

# Chapter 1

In the five months that Michael Sinclair had been dating Kate Avery, he'd learned a lot about women.

For one thing, there actually were shoes that did not go with certain outfits. For another, women went to the bathroom in groups, not by chance, but to talk. They loved dessert, especially cake, and preferred sweat pants to just about everything. They were also really into men with good dental hygiene.

"Trust me, nice teeth are important," Kate had told him. "If a guy has bad teeth, I'm not going to stick around long enough to find out if he has a good personality. Bad teeth will automatically disqualify you from the dating game."

Michael had found that particularly interesting. Having ghosts frequently hanging around and crashing their dates didn't bother her at all, but a few weeks without flossing? Apparently that was a deal-breaker.

He'd also learned that in the world of women, nothing was simple. Everything was open to interpretation. How, he wasn't sure. But apparently, a simple text message like **Yes** or **OK** could mean anything from "You're the most wonderful person in the world and I have no idea what I did to deserve you" to "I'm really mad and I'm going to break up with you."

And Michael had always thought that seeing ghosts was stressful. Those wandering spirits were nothing compared to whatever women had going through their heads at all odd hours of the day. That was why, when Kate had asked him if he wanted to go grocery shopping with her that Saturday morning, he'd prepared himself for long hours of self-doubt and anxious deliberation.

Normally, he knew, she wouldn't have asked him, but her grandparents were in town for the weekend. Her parents were hosting a small family get-together and Kate had volunteered to make dessert. She also wanted to take the night as an opportunity to formally introduce Michael as her boyfriend. That meant everything had to be perfect.

The good news was that Kate's father, Rex Avery, seemed to like him pretty okay. He'd believed Kate when she told him that Michael could talk to the dead. He also understood how much they had been through together and how they'd saved each other on more than one occasion and he appreciated that.

As far as Terri Avery was concerned, however, her daughter wouldn't have needed saving had she not been with Michael in the first place. And as much as Michael hated to admit it, she kind of had a point. If Michael and Kate had never met, she never would have been exposed to a crazed woman wielding a gun in a summer field or a forlorn ghost, so desperate to find his long lost love that he possessed her and threatened worse.

On top of all of that, Michael was going into his seventh month of unemployment. He'd managed to find work through temp agencies, but it was barely enough to survive on. It was difficult nowadays for him to get interviews, because as soon as potential employers did any sort of research on him whatsoever, they always ended up finding out about the ghosts, after which, they'd assume he was either crazy or a liability. Lousy as it was, he understood. He probably

wouldn't hire a guy who ran around saying that he could see ghosts if the roles were reversed. Unfortunately, they weren't, and he was the one stuck without a job.

But at least he had the ghosts to keep him company.

All joking aside, Michael had come to realize that as much as he wanted a stable job for himself and for the income it provided, he wanted it even more for Kate. She deserved to be with a guy who was gainfully employed. He knew she didn't hold his circumstances against him and that she'd still love him even if he wasn't working at all, but more than anything, he wanted to be worthy of her love. That, and he desperately wanted her parents' approval.

It was for all those reasons that he was more than willing to stand by Kate as she valiantly strove to select the appropriate frosting for her homemade cupcakes.

"Do you think I should buy the fat-free chocolate fudge? Or do you think they'd prefer the buttercream?" Kate asked Michael, examining her choices. He didn't want to bring her down, but she probably would have been better off asking him about small particles in the ozone layer, or some other obscure factoid that he knew absolutely nothing about.

"You know your family better than I do," he told her. "Which do you like better?"

"Well, you know chocolate is my favorite, but there's definitely something special about buttercream icing. I can't deny that."

"Okay. Then which one is more expensive?" Michael asked.

"The chocolate, but it's also better for you."

"That probably means it doesn't taste as good."

"But maybe I could add in some chocolate chips or sprinkles."

"Which would make the chocolate fudge more expensive and less good for you," Michael summed up.

Kate considered what he said.

"I think I'm going to get the chocolate fudge. And sprinkles."

And that was that.

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Upon arriving home at the Riverview Apartment complex, Michael helped Kate carry her groceries up the stairs. For an outing that had originally started as a quest for cupcake ingredients, they certainly had come home with a lot of bags. Of course, Kate had also bought milk, toilet paper, microwave meals, and then there was the fruit: mangos, grapes, and broccoli stalks for the newest member of the Avery family, Marlon Brando, the Green-Cheeked Conure.

Michael had never liked birds, so he hadn't been particularly thrilled when Kate adopted the six-month-old conure from the local animal shelter. He hadn't met many conures, but at least with Marlon Brando, the feeling seemed to be mutual. The bird, ridiculous as it sounded, apparently had decided that Kate belonged to him and he didn't like sharing her affection with anyone, especially someone who never fed him.

As usual, the moment Marlon Brando saw Kate, he began doing his little welcome-home-dance, bobbing his head up and down, picking at the side of the cage with his beak, and squawking those ungodly chirps and squeals of delight that he reserved only for his human.

"Hi, baby!" Kate greeted him with just as much enthusiasm. She opened up his cage and immediately, he climbed out onto her hand and up her arm to her shoulder. "How's my pretty boy? I got you some treats! You want some mango? You love mango."

The first time Brink had ever witnessed the phenomenon of Kate conversing with her bird, he'd pointed at them and said, "You know, that's how crazy you look when you talk to invisible people in public."

Kate, of course, hadn't heard him, but as it turned out, the bird had. As soon as Marlon Brando set eyes on Brink, he went absolutely ballistic, piercing the air and everyone's ears with horrible, aggressive screeches, and trying so desperately to attack Brink that he half flew, half tumbled off of Kate's shoulder and onto the floor. The little demon bird then proceeded to charge Brink, while Michael, in what would certainly be remembered as one of the lowest points of his life, fled the scene and barricaded himself in the bathroom.

Really, was it any wonder he wasn't a fan of Marlon Brando?

As though summoned by Michael's thoughts, Brink materialized inside the apartment that Kate shared with her brother, Gavin.

"Hello lovebirds, actual bird," he nodded at Marlon Brando, who was suddenly shrieking like the Grim Reaper himself had just appeared, demanding his foul, feathery soul.

"Brink?" Kate asked, upon witnessing her conure's despair.

"Yep," Michael and Brink answered together.

"Tell her I said hello," Brink said.

"He says hello," Michael had to yell to be heard above Marlon Brando's fit.

"Brink, you know I love you, but you scare my bird," Kate shouted back.

"I scare *it*? That thing tried to kill me! Again!" Brink insisted. Michael couldn't help it. He laughed.

"Are you boys making fun of my baby?" Kate asked, kneeling down in front of Marlon Brando's cage to placate the poor, paranoid conure with a small slice of mango.

"Never," Michael assured her.

"Yeah, right," she grinned at him over her shoulder. "Okay. Do you think I should make the cupcakes now so they'll be cool by the time we actually leave tonight? Or do you think I should wait until later so they'll still be warm and fresh?"

"Has either of you figured out yet that it doesn't actually matter what *you* say? She just uses you to bounce ideas off of and then does whatever the hell she wants anyway," Brink remarked.

"Um..." Michael's non-response was actually intended for Brink, but it kind of worked for Kate, too.

"You know what? I'm just going to go ahead and make them now. That way, later, when I have to shower and change and get ready, I won't be rushed," Kate said.

"Good thinking," Michael said. That was probably what he would have suggested too, had he actually been given time to weigh all the options.

"Would you like to help?" Kate asked, rising to her feet and wiping her hands off on her jeans. Meanwhile, Marlon Brando, who'd calmed down considerably, climbed through the open door of his cage, around the side, and up to the top. It was his favorite spot in the house, lording over all the people (living and dead) that he hated.

"Sure," Michael replied, trying not to dwell on the idea of the attack bird loose in the living room.

“Okay, if you would, dig around in the drawers until you find my measuring spoons,” Kate told him. “Oh no, wait! On second thought, could you maybe rinse out a bowl?”

“Absolutely,” Michael said. Two steps into the kitchen, however, and Kate threw her hands up as if to stop him from moving another muscle.

“Sorry, wait! Hold up! I actually think there’s a clean bowl in the dishwasher. Let me check.” And with that, she rushed passed him to the other side of the kitchen.

Brink cast Michael a sidelong glance and asked, “Having fun yet?”

Michael ignored him. He had known Kate long enough to know that when she was nervous about something, her anxiety presented itself in mile-a-minute chatter and a near whiplash-inducing case of indecisiveness.

After retrieving the clean bowl from the dishwasher, Kate clambered around the kitchen for her measuring cups, stirring spoons, and cupcake liners. Finally, she stood up, pushed the frazzled, stray hairs away from her face, and looked at Michael.

“You know, Sweetie, I love you so much, but I think it might be easier if I just do this myself. Would you mind?” she asked.

“I would not mind at all. In fact, I was just thinking the exact same thing.”

“Okay, good.” Kate rose up and kissed him on the cheek. “You can definitely wash the dishes after I’m done if you want, though.”

“Actually, I think I’ll pass on that too, but thanks,” Michael teased, even though he would absolutely help her clean up if she asked. She knew it, too.

“We probably won’t even have time to clean up before we have to start getting ready for dinner tonight. That’s okay. I can make Gavin do it tomorrow.”

“You can make Gavin do what tomorrow?” Gavin asked, emerging from his bedroom unshaven and still in his pajamas.

“Clean up the kitchen.”

“Hell no you won’t. You were the one who volunteered to make cupcakes. You get to clean it up,” Gavin muttered, running a hand through his messy hair and turning on the coffeemaker.

“What are you doing? Get out of my kitchen,” Kate ordered.

“Relax, oh crazed sister of Cuckoo Land, I’m just making coffee.”

“Well, I need to make cupcakes so move.”

“Kate.” Gavin stood directly in front of her and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Do you remember that time when we were kids and I accidentally sat on you and knocked all the air out of your lungs? That’s about to happen again, only this time, it won’t be an accident.”

“Fine.” Kate crossed her arms. “Though you should know that you didn’t actually knock the air out of my lungs. You forced my diaphragm to spasm and freeze up, thus making it very difficult for me to breathe. That’s what knocking the wind out of someone actually is.”

“Wow, I am so glad I know that,” her brother deadpanned. As if in agreement, Marlon Brando the Conure whistled from the perch atop his cage. Gavin scowled. “That bird is stupid.”

“He is not stupid! Are you, baby?” Kate asked her conure.

“It doesn’t even talk! If you’re going to get an annoying bird, at least get one that can learn to curse,” Gavin said.

“But I like *him*. He’s a good boy.”

“He’s a pest.”

Michael would never admit it to Kate, but he was with Gavin on that one. His relationship with Kate had been perfect until that stupid bird came along. For the most part, it still was pretty perfect, except for when Marlon Brando was around. If Michael even so much as tried to wrap his arm around her, the little conure went off like a fire alarm, squawking and pecking at his hand.

Michael had occasionally wondered if he’d have to deal with another man seeking Kate’s attention. He just never thought that man would be a bird.

“*You’re* a pest. Get out of the kitchen,” Kate ordered.

“Sis. Do you not see the empty coffee mug in my hand? Be patient,” Gavin asked.

“I shouldn’t have to be patient. I was here first.”

“If you really want to play that card, then technically, *I* was here first. Like, two and a half years before you.”

“We get it. You’re old. Hurry up.”

“Michael, does she ever treat you like this?” Gavin asked. “Bossing you around and being mean to you all the time?”

“I don’t have to be mean to him because he’s wonderful,” Kate told him before batting her eyelashes back at Michael. He grinned sheepishly in response while both Gavin and Brink pretended to throw up.

“Ugh. Happy couples. Gross,” Brink groaned. “If I had a working stomach, I’d be so nauseated right now.”

“And that is my real incentive to get out of the kitchen,” Gavin commented, grabbing his mug, now full of steaming hot coffee, and making his way back to his bedroom. Once he was gone, Michael looked at Kate.

“We’re not *that* bad, are we?” he asked her.

Kate smiled and took his hands in hers. “Of course we’re not.”

“No,” Brink remarked from the sidelines. “You’re worse.”

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## Chapter 2

After the cupcakes had been frosted to perfection, Michael returned to his own apartment so that both he and Kate could shower and prepare for the evening. As always, Kate hated seeing him leave, even if only for a few short hours, but she also needed the time alone with her thoughts. She knew that this wasn't going to be the first time she'd introduced a serious boyfriend to her family. She must have brought Trevor home on more than one occasion. The problem was she couldn't remember all those times, so this was pretty much a new experience for her.

It wasn't that she was nervous about it. She was really excited to introduce Michael to her grandparents and to give her parents the opportunity to get to know him better. True, her mom hadn't been *thrilled* when Kate had announced that she wanted to bring Michael along as her dinner date, but she also understood how much he meant to her daughter.

Okay, so maybe she was a little nervous, but more for Michael's sake than for hers. She knew how much he wanted to make a good impression and she loved him for it, but she also wanted him to enjoy the evening and be able to relax and have a good time around her family. And of course, she wanted her family to love and adore him, too. They may not have realized it, but she planned on keeping him around for a while.

When seven o'clock finally rolled around, Kate and Gavin stopped by Michael's apartment. When he opened the door, Kate felt her heart skip a beat. Michael looked so handsome, nicer than she'd ever seen him. He was wearing dark slacks the color of charcoal and a fancy button-down shirt the color of a clear night sky. He was also holding a brand new bottle of what looked to be very fancy wine.

"Wow," she smiled. "You look amazing."

Michael grinned. "So do you."

Kate blushed. She'd tried to look pretty. She was wearing a springtime skirt and a shirt the color of the sun. She'd clipped her hair up into a loose bun and she'd applied a light touch of mascara and lip gloss.

"I look amazing, too," Gavin joked.

"Yes, Gav, you're a total stud," Kate humored him. She had to admit that her brother really had tried. Of course, he was the only one in jeans, but whatever.

When they arrived at the Avery house, Terri was waiting to embrace both of her children. Michael, she simply greeted with a polite, "Hello, again."

"Good evening, Mrs. Avery," Michael replied. Then, he held out the bottle of wine and said, "I um... I brought some Cabernet."

"Oh, thank you, dear. That's very thoughtful."

Kate would have preferred a little less rigidity and a little more sincerity in her mother's tone, but at least she was trying. She had hoped that with time, Terri Avery would warm up to Michael, but it simply hadn't happened yet.

Inside, Kate introduced Michael to her grandparents, June and Jack Weir, whom she and Gavin affectionately called Mimi and Pop. As her only granddaughter, Kate had always been

especially close to Mimi. If there was anyone in the world she could count on to make Michael feel right at home, it was her grandmother.

Sure enough, June gushed, “Michael! It is so wonderful to finally meet you! Kate’s told me so much, it feels like I already know you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mrs. Weir,” Michael replied.

“Oh Sweetheart, you can call me Mimi. All the kids do. And this is my husband, Pop.”

“Good to meet you, Son. You sure seem to make our Kate happy,” Pop said. He was a tall man with intelligent eyes and a surprisingly soft and gentle voice.

“She makes me happy. That’s for sure,” Michael said, grinning down at Kate.

“Now is it true what she’s told us about the ghosts and the spirits?” Pop asked.

“Yes, sir. It is.”

“Really? Because when she was little, she certainly would make up some strange stories. Once, she was sitting all by herself in the playroom we had for them back in our old house and she would not stop talking about this giant yellow rabbit that she’d made up named Russell.”

“What?” Michael laughed.

“Oh my God, I remember that dumb rabbit,” Gavin groaned. “She used to draw pictures of him and run around the house telling me that if I didn’t do exactly what she said, she would command Russell to sneak into my bedroom and eat me.”

“That is so bizarre,” Kate said. Bizarre, twisted, creepy. Any of those adjectives would have been pretty accurate. She had to admit, she didn’t remember Russell or what may have compelled her to create such a fantasy.

“Yeah, we thought so too,” Gavin remarked.

“I’m surprised Mom and Dad didn’t ship me off to the local cathedral for an exorcism.”

“They thought about it, but there was all this paperwork involved...” her brother teased.

“Well, I may have made up a weird imaginary killer rabbit, but I promise, I’m not lying about the ghosts.”

“Or the fact that you saw a UFO when you were five?” Gavin laughed.

“You what?” Michael asked Kate.

“It’s a family joke,” Gavin explained.

“It’s not a joke! When I was five years old, we were all driving out in the middle of nowhere and I looked out the window and hovering over this gathering of trees was a weird, shiny rectangular aircraft. It had a lot of blinking different colored lights and was shaped kind of like a box, and I’m telling you, it looked like nothing I have ever seen before,” Kate said.

“That *never* happened,” Gavin insisted.

“It so happened. Besides, if I’d just made it up, then don’t you think I could have embellished it a little? Made the story a bit better?”

“You were five years old. You barely knew how to use the toilet. No, I don’t think you could have come up with anything better.”

“Whatever. It totally happened.” And she absolutely knew how to use the toilet when she was five.

“How does it feel, Michael?” Gavin asked. “Knowing you’re dating a girl who is certifiably insane?”

“You know, that might explain *why* she’s dating me, so to tell you the truth, I’m kind of okay with it,” Michael said. At that, Pop threw his head back and laughed.

“I like this kid,” he told Kate, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “Accepts you just the way you are, doesn’t he? Quirks and all.”

“Thank you, Pop,” Kate grinned. “I like him, too.”

Once the family had dispersed, Kate took Michael’s hand and looked up at him.

“Well, you’ve won the grandparents over,” she said.

“I like them, too. By the way, did they have a dog? A pug?” Michael asked.

“Yeah, his name was Buddy. Why?”

“He keeps running around and jumping up your grandpa’s leg.”

“You mean he’s here?” she asked.

“Yeah. He’s barking at your grandma right now. I don’t think he realizes that he doesn’t need food anymore.”

“That is just like him. He was the cutest dog ever but he wasn’t very bright. But oh my God, he was so sweet. He died when I was fifteen, but even in his last days, he still tried to play fetch with Pop. They’ll be happy to know he’s still around.” She smiled. Then she said, “I’m so glad you came tonight.”

“I am, too,” Michael replied. But there was a slight catch in his voice, a hint of hesitancy.

“What is it?” Kate asked.

“Nothing, just... There’s another one.”

“Another what? A ghost?” she asked before realizing just how dumb that question was. What else would he be talking about? A banana peel?

Michael nodded. “Just outside that window,” he answered, indicating the large living-room window just on the other side of her parents’ piano. “She looks like she wants to come in, but she doesn’t understand that she can.”

“Does she look angry?”

“Not angry. Agitated. Like she has something heavy on her mind.”

“I imagine death has that effect,” Kate remarked. “I wonder if she’s someone we know?”

“I don’t think she is,” Michael said, speaking in hushed tones, careful not to be overheard. “She doesn’t seem to recognize any of you. She’s probably just a drifter. Or maybe someone who used to live here before your family.”

Even though she’d known about Michael’s gift for almost eight months, there were still times she found herself overwhelmed by the idea of what he experienced on a day-to-day basis. For most people, ghost stories were a spooky escape, a glimpse into a world that they probably didn’t want to imagine. To the average passerby, a ghost story was all about clinking chains and doors creaking open by themselves. It was easy to forget that the real ghost stories had little to do with that cinematic nonsense, but everything to do with the human experience: life, love, loss, faith, redemption.

The woman that Michael saw standing outside the window had a past. She had memories. She probably had family still living. Kate didn’t even know if the woman realized she had died. Michael had explained to her that while most understood and accepted what had happened to them, some remained unaware - or perhaps in denial - for months, even years. Sterling Hall, the ghost they’d encountered the previous October, had existed in a state of willful

ignorance for over a century. The idea of death, it turned out, was difficult to overcome, even after one had already died.

“Do you think you should go talk to her?” Kate asked.

“I don’t want to ruin the evening,” Michael said.

“You wouldn’t. You’d be helping someone.”

Michael stared at her with soft, dark eyes. “How is it you can always see the good in everything?”

“I can’t. I just know how she feels,” Kate reminded him. It was true. After all, the very first time they had met, she had been a ghost herself. She’d never forget the comfort she felt in his acknowledgement, or even simply in his presence.

“Okay,” Michael finally said. “I’ll go see if she’s alright.”

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He didn’t want to admit it as he stepped out onto the front porch and made his way around the side to the side of the house where the frantic young woman was still staring in through the window, but Michael had a bad feeling. Granted, bad feelings often accompanied encounters with spirits, but this was a particularly nasty one.

The spirit didn’t notice him approaching. She kept her pale, weary face pressed up against the glass, in between her bony hands.

Not wanting to startle her, Michael cleared his throat. When she didn’t respond, he decided to speak up.

“Um... Hi,” he said.

Still nothing.

“Excuse me? Miss?” he tried again, taking a few steps closer to her, careful not to trample any flowers.

Finally she turned to look at him. Her light blue eyes were wide and sunken in, surrounded by dark circles, and her long blonde hair hung freely down her back. She wore a ragged white dress and her feet were bare. Michael couldn’t begin to wonder what had happened to her, or why she was so attached to the Averys’ house.

All he did know was that the moment she laid eyes on him, she began to panic. Her breath came in short, labored gasps, and she seemed to be trembling.

“Hi,” Michael greeted her again. “I know... you’re probably not used to people seeing you. I just wanted to make sure that - ”

“Stay away!” the girl cried shrilly, backing away from him.

“What?”

“Back! Back!” she screeched, lashing out at him.

Michael stumbled backwards, holding up his hands.

“I just want to talk to you,” he told her.

“You can’t talk to me! You’re a devil! A *devil!* Back!” she screamed again. Her anger and fear electrified the air, resulting in a power surge throughout the entire neighborhood. Lights in every house flickered, as did the streetlights.

Every instinct told Michael to run back inside to Kate, to leave the mad ghost on her own, as she so very clearly wished to be, but for some stupid reason, he stayed steadfast in his place.

“Listen, I’m not trying to hurt you. I just wanted to see if you were alright. If you need any help!”

Instead of screaming again, the girl covered her ears with her hands, bowed her head down, and began to mutter, “*No, I said I can’t see past the shadows. You’ll have to hide. You’ll have to hide. Take him out to the back and dig. I said dig! I heard you, I heard you...*”

As her murmurs intensified, Michael felt the electricity spike again. This time, he heeded his gut and sprinted back toward the front door. He made it inside just as the power began to flicker again.

“What’s happening?” Kate asked him.

But before he could answer her, the electricity gave one final surge, and with a loud zap, the entire house went dark.

It wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened. True, Michael would have preferred not to have been responsible for a neighborhood-wide power outage the night he was supposed to be meeting his girlfriend’s family, but things certainly weren’t as horrible as they could have been.

Kate, however, was still a little shaken.

“What in the world was that?” she asked him. “Did she do this?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“But why?”

“I couldn’t say,” Michael replied honestly. Then a movement out of the corner of his eye drew his attention back to the dark living room. “Wait a minute,” he said, stepping in front of Kate.

“What is it?”

Michael didn’t respond. Instead, he watched silently as the ghost of the madwoman glided swiftly through the window and into the house. She passed by as though she didn’t even see Michael or Kate standing there.

“Michael, what’s going on?” Kate whispered.

“We need to go check on your family,” he told her.

Together, they hurried into the kitchen, where Gavin was showing off the flashlight feature on his smart phone. Terri seemed slightly agitated, but the rest of the family appeared no worse for the wear.

“Well, this is fun, isn’t it?” Gavin asked them.

“Is everyone alright?” Kate asked.

“We’re fine, Pumpkin,” Rex assured her. “Are you alright?”

Michael wasn’t sure if she ever answered him or not. The ghost had appeared in the corner, still mumbling to herself. As she inched her way along the outline of the room, she dragged her hand across the countertop.

*Please don’t do anything rash. Please just leave. Please, please leave this family alone,* Michael prayed. Too bad he couldn’t communicate with her telepathically. It would have been nice to have psychic powers that were actually useful.

*“Who do they think they are, silver and silver. No, you know you can’t touch. How dare you? You know you’ll regret it...”*

Then, all of a sudden, she fell silent and stared down at the pots full of vegetables and rice on the stove. After a mere moment's hesitation, she began to swat at them, as though she were trying to push them off the counter and onto the floor. They didn't move.

With each effort, she became more and more agitated, and as her frustration grew, the temperature in the room began to drop.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one who noticed.

"Well, it feels like the air conditioner is still working. It's freezing in here," Pop commented.

"You know, Pop, sometimes that means there's a ghost present," Gavin told him, even though the smile in his tone indicated that he did not believe that was the case here.

"Why is that, I wonder?" Pop asked.

"Dad, please," Terri murmured. "I'd like to try and salvage what's left of this evening. The last thing I need is -"

But before she could get the words out, the ghost girl gave an electrifying screech that brought a crystal pitcher full of iced tea toppling off the kitchen table and shattering to the ground into a thousand shards, shimmering in the faint glow of dusk pouring in from the windows.

Terri screamed. Mimi gasped. Rex and Gavin both cried out in alarm. Kate, meanwhile, clutched Michael's arm, the same way a frightened child might cling to her favorite toy.

"Was that her?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he replied shortly, keeping his eyes locked on the girl, who stared, transfixed, at the pool of tea and ice and lemon, mixed in with the broken pieces of what had once been the pitcher.

As he spoke, the girl's head snapped up and she looked at him, her pale eyes frantic and alert and terrified.

*"You did this! You did this!"* she shrieked.

Then, with one final burst of energy, the ghost vanished.