

# Esmerelda Sleuth

PARAORMAL INVESTIGATOR

## BEYOND THE PORTAL

Book Three

by

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“They say that there are eleven dimensions of reality on this planet. Time is used to measure your perception of each unique reality. As the realities can differ... so can time.”

Esmerelda Sleuth

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# A Quick Summary to Catch Up

Welcome to book three of the Esmerelda Sleuth series.

In book one, “The Other Side of the Mirror”, Esmerelda met and fell in love with Lance Northrup. Introduced to her as a handsome and wealthy realtor, Esmerelda soon discovered that this was simply a ruse that he took on to camouflage the fact that he was a time traveler who’d traveled from the nineteenth century specifically to find her and take her back to marry him. Fortunately for Lance, she fell in love with him almost immediately and happily obliged.

Unbeknownst to Esmerelda, she’d been born in that time frame and had been bonded in marriage to him by her family while an infant. When enemies who didn’t want the marriage to take place threatened her life, her parents had her magically sent forward in time to protect her; making sure that her memories were erased as well.

A private investigator with a practical mind, Esmerelda found it difficult to accept that hers and Lance’s families belonged to a secret society of people who hadn’t lost the ability to tap into nature’s magic like the rest of the world did when religion took hold and made magic an evil sin. It took Lance taking her through a mirror that acted as a portal through time before she even remotely began to believe.

There were rules to using the magic and the supply available to a person could be depleted, which was what happened to Lance after using it during his longtime search for her. Hence, when she fell in love with him and willingly went back in time to marry him and her life was threatened again, he was unable to return to the future with

her. Instead, he stayed behind while he waited for his depleted supply of magic to replenish and he figured out a way to be with her again without danger to her or to him.

She was safe from those who wanted to harm her because she'd been given a drink that slowed down her vital signs to the extent that the physicians of that time weren't able to detect them. In short, she was pronounced dead. A mock funeral was held for her before her distant cousin, Anton, -who was also magical- took her back into the future and left her in the care of her good friend Nora.

This brings us to book two of the Esmerelda Sleuth series, "Magic in the Box".

In book two, Esmerelda and her good friend Nora move into the estate house that Lance turned over to her. While there, they searched for the magic box with no luck.

They were only in the house a day when a handsome homicide detective named, Killian, came to the house to question them about Lance's whereabouts, since he was a suspect in the murder of Melanie Gaines. Knowing that Lance didn't do it, but unable to tell the detective that Lance was back in time, Esmerelda feigned ignorance and stayed tight-lipped.

Jason discovered that Esmerelda's death was faked. Thinking himself in love with her and believing that she would eventually fall in love with him if he kept going to her bed and worried that she would accumulate enough magic to go back to lance, he transported to the future to visit her in bed as well as to syphon her magic.

In the meantime, Nora saw a transparent man in the house. After which, while at a restaurant, she saw this same man in human form.

Thinking that there was a break-in into her house by someone who knew her alarm code, Esmerelda sought the names of the workers who installed it from the company. While looking for one of them to question him, she was mugged and left with a cracked skull.

While in the hospital recovering, Jason teleported in, drugged her, and then took her magic through sex.

Killian heard about her mugging and visited her in the hospital to ask about it, at which time he learned about Jason's visit. He suggested that he become her boarder for a while so that he could protect her from more harm. She readily agreed.

A friendship bloomed between Killian and Esmerelda while a romance formed between her friend Nora and Killian's partner, Roger. Killian found the missing magic box in a thrift shop and took it to Esmerelda. He informed her that she and Lance were the only ones that it would open for, which was why the thief discarded it.

With things calmed down, Killian went on assignment into the wee hours of the morning. Kidnappers seized the opportunity to snatch Esmerelda from her bed and stuff her in a trunk. She found a crowbar in the trunk and struck one of her kidnappers with it as soon as the trunk lid was opened. He was knocked unconscious with an enormous gash in his skull. The other kidnapper grabbed her before she could strike so she did the only thing that she could think to do. She bit him in the neck. Sadly, she bit too hard and she bit his jugular and he died.

While finding her way to a phone, she ended up at the man who had astral projected into her home. He was actually the real kidnapper who had hired the two men. He forced her to open the box and sent Lance a picture of Esmerelda along with a threat so that he would cooperate and deliver the message that he wanted to send to someone through the box to them. His doing this used up most of the magic that the box possessed, leaving little, if any, for Esmerelda and Lance to communicate with.

Killian was not only a homicide detective, but he was also a member of the secret society. When he discovered that Esmerelda was missing from her room, he used magic to locate her. The kidnapper was arrested and she was returned to her home where they had their first tryst in the linen closet.

Realizing the mistake that he made - since she was married to and loved Lance- Killian moved out.

Heartbroken by what she considered Killian's "love 'em and leave 'em" use of her and the fact that she and Lance would probably never be together again, Esmerelda fell into depression. After a long pep talk, Nora convinced her to get back into the investigation mode.

This brings us to book three, "Beyond the Portal".

A thin layer of powdery snow blanketed the ground. Beneath it was an icy crust that had assaulted the landscape just hours earlier. The frozen moisture on the trees gave them a glassy appearance. We'd had one of the worst recorded snowstorms in Virginia history and it was still coming down. I stomped the snow from my boots and took them off. Setting them on the boot tray, I slipped my feet into my office loafers. Then, I opened the door to shake my jacket outside of the building. I worked as fast as I could so that minimal falling snow replaced what I was shaking off it.

"You're fighting a losing battle," Nora said as she snuggled under an afghan while sitting in a tapestry covered winged back chair that she'd taken from one of the rooms in the unused west wing of the mansion sized house that Lance turned over to me when we were married back in time. She'd strategically placed it in front of the infrared fireplace that we'd been forced to put in to assist the outdated furnace. Opposite her was a similar wing backed chair that she'd taken from the same part of the house. It was empty and looked mighty inviting. She pulled the afghan tight around her neck. "Close the door, will you? Even with this heater running, I can't get warm. I never thought about the furnace being old."

"We haven't had a winter like this since you and I moved here," I said as I quickly shut out the cold. I hung my down-filled stadium jacket on the antique brass coat tree located next to the door and

scurried to the empty chair opposite hers. “Why would you think about the need for this much heat? If the winter was milder, that furnace would have been sufficient.”

“I guess,” she mused as she tucked her chin beneath the afghan.

“Why did we come into the office, anyway?” I asked as I leaned forward and stretched my hands toward the heater. “Who do you think is crazy enough to venture out in weather like this? Are the roads even open?”

“The guy will be by to plow and sand the driveway again in an hour,” she said. “I’ve got him coming every three hours until this storm stops.”

I nodded. “That’s fine for our premises, but what about getting to us? What are the roads like? First icy snow and now this powdery stuff. Are the road crews able to keep up with this crazy storm? It’s not like we’re in Alaska or Canada where they’re used to weather like this.”

She leaned forward and stretched her hands toward the heater. “Believe it or not, a man called about ten minutes ago and said that he was on his way.”

“It couldn’t wait until the storm subsided?” I asked with surprise.

She shrugged. “I figure it’s a good case if he’s desperate enough to travel through this.”

“Desperate? Or, Crazy?” I asked.

She giggled. “We’ve had a few of those in our day, haven’t we?”

I leaned against the back of the chair and closed my eyes.

“Don’t ask me why, but I had it in my head that when I left Helmsley Investigations, I left the crazies behind too.”

She sat back in her chair and placed her warmed hands to her cheeks. “I think I’d like to close up shop, take a nice hot bath, and get into a warm pair of flannel pajamas after we see this guy. He’s the only one we have scheduled and I’m feeling off today.”

“Why don’t you go back to the house now?” I offered. “I can handle this interview on my own.”

She vigorously shook her head. “You always screw up the paperwork.”

“Do I?” I asked with surprise. “I had no idea. You never said.”

“I didn’t want to hurt your feelings,” she explained. “Plus, you do it so seldom that it wasn’t worth mentioning. I only say it now because I suspect that I’m getting sick and I don’t want to deal with figuring out what you’ve put in all the wrong places when I’m ill.”

“Seriously? I’m that bad?” I exclaimed.

She shrugged. “Let’s just say that it’s not your thing.”

The sound of bells jingling outside caught our attention. We simultaneously scurried to the window to see what was coming up our drive.

“Is that a horse driven sleigh?” she asked with awed surprise.

I wiped at the fog that our breath caused as we peered out of the windowpane and nodded. “Arriving in a horse drawn sleigh. That’s something you don’t see every day.”

“Is he Santa Clause come early?” she giggled.

I looked again, grinned, and shook my head. “He’s too skinny.”

“Do you think he’s a nut job?” she asked with concern.

I shrugged. “He could just be resourceful. I worry about those horses. I hope he didn’t damage them by driving them over this type of terrain. They could founder if he doesn’t have the right gear on their hooves. Besides that, ice can be slippery and bones do break.”

“Oh, wow,” she gasped. “That’s right. I didn’t think of that. Those poor horses.”

We watched with interest as the driver pulled the sleigh up close to the house and then secured its break. He quickly hobbled the two horses pulling it in such a practiced way that it was clear he’d done it numerous times.

“That’s efficient,” Nora mused.

Before I could make a comment, the door flew open and he bounded into our office. I was healthy, but I was still affected by the sudden cold that gushed in along with him as it assaulted my exposed flesh. I could imagine how poor Nora felt.

“It is not fit for man nor beast out there,” stated a tall, slender man with an accent that I couldn’t quite place. He was so wrapped in fur that it was impossible to see his features.

“Yet, you and your loyal beasts traveled through it,” I said in a tone that was just a bit more curt than I’d intended.

Always the one to be politically correct, Nora gave me a warning look as she rushed forward to greet our potential client with her hand extended. “I’m Nora Oosterhout and this is my partner Esmerelda Sleuth. You are Mr. Havershaft. Is that right?”

Keeping his wrappings on him, he poked out a thin, boney hand and removed the snow covered glove so that he could shake her

petite, plump one. “That is correct, Miss Oosterhout. It is worse out there than I had anticipated. I came through the fields on a path that was made by snowmobiles, but I fear that, if I dally too long, going home will be a difficulty for my horses. They have cleats and pads on to help prevent them from slipping on the icy crust or snow building up in their hooves, but, even so, I shall cut to the quick.”

I don’t know why, but I held my breath while I waited to hear the reason for his visit to our office on such a blistery and stormy day. That in itself gave me the impression that it wasn’t going to be an easy job. The oppressive energy that entered the room with him only emphasized that fact.

“How can we be of service?” I asked.

He looked directly at me as he spoke. “You are a paranormal investigator, correct? I mean to say that you are not simply a private investigator. You will venture into the paranormal, if need be. Is my information correct on that matter?”

Ignoring the fact that he was speaking directly to me, Nora said with a nod, “It is.”

“Excellent,” he said.

Even though I could only see his distinctive dark eyes, I could tell that he was smiling from this news.

“I have recently purchased a nearby estate and I fear that there is something living in my attic that is not of this world,” he said.

“Have you tried to see what it is?” Nora asked.

He nodded. Or, at least I think that he nodded. It was difficult to tell with all the wrapping he had on his person.

“I moved in one month ago and have not had a night’s peace since day one,” he said with dismay. “I have checked out the attic more than once, but found nothing. I even put in cameras. Nothing.”

“Are you sure that it is something paranormal?” I asked. “How long was the house empty before you moved in? Perhaps you have some wildlife living up there.”

“I thought of that, but the house was only vacated by the previous owners a week before I moved in,” he explained. “Plus, just to cover all bases, I had a pest control company check it out. They found nothing.”

“I see,” I said as the wheels in my mind churned. From what he was saying, all the signs pointed to the paranormal, but the level-headed and practical side of me wasn’t about to take things at face value.

“Will you take the case?” he eagerly asked. “Money is no object.”

If he lived in the house that I suspected he lived in, I was sure that he had plenty of money to toss around. That wasn’t the issue. I just wasn’t convinced that he had something paranormal going on in his house.

“I’d like to check out your house before we commit,” I said.

Nora looked at me with surprise, but said nothing.

“That is perfectly understandable,” he agreed. “Why don’t both of you come to dinner tomorrow night? Say, around seven? That is usually when the chaos begins.”

I could see my dear friend’s cheeks flush with excitement. Her contribution to the business was to run the office. I was the

investigator. Getting a dinner invitation from a client had to be exciting for her. There was also the fact that this would be my very first investigation of the paranormal. My experience lay in the basic, mundane cases which primarily consisted of spousal cheating. I could also see the wheels churning in her head. She'd just admitted to feeling like she was coming down with a cold. If that was true, the odds of her being sociable outside of the house for the next few days were low.

"I'm sorry, but we aren't available until the beginning of next week," I said.

She looked at me and smiled her thanks.

"Oh," he said with undisguised disappointment. "I see." Then, after a moment's silence, he said, "Shall I plan on you coming to dinner Monday evening next at the same time?"

I nodded. "Please write down your address and telephone number. Then, I'd suggest that you get those horses to shelter. They're starting to look like snow statues."

"Heavens," he gasped as he took a quick look out of the window at his horses. "Had I known that I could not immediately acquire your services, I would not have put them through this." He heaved a sigh. "Oh, well. May I have a piece of paper please?"

I seethed with prideful indignation over his comment about thinking us so lacking in work that he could get us immediately as I watched him scribble down his address and telephone number. It didn't matter that it was true. I was sure that once the word got out that I'd gone into business for myself, clients would be filing through our door. I had a good reputation, after all.

When he finally left, I snarled, “He thought that we’d be available right away? How presumptuous.”

Nora shrugged. “We are a new business.”

I scowled. “The business might be new, but we’re not.”

“We are new in the world of the paranormal,” she insisted.

“Besides, we were available.” Then giving me a smile of thanks she added, “I appreciate you giving me time to kick this thing out of me. This is our first case. I would have felt terrible being left out of it.”

I thought on how I’d managed to solve most of my cases with clues that I got from sitting down and getting what I thought were visions from rooms and objects. Then, I remembered Lance’s definition of paranormal. According to my long lost husband, I’d been dealing in the paranormal for some time. It just wasn’t with ghosts and goblins.

Looking directly at my friend, I asked, “Are we actually new to the paranormal? Are we really?”

It was surprising how much of the snow from Mother Nature's onslaught didn't stick around. By the time Monday night arrived, we could see large patches of green glistening grass that had been beaten down, but was, once again, reaching for sunlight.

As she'd expected, Nora came down with a whopper of a cold. The five days grace that I gave her to be ready to go to dinner was all that she needed to aggressively treat it with vitamins, herbs, and chicken soup. She managed to kick it out of her system enough that she could attend the dinner without ruining the experience for herself and our host - or even me- by showing up with a runny nose, watery eyes, and a cough.

I swear that the woman had a natural remedy for everything.

"Are you sure that you're up to this?" I asked as we rang the doorbell. "I know that you claim Agatha set you straight, but we have no idea what awaits us."

"Oh, ye of little faith," she teased.

"It's not like you've been a tower of strength in situations that involved the unknown," I replied.

She jutted her chin forward. "I beg to differ. Let's not forget who held vigil in that big house all by herself while she waited for people to come in and out of that little mirror."

"True, but you also got spooked by Tillman's astral projecting into our house and refused to go on the third floor when you were checking out the place while waiting for me to return," I said in a calm and steady voice. "I'm just saying that it's not the same in the field as

in the office. Things look different on paper. Not as scary. Not as dangerous.”

Her eyes grew wide with concern. “Do you think this job could be dangerous?”

Before I could answer, a tall, slender, fairly attractive gray haired man with memorable dark eyes opened the door. “Good evening ladies. It’s good of you to come. Mr. Havershaft will be down in a moment. May I take your coats?”

The snow may have dissipated, but the cold still plagued us. The heat of the house’s interior was a welcomed sensation. I eagerly shed my jacket and handed it to the man that I assumed was the house attendant. Nora did the same.

Out of courtesy, we’d brought along house slippers. I caught a glimpse of his smile of approval as we shed our boots and put them on.

When he was sure that we were ready, he guided us into a large sitting room that resembled the one in my house. While giving my surroundings an investigator’s assessment, I realized that much of the architecture was almost identical to that of my own home. It made me fairly confident to think that they were created by the same architect.

After offering us both a cocktail, he politely excused himself and left the room.

Mr. Cecil Havershaft kept us waiting only a few minutes before gracing us with his presence. I say gracing because that’s how it felt when he glided into the room in such a regal way that one might think that he was floating instead of walking. His movements were smooth

and easy as he took each of our hand and kissed it on the back like they'd done when I was back in time with Lance. In fact, his antiquated behavior and mode of regal movement so reminded me of my time with Lance that my heart began to ache.

I'd convinced myself that Lance was a lost cause and that I needed to move on. It took considerable effort, but I'd managed to push him so far into the recesses of my mind that, when our host's actions brought forth the memories, it was painful and traumatic; both emotionally and physically.

"Are you alright, Miss Sleuth?" he asked as he released my hand.

"I'm fine," I stammered as I searched for a viable excuse for the noticeable shift in me. "I think all of this splendor has surprised me a little more than expected," I said.

It was a weak excuse, but it was the best that I could come up with.

"Your house was built by the same builder, I am told," he thoughtfully said. "I should imagine that you would be accustomed to grandeur such as this."

"We are," Nora interjected as she gave me a worried look. "Even so. To experience it in someone else's home is a real delight. You have done a wonderful job decorating."

He smiled with pride. "Admittedly, I purchased the home furnished. Collecting this many antiques in such impeccable condition would take years. I did, however, add a few personal touches." He pointed to a painting depicting an old English hunt that hung over the fireplace. "That, for instance, came with me."

Nora sucked in air. "Is that an Edgar Degas?"

His eyes danced with approval. "You know your art."

She nodded. "I'm not an expert, but I have an appreciation of excellence."

"I have a fairly impressive collection of art scattered throughout the house. Perhaps I can show you sometime," he offered.

Her voice was breathless with excitement as she said, "I'd love it."

A loud bang coming from the floors above caught our attention.

Cecil heaved a sigh. "And, so it begins."

The man who greeted us at the door appeared in the archway that led to the great hall. "Dinner is ready."

"Ladies, please allow me to introduce my brother, Archibald Havershaft," Cecil said with politeness, grace, and dignity. "Archibald, this is Miss Sleuth and Miss Oosterhout."

His brother gave a warm, handsome smile and nodded his greeting to us. "I had the privilege of answering the door. Although, I was lax in introducing myself. Please forgive my manners, but I was so struck by your beauty..."

Cecil cut his brother's words off with a scowl, a raised brow, and an impatient tone. "Really? You answered the door? Where was Henry?"

"He was busily fixing what smells like a scrumptious duckling," he replied. Clearly not vexed by his brother's short tempered rudeness, he turned to me and said in a smooth tone that hinted of the same accent that Cecil had, "Please call me Archie."

I took a moment to compare the two brothers. They were both tall and regal in movement and appearance. They both had silver grey hair that gently graced the top of their ears as it feathered on the sides of their heads. Their complexions were ruddy and their faces clean shaven. The most striking quality about them was their memorable dark eyes that rested just far enough on either side of their slender noses and just the right distance from their masculine mouths to be declared to be in a perfect location. Could they be twins? Once again, I was reminded of Lance, whose brother looked like his twin even though he wasn't.

Since I needed to know for my own sake, I turned to Archie. "Are you and your brother twins?"

He shook his head. "You would think so, would you not? We are actually two years apart. He is the eldest." Then, with a teasing tone, he said, "Of course, you could tell that right away, I am sure."

I liked his humor and easy manner. It helped to curb the painful heartache that seeing a similar sibling situation to Lance's caused me.

In an effort to shake off the gloom that threatened to overtake me, I smiled and said in an easy manner. "You just left the kitchen, didn't you?"

He nodded. "Is it that obvious?"

"The scent of roast duckling suits you," I giggled.

He looked at me with surprise and, then, chuckled. "You are a delight, Miss Sleuth."

"Please, call me Esmerelda," I said.

Offering me his elbow, he said, “Well, Esmerelda, shall we go bathe in the divine scent of roast duckling?”

I nodded and gave him a warm smile as I took his arm. Looking over my shoulder, I saw that Nora and Cecil were following suit.

At the sound of another loud thud above our heads, I stopped walking and looked up.

Archie heaved a sigh. “I apologize for the noise, but it is why you are here, is it not? I hope that you will be able to enjoy your dinner despite the irritating raucous overhead. It took us a while to be able to ignore it and not let it spoil our evenings overly much.”

“Does this go on every night?” I asked.

“Oh, my dear, it is only just beginning,” Cecil informed me as he guided Nora past us. “We should not let the food get cold. This is Henry’s first dinner party since we took over the house. He has gone all out for it. It would be rude to dally and spoil things.”

The two brothers guided us into an elaborate dining room that rivaled my own. It felt almost surreal in the way that the table was set in the style that I’d enjoyed when I went back in time. Although, it was something that Nora and I didn’t bother with, I appreciated a good table setting. It was one of the things that I loved about being in the past. Dining, no matter what the meal, was always treated like a social occasion that offered a perfectly set table and required dress and etiquette.

“Your table is beautiful,” Nora said. Her eyes reflected the awe that she felt as she gazed at the antique Johnson Brothers dinnerware, Repoussé flatware, and the Waterford stemware that accompanied it.

“I see that you appreciate old things,” Cecil said with approval.

“I get it from Esmerelda, I think,” she said with a warm smile in my direction. “She’s got this uncanny connection to old things. It’s as if they speak to her.”

“Really?” he said as he studied me a little more closely than I was comfortable with. “You have an air about you, Miss Sleuth. It speaks of times gone by. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Esmerelda,” I said as I scrambled to decide how to respond to his question.

“I beg your pardon?” he said.

“Please, call me Esmerelda,” I said with the best friendly smile that I could muster.

Whether he picked up on my uncomfortableness with his brother’s question or he was bored with the topic, I couldn’t say, but Archie mercifully rescued me by bringing the conversation around to the house and grounds.

“I understand that you have fairly extensive grounds as well,” he said with humor. “I believe that, if we combined the two estates, we would have enough land for a small town.”

I chuckled. In a time when owning a sizable amount of land was a rarity, it seemed absurd that two neighbors would possess so much. “I believe you are right.”

He leaned forward with a mischievous glint in his eyes, “Do you feel a bit greedy? Come on, you can tell me.”

I laughed at his teasing and shook my head. “Not in the least, sir. I feel lucky, but not greedy.”

“The estate was turned over to you, I believe,” Cecil said. “A transfer of inheritance, was it not?”

I was instantly on the defense. “You seem to know a good deal about my business.”

He gave a look of immediate concern. As did his brother.

“I was not trying to pry. Please, forgive me,” he said with a reddened face. “When I was investigating the neighborhood, I came across the information. It is public, you know.”

I relaxed. “Yes, it is. Please excuse me for reacting like I did. It’s an investigator’s curse, I’m afraid.”

As if on cue, a loud crash rang through the house.

“And so the night progresses,” Archie mused.

As their house man, Henry, served us with pride, our hosts continued to enjoy and dine on the delicious cuisine as if the calamity overhead wasn’t occurring. Nora and I weren’t as graceful in our dealing with it. More than once, she ducked at the sound of a loud bang or crash as if to avoid being struck by something. I, on the other hand, simply became so annoyed that the lovely ambiance for such a fine meal was being spoiled that I thought I’d explode.

I waited until dinner was completed and we were sitting in the parlor with our coffee before bringing up the task of discovering what was causing the nightly disturbances. Seeing that it was time to get down to business, Nora pulled out the necessary paperwork that she’d had the foresight to bring along.

“Normally, this would have been done in the office,” she explained as she handed the papers and a pen to Cecil.

“I understand. I appreciate your making allowances for me,” he said as he signed his name in the designated places with the same

grace that he did everything else with. “When will you begin the investigation?”

Nora took the signed papers and returned them to her briefcase before looking at me questioningly. As did our new clients.

I had absolutely no idea where to begin on such a crazy case. So, instead of saying that I’d start right away, I said, “I’ll need a few days to prepare.”