of the chandelier.

“Sabine!”

The broom slips from my fingers at the snap of Ransom's voice.

“Are you all right?” he asks with a worried frown. “You didn't answer when I called you and you look awfully pale.”

“It's nothing. I'm fine.”

“Are you sure? Can I get you some water?”

I shake my head, even more impressed with Penny-Love's boyfriend. I just hope he isn't too nice for her. Being around P-L is like climbing aboard a thrill ride; lots of fun but you'd better buckle in securely and hold on tight.

Penny-Love calls Ransom back to a stack of metallic towers lying on the floor. This must be the heavy lifting P-L needed Dominic for, and this thought stabs me with sadness. I consider texting him, but I won't beg for his time. Besides, Ransom seems strong enough. He lifts the first metallic tower like it's made of paper. The second goes up fast, too. But as he bends down for the third--the tallest and heaviest tower--I get a bad feeling. A vision flashes in my mind of the tower lurching sideways, tumbling down and crashing onto Ransom.

I start to run, desperate to warn him...but it's too late.

Screams echo around the ballroom. There's another sound too--someone is laughing.

When I turn toward the laughter, there's a strange man standing so close to a wall mirror that he seems to be inside the glass. He has short dark-brown hair, a trim brown beard and narrowed demonic eyes. I recognize him from my vision, although he's older and dead. I'm staring at the ghost of Jeremiah Wilshire.

Even worse--he's staring back at me.

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Good news: Ransom survives with only bruises and a nasty bump on his head.

Bad news: The ghost will strike again.

Jeremiah is one angry dead dude. Although he vanished without giving any hint of what he plans to do, his aura burned like lava, and I know he'll be back with vengeance. Wasn't killing his wife enough? You'd think dying would have cured him of being psycho. Guess not.

But why attack Ransom? Was it random or deliberate? Either way, a psycho ghost at the prom equals trouble. I wish I could warn Penny-Love but I've worked hard to hide my psychic secret from her and don't want to risk losing her friendship (yes, she is that shallow, but I like her anyway). Besides, she'd never believe me--not even if a ghost spit in her face.

We work another hour, until the ballroom shines with cleanliness. Silver and purple streamers twist like royal vines along the walls and a giant banner “Castle Dreams Come True” sways high across the stage. All that's left to do is stock the kitchen with

refreshments and put up the fallen “turret” tower. Penny-Love says she’ll bring one of her brothers to help, and we agree to meet in the morning.

On the drive home, Pen raves about her prom dress, the hot new stylist who’ll beautify her hair and the limo Ransom hired to take us to the prom. But I’m hardly listening. I need to get rid of the psycho ghost before he does something worse than knock over a tower. Next time he might really hurt...even kill!...someone.

“Who’s doing your hair?” Penny-Love stops for a red light.

“Huh? Oh...for the prom.”

“Well...duh.”

I shrug. “I haven’t thought about it.”

“That’s because all you’re thinking about is Dominic. You can’t hide your feelings from me, Sabine. It sucks he won’t take you to the prom.”

“Well...” I let her think what she wants. “His work is important to him, especially starting a business in this economy. He’s not in high school anymore so I can’t expect him to get excited about a school dance. Still...” I sigh. “I found an amazing prom dress and now he won’t even see me in it.”

“Know what you should do?” P-L says with a wicked grin as the red light changes to green and she stomps the accelerator.

“I’m afraid to ask.” I pause. “What?”

“Tell Dominic that if he doesn’t take you to the prom you’ll dance with other guys. I’ll bet your ex-BF Josh will be there. Nothing stirs up the jealousy juices better than an old boyfriend.”

I shake my head. “Dominic and I don’t play jealousy games. We trust each other.”

“Sweet but bor-ring.” Penny-Love purses her lips as if thinking deeply. “You know what puzzles me? Dominic’s anti-prom attitude. Sure he’s an outdoorsy guy but he’s not a coward. I can’t see him letting you down like this without a good reason.”

“His good reason is his work,” I say with a weary sigh.

“Maybe,” she says but she doesn’t sound convinced.

It hurts too much to think of my strapless chiffon prom dress with the tiny sequins trailing like stars in a golden sky. I found the perfect gold strappy heels, too, and planned to wear a gold chain with an oval diamond that my grandmother gave me for my seventeenth birthday. I’d been so sure Dominic would go with me that I bought the tickets without actually asking him...until yesterday.

His refusal. My silent agony. I didn’t cry then but I might lose it if the prom topic comes up again. Unless we talk about prom for a non-personal reason. Like a psycho ghost. Dominic has intuitive skills that could help ghost-busting. He doesn’t see ghosts but he’s tuned in to the other side and can communicate with animals. I smile as I imagine us driving to Wilshire Castle and taking down the ghost. Together.

When Penny-Love drops me off, I see Dominic’s pickup truck parked in its usual spot by the barn. Instead of going into the main house where I live with my grandmother, I head for Dominic’s loft studio. I tap on the door, but no answer. It isn’t locked, so I enter. The combo living room-kitchenette shows evidence of Dominic; dirty dishes in the sink, a loaf of bread on the counter and western boots by the couch. Biggest evidence is the lump underneath a blanket on the couch: Dominic.

He’s curled on his side, his tanned rugged face softened by sleep. My feelings soften, too, as I gaze down at him. I reach down to gently push aside a curl of his sandy-

brown hair from his face. He looks rugged yet vulnerable. I feel such an overwhelming love for him that I can hardly breathe. I long to curl up beside him and hold him so tightly that he never leaves.

His eyelashes flutter. “Sabine?” he murmurs with a smile.

“Hey,” I say. “How come you’re sleeping on the couch?”

“Was I asleep?” He sits up, yawning. His towel slips and he’s shirtless, only wearing his jeans. Blond chest hairs trail down to a rock-hard six pack. Be still my lustful heart, I think as delicious naked images dance in my head.

“Want to crawl under my blanket?” Dominic invites.

Every cell in my body begs me to answer yes so I’m surprised when I say, “No. I have something important to discuss.”

“Your loss,” he teases.

“Don’t tempt me.” I squeeze his hand, sitting beside him. “We need to talk.”

He frowns. “If it’s about the prom, I’m really sorry, but I just can’t go.”

“I know.” I bite my lip, trying hard to be understanding. “This *is* about the prom, but not about us—it’s about the prom ghost.” I tell him what happened at Wilshire Castle. He shows no doubt when I describe the ghost. He believes me.

“If I can just talk to the ghost alone, I’m sure I can get rid of him,” I explain.

“Do *not* go near that ghost again.”

“We’re decorating in the morning, so I have to be there. That’s why I need to deal with this tonight. If I convince Jeremiah to go into the light, he’ll be gone by morning. The prom can go on without any danger.”

Dominic shakes his head. “No way. You’re not going to a deserted castle alone.”

“I don’t plan to.” I look into his blue eyes. “I want you to come with me tonight. Will you?”

He frowns. “I have a six a.m. job with a new client who owns three boarding stables. If this client likes what I do, it’ll mean steady work so I can afford to take more time off to be with you. But I have to get my gear ready. Sorry, Sabine. But I can’t go.”

“Can’t or won’t?” I turn away from him.

“Can’t.” He lightly touches my chin, turning me back toward him. “Sabine, you know I love you and I’m working hard so we can have a good life together. I’m sorry if I can’t be with you much right now. But it will get better. I promise. I can’t go tonight but if I can get away for a few hours between jobs tomorrow, I’ll help with the ghost and even prom decorating if you still need me.”

“I always need you,” I say with an ache of longing.

“Will you promise not to go out alone tonight?”

He’ll stop me if I don’t promise, so I nod. “All right.”

“Good,” he says with relief.

But if he could read my mind, he wouldn’t look so relieved--because I’m still going to Wilshire Castle tonight.

Just not alone.

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I wait till after dinner when Dominic is busy in the barn and my grandmother is working in her home office before hiking down my rural driveway.

“You’re the best, Manny,” I tell my partner-in-scheming and school newspaper editor Manny DeVries when his car pulls up beside me.

“That’s what all the girls say,” he teases.

I laugh. He’s so full of himself, but not lying either. Girls are really into his confidence and dark handsome looks. We’ve never been romantic, just good friends, and he’s one of the few people at Sheridan High I trust with my psychic secret.

“How could I resist a secret rendezvous to a castle?” Manny’s dreadlocks woven with beads rattle as he gestures for me to climb into his Chevy. He points to a stack of printouts between our seats. “Want to hear what I found out about your ghost?”

I nod, fastening my seatbelt. Manny isn’t only helping with transportation—he’s got mad hacker skills.

“Jeremiah Wilshire married Hannah McDermish sixteen years ago, and they appeared happy except they couldn’t have children. Hannah loved to collect Disney princess figurines so Jeremiah built her a fairytale castle fit for a princess. But after a few years there were rumors of violent arguments. Then Hannah vanished. Her sister Tiffany reported seeing Jeremiah with a shovel but even though the police searched the property, the body was never found. Tiffany accused Jeremiah of keeping Hannah away from her friends and family until she rebelled and he killed her in a jealous rage. But he’s dead now, too—from a freak fall down ballroom stairs--so no one knows what really happened.”

“Except his ghost,” I say.

“Murderous ghosts aren’t the most reliable sources,” Manny says. “Are you sure you want to do confront the ghost?”

“Ghosts don’t scare me. I’m sure Jeremiah regrets what he did to his wife. That’s why he’s so angry. I’ll convince him that his wife is waiting for him on the other side and he needs to cross over to tell her he’s sorry.”

“You think he’s really sorry—or a sick twisted killer?”

“Most ghosts aren’t dangerous; just confused.”

I hope I’m right. Not only will I help Jeremiah but I’ll save the prom, too.

When we reach Wilshire Castle, I ask Manny to wait in his car and he pulls a macho act, insisting on protecting me. Like I’m the one who needs a body-guard? I remind him that I can see ghosts and he can’t. “I’ll call you if I need help,” I say, waving my cell phone.

I leave before he can argue then retrieve the key I’d watched Penny-Love hide beneath a faux rock. The castle foyer is dark and I don’t want to attract attention by flipping on the lights, so I pull out my flashlight. But the faint glow isn’t bright enough to cut through the gloominess. I sense my spirit guide nearby, hovering silently.

*Do my warnings cast no caution to your actions?* Opal scolds.

“I know what I’m doing,” I assure her.

*The diminutive knowledge of those attached to earth is insignificant.*

“If you don’t approve, then leave.”

Unfortunately she takes my words literally. After she’s gone, it’s like the light in my aura has faded, and I’m alone in a dark, creepy castle.

Maybe not so alone, I realize when I push open the door to the ballroom and shivers prickly my skin. Across the dance floor to the staircase leading up to the second floor, a wispy outline of a man beckons to me.

Jeremiah Wilshire.

I get an urge to flee to the safety of Manny's car, but I came here to talk to Jeremiah, and I'm not wimping out. He's only a ghost, and most ghosts have no more strength than a gust of wind. Still he did manage to topple a tower, so maybe he's stronger than most ghosts. Rage can be a powerful fuel.

When I'm near the staircase, I stop to face him.

"Hi, Jeremiah," I say in my calmest tone. I even manage a smile.

"Who are you?" His harsh voice seems to come from a long distance although he's only an arm's reach from me. His eyes are blazing coals, narrowed under dark brows.

"I'm Sabine Rose."

"You aren't dead, so how can you see me?"

"I've always been able to see ghosts." His burning anger drains some of my courage. "I-I came here to help you."

He snorts. "A little girl like you is going to help *me*? Fat chance."

I think back to my vision of him dancing with his wife. "I know about you...how much you loved your wife. You used to dance with her underneath the sparkling lights." I point up to the chandelier. "I know you never meant to hurt her."

"She's the one who hurt me!" He swirls down a step and I stumble backwards. "Yeah, I loved her and gave her everything she wanted—but it wasn't enough. I warned her I'd kill her if she ever tried to leave me."

"Whatever happened...well it was a long time ago. You must let go of the past if you want to see your wife again."

"I've already seen her. She was here with you."

I gasp. "Impossible! I would have seen her like I'm seeing you."

"She's changed, younger and her voice is different, but her hair and freckles are the same."

"Where exactly did you see her?" I ask, puzzled.

"Here—in the ballroom. But she ignored me because she was with *him*."

"Who?"

"The man who stole her from me."

"There weren't any other ghosts—only you."

"When I see that wife-stealer again, I'll do more than drop a tower on him." Jeremiah's aura swirls blood red. "He won't get off so lucky next time."

I stare at Jeremiah, realization stunning me. "You pushed the tower on Ransom because you think he stole your wife?"

"I didn't push hard enough. He has no right to her."

"But she's dead."

"Liar! You held the ladder for her while she put up that banner." He points to the silver and purple "Castle Dreams" banner high over the stage.

"You can't possibly...that's crazy...you think Penny-Love is your wife?"

"Don't call her that silly name. Hannah is my wife and I'll kill anyone who tries to keep her away from me."

*He really is psycho*, I think, glancing around and ready to run.

"She's not your wife. She doesn't even look like her except for the same color hair and freckles." I'm trying to sound calm but my voice rises, close to screaming. "Her

name is Penny Lovell and Ransom is her boyfriend. They were just little kids when you died. Your wife would be much older than you if she was still alive.”

“My. Wife. Is. Alive!” he roars, swirling down the stairs so fast that I feel his cold fingers clamp around my neck.

“Let go!” His grasp isn’t solid like flesh but his energy grips holds me until I push through him—literally moving through his transparent body.

I spin around to run but he blocks my way. “She couldn’t see me, but you can.”

“She’ll be able to see you if you let go of your anger and go to the light,” I say. “She’s there waiting and she’ll forgive you if you tell her you’re sorry.”

“I’m not sorry. I’m going to kill the guy who took her from me.”

“Ransom doesn’t know your wife. You have to believe me! Don’t hurt him—please!”

“Maybe I won’t.” A sly look crosses his misty face. “If you do what I ask.”

I tense. “What?”

“Bring my wife to me.”

“But I—”

“Tomorrow.” His gaze holds mine. “Or the boy dies.”

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What am I going to do? I can’t hand over Penny-Love to a vengeful ghost. She can’t see ghosts anyway so the whole idea is ridiculous. Jeremiah isn’t only dead—he’s delusional. How can Jeremiah think my friend is his dead wife? Doesn’t he remember killing and burying Hannah? If only I could ask Hannah what happened but she’s probably already crossed over and I’ve never been good at summoning spirits. I call out for Opal’s help but she’s not listening. If I could find Hannah’s grave, that might give me a strong connection to soul. But if no one else could find her grave in over a decade, how can I find it before Penny-Love returns in the morning? Besides, I can’t stay any longer. I need to get back before I’m missed. Grave hunting will have to wait till tomorrow.

I join Manny in his car and on the drive back, we try to come up with a plan. But it’s a total plan fail. No ideas.

No surprise I can’t sleep. So I flip through the print-outs Manny left with me. Names, dates, newspaper articles, financial information and photos. Studying a photo of Jeremiah and Hannah on their wedding day, I can’t understand how he can mistake this round-faced, dimpled girl-next-door type with dramatic, trend-maker Penny-Love. The only thing they have in common is hair color.

Sighing, I twist my long blond hair into a braid and climb into bed—then jolt up when an idea hit me. I can’t keep Penny-Love away from Wilshire Castle, but I *can* keep the ghost away from her with the right distraction.

It’s a crazy idea but when dealing with a psycho ghost “crazy” might just work.

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Ridiculously early the next morning, I dig through my closet, dresser drawers and even under my bed—which is where I finally find it. The red wig I used to impersonate my half-sister Jade. It’s not Hannah’s shade, more crimson than copper, but in dim lights it might do the trick. All I want to do is lure Jeremiah away from the ballroom for a while. It won’t take long for Penny-Love and the other volunteers to finish.

I skip breakfast and hurry outside, hoping to show Dominic the print-outs before he leaves for his first horse shoeing job. But his truck is already gone. When I hear



Penny-Love's car rattling down the driveway, I glance at the papers in my hand. I don't want her to see them, so I hurry into the barn and leave them in the loft for Dominic. I send him a text saying I hope to see him later at the castle.

We have a smaller decorating crew, only Penny-Love, her oldest brother, her guy Ransom and me. While they work to make the towers secure, I say I'm going to organize the kitchen. Instead, I search for the ghost.

"Jeremiah," I whisper as I peer into room after room.

I'm wearing the red wig, my head bent low so the hair falls like a mask hiding my face. I look even less like Hannah than Penny-Love does but I only need to confuse Jeremiah to a) keep him away from the ballroom b) persuade him to cross into the light.

Only I can't find the ghost. When I search through the castle my skin remains goose-bump free. Closing my eyes, I concentrate on Jeremiah. A vision slowly forms of a filmy figure kneeling on the ground, tracing his fingers on a smooth oblong rock. Not a rock, I realize as my inner-vision clarifies: a grave stone engraved: H-A-N-N-A-H.

I follow my intuitive GPS outside. Wilshire Castle is surrounded by thick woods and rolling hills dense with weeds. I take a path with a faint trail of gravel. I keep walking as if being pulled by an invisible rope, through shadows of oaks and around rocky outcroppings, until I reach a meadow of yellow flowers. No weeds. And in the center of the meadow, Jeremiah huddles over the ground.

His ghostly shoulders shake as if he's crying.

"Jeremiah," I call out in a soft whisper, leaning forward so the red hair waves over my face.

He whirls around, his feet hovering over the ground. Anger shifts sharply to a pale fog of shock. "You... You're here? Hannah?"

This is too easy, I think. Whatever. I go with it. "Yes. I'm worried about you."

When he moves closer, I hold up my hand. "Don't come any closer. Just listen."

His translucent form wavers to a stop. "I've missed you so much, Hanny. Why did you leave me?"

"You know what happened." I point to the grave just beyond him.

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know," I say in a forgiving voice.

"You hurt me more." A tear slips down his ghostly cheek. "I'm sorry my job kept me away so much. I tried so hard to make you happy. I bought you those princess statues and pretty clothes and everything you wanted. But it wasn't enough. Why did you cheat on me, Hannah?"

"I-I did?" My wig slips but I hold it in place.

"I'll never forget coming home early to surprise you with flowers and reservations at your favorite restaurant--only I was the one surprised. You were putting your bags in *his* car!" He aims a ghostly finger at me. "Leaving me after everything I did for you!"

"That's terrible but no excuse for what you did," I accuse.

"You killed me, Hannah." His voice breaks. "But I never stopped loving you. Then your sister told people I killed you. I wouldn't hurt you...not ever."

"How do you explain that?" I point to the grave.

"Revenge. I took away what you loved most."

Life, I think. He took away her life.

He's staring at me, frowning as if puzzled. "You're not Hannah – you're that psychic girl."

"You're right." Glad to end this horrible charade, I pull off the wig.

His face darkens. "You promised to bring Hannah to me."

"I can't do that. You're the only one who can find her but you have to let go of all of this." I gesture toward the castle then to the grave. "She's not in there anymore. She's in the light, waiting for you."

"You're lying!" His roar gusts into a wind that rips the wig from my hands and sends it flying across the meadow. "You let me think she was back!"

"I had to stop you from killing anyone else," I say, backing away.

"I never killed anyone!" Another branch snaps and is swept up in his twisting fury. "I didn't mean to push that tower on your friend—it just happened when I got angry. When I was alive I could control my temper. I didn't even yell when Hannah drove away with another man. I died inside, watching my love leave me. I stopped caring about anything when friends turned against me—accusing me of killing her."

I'm stunned by the realness of his words. "You really didn't do it?"

"I would never harm my Hanny. But everyone believed her sister. No one believed me."

In my gut, I know he's telling the truth. "If you didn't kill her, what really happened? Where is Hannah?"

"I can answer that," a voice rings out.

When I whirl around, there's a thin middle-aged woman with reddish silver hair and circles beneath her sad eyes. At first I think she's the ghost of Hannah, but she's not the same woman from my vision. Besides, she's solid not see-through and very much alive. She's not alone, either.

My gaze shifts to the guy standing behind her.

Dominic is here.

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The following conversation is beyond weird. As the only ghost-interpreter, I have to repeat everything Jeremiah says. Mostly, though, we listen to Beverly--not Hannah--but her sister.

"I thought you killed her," she says to Jeremiah, looking around uncertainly since she can't see him. "She showed me bruises and said you were abusing her. Then she disappeared and I saw you carrying a shovel. A year after your death she showed up and confessed that it was her boyfriend who hit her. She said she'd made a horrible mistake by leaving you. She wanted me to go with her to see you so she could tell you she was sorry. Instead I told her you'd died. She was heart-broken."

Only I can hear Jeremiah's low sobs. My heart breaks a little, too.

Beverly explains that Hannah was already ill with cancer. She didn't have much time left and wanted to die quietly. "I visited her every day in the care home...but today was the last day." Beverly wipes away a tear. "She...She's gone."

She chokes up so Dominic takes over. He says he read through Manny's print-outs and realized Beverly's address was near the area he was working. He had a "feeling" she knew more about Hannah. But by the time he found her, Hannah had died.

"Beverly had no reason to keep Hannah's secret anymore," Dominic adds. "After she told me everything, I told her what I knew. Fortunately she believes in ghosts. She

insisted on coming here when I told her about Jeremiah's ghost. But we got here and couldn't find you—until I heard a voice in my head telling me to following the gravel path in the woods.”

“A voice?” I ask.

“A spirit woman,” he answers with a knowing look at me. “She had a Spanish accent and spoke in a formal way like she was born a hundred years ago.”

*Three hundred years*, I think, smiling. Opal is still watching out for me.

Jeremiah glides next to me. “Thank you for everything,” he says, tears still shining through his ghostly form. “No use waiting around this old castle anymore. Hannah isn't coming back.” Finally, he agrees to go into the light.

“One last question,” I say as a bright light bursts around him. “Hannah isn't buried here—so who's in that grave?”

“Not who, but what.” Jeremiah chuckles. “Hannah's princess statues. The whole danged collection.”

\* \* \*

The ghost is gone but there's still work to be done in Wilshire Castle.

Dominic comes inside to see if the guys need his help, but the towers are upright and gorgeous. I head for the kitchen to finish my duties and Dominic says he has to return to work. I don't pressure him about going to the prom. We can't always be together but that doesn't mean he loves me any less. Before he leaves, though, Penny-Love takes him aside for a private talk—and they won't tell me what it was about. Frustrating. When I ask Pen, she only flashes a wicked grin.

I'm exhausted when I finally go home. But there's no time for napping. My grandmother fixes my hair; tumbling down my back in soft curls. She zips up my dress, too, and tells me I'm beautiful. I smile, but inside I'm wishing Dominic were saying those words. He's still at work, though, and I'm okay with that.

Penny-Love and Ransom pick me up in a sleek white limo. My grandmother snaps a million photos, and I swear she's crying as she watches us drive away.

Wilshire Castle sparkles with lights and banners and is so beautiful no one will believe it was ever haunted. I go straight to the kitchen, planning to help there most of the night. Manny finds me, though, and makes me promises to save him a dance.

“Sure,” I say with a laugh. “If you're not too busy.”

“Never too busy for you, Beany.”

“Don't call her that,” a voice interrupts. “Sabine doesn't like that nickname.”

I turn and there's Dominic—looking oh-so-handsome in a western suit; black cowboy hair, black vest over white dress shirt, and sexy tight black denim jeans.

“No prob, Nick.” Manny chuckles as he leaves the room.

Left alone with Dominic, I smile up at him. “So...you're here.”

“Wasn't easy—but well worth it.” He grasps my hands. “You look beautiful.”

My heart swells. “You look amazing yourself.”

“Thanks to Penny-Love. I have a confession to make.” He bites his lip. “My work isn't the only reason I said no to the prom. I'm an outdoor guy, not the type to wear a fancy tux and strangling tie. It seemed easier to skip the whole prom thing. Still I wanted to do it for you. When Pen demanded to know why I wasn't taking you, I told her—and she pulled out her iPhone. She found a place where I could rent a western suit. No tie or tux. I still had to juggle my work schedule...but I did. And here I am.”

“Here you are,” I say happily.  
He tugs on my hand. “Sabine, would you like to dance?”  
“I’d love it.”

We move out of the kitchen into the rocking ballroom where we join other couples swaying to a slow song. I lean against Dominic’s chest, and have a vision of us dancing at our future anniversary party, even more in love.

\* \* \*

Across the ballroom, another couple dances beneath the glittering chandelier to a beat of their own. Their feet don’t touch the ground. But no one notices them. The only person in the ballroom able to see them has her eyes closed.

“Welcome home, Princess,” the man whispers.  
And they dance.

The End.

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