

THE SEARCH FOR THE CRYSTAL KEY

A Continuation of Dark Escape

by

Eileen Sheehan

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ELECTRONIC EDITION

EARTH WISE BOOKS

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This book is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Note: The end of this book contains a sneak peek of "Dream Love" by Eileen Sheehan

This book is dedicated to all the diehard romantics who enjoy a little mystery and a few thrills tossed in the mix.

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Let's Do A Brief Catch Up...

On the cusp of her eighteenth birthday Tara O'Shea moved into the centuries old country estate she inherited from her grandmother. She wasn't long in the house before she started seeing an apparition of a man.

Tara's brother, Dennis, brought his friend -who was also Tara's ex-boyfriend- Mitch, for a weekend visit. The trio set out on an exploring excursion in the woods behind the house where Tara fell into an abandoned well. Fortunately, Tara's horse was with them and while waiting for Mitch to run back to the house to call 911, with the help of rope and the mare, Dennis pulled Tara from the well. Mitch returned with Dennis's jeep and the two men took her back to the house to await the ambulance.

While in recovery, Tara's spirit guide appeared and introduced himself as Liam. He spoke to her briefly and then disappeared.

Once recovered, she decided to drive into a nearby town for supplies. While enroute she met Maggie O'Shea. Maggie wasn't only her shirt tail relative, but her neighbor. Adept at metaphysical arts, Maggie took Tara under her wing to teach her spirituality and magic.

Maggie gifted Tara with an ancient text that was handed down in her family from generation to generation. Consumed by curiosity, Tara unwittingly read the wrong section of the book and unleashed the dark side. A

threatening face of a demon appeared in a ball in front of her. Liam arrived and sent the demon on his way, before leaving just as fast as he came.

Taking a short cut through the fields to seek out Maggie to tell her about what occurred, Tara met a tall, dark, and handsome stranger, named Brandon, riding an enormous black gelding. They exchanged pleasantries and she continued on to find Maggie at the local country store. Maggie decided to stay with her for a few days to make sure all was well.

While eating at a local restaurant, Tara and Maggie met up with Brandon. He slipped Tara a note asking her to meet him in the same field where they'd first met the following afternoon. When she arrived, she found him face down on the ground with a gash on his head. While debating how to handle the situation, an extremely handsome blonde, named Dominic, appeared. Claiming he was just traveling through the area and stopped to take in the view of the countryside, he offered to drive Brandon to the local hospital with Tara as his guide. Brandon was admitted to the hospital and Dominic drove Tara back to her home, where Maggie awaited.

Tara found Dominic absolutely gorgeous in a god-like way and completely missed the fact that he was more interested in the house than he was in her.

When Brandon was released from the hospital, he arrived at Tara's house late in the day to retrieve his gelding

that she was kind enough to board during his hospital stay. While they're discussing what the safest route for him to ride his gelding back to the stable, they spotted a creature with the head of a wolf and the body of a cat stalking them. When Maggie grabbed a gun and shot it, the beast exploded into pieces.

They decided it was best for Brandon to stay the night. Maggie lured Brandon downstairs after everyone went to bed and drugged him, so she could sample his blood to make sure he wasn't a demon. While Brandon was in his drug induced sleep and Tara was safely upstairs sleeping, Maggie shot a few more beasts lurking outside.

After that, some time passed without mishap before Dominic arrived unannounced at Tara's door while she was attempting to remodel. She accepted his offer to help. In the interim, he made a play for her that she couldn't resist. From that day forward, he arrived at about the same time each day to romance Tara and help with the remodeling of the house.

Things moved quickly between Dominic and Tara. He soon offered his hand in marriage.

This didn't sit well with Dennis, who argued vehemently with Dominic.

While taking a walk to cool off, Dennis was attacked by one of the demon beasts. He escaped death, but was badly injured and sought help from Maggie. While Dennis rested, she headed off to Tara's house to investigate the situation.

Maggie wasn't captivated by Dominic's looks like Tara was. Instead, she felt an evilness that she couldn't place. She was worried about the hold he had on Tara, so she cast a spell asking for the person capable of separating Tara from Dominic to appear. Brandon arrived in response to Maggie's spell.

Panicked about possibly losing Tara to Brandon, Dominic decided to drug her and impregnate her so Dennis wouldn't fight the marriage. When Brandon and Maggie burst into the room to stop Dominic, he stormed from the house.

Full of denial, Tara refused to believe Dominic would do what Maggie and Brandon claimed he did, so she turned her frustrations on Brandon. Maggie took Brandon back to her house to let Tara cool off. En route, they fled from more demon creatures.

Tara finally came to her senses. While taking a shortcut on her mare through the woods to Maggie's house, she was chased by a dark figure. When she arrived, Maggie took her mare into her home with them because the fields were filled with the demon creatures and she had no other shelter for the horse.

The demon creatures turn out to be Dominic's pets.

They killed as many as they could until they ran out of ammunition, while Dominic incessantly pounded on the door demanding Tara come to him. Maggie found a spell to counteract Dominic, but it required an herb from her garden

outside. She wore her cloak of invisibility to sneak out amongst Dominic and his demon creatures. Dominic saw the ground flattening beneath her invisible feet. He tackled her and then let his creatures tear her apart.

With dawn rapidly approaching and, with it, the loss of his demonic creatures, Dominic set the house on fire to force them out. After much turmoil and expression of fear, Tara calmed down enough to gather her wits about her and called upon Liam for help. He immediately extinguished the fire and destroyed Dominic and his demon creatures...

...And so, the story continues.

ONE

Flames engulfed the cottage and taunted the leaves of the old apple tree, forcing its sap to the surface to help ease the scattered damage to the charred bark. The hot, dry air seared her lungs. She'd never experienced heat of this nature. Her skin hurt to the touch. She could see the evilness in Dominic's eyes as he prowled the perimeter of the dwelling. His bellowing pierced through the chaos, "I want you Tara. If I can't have your body, I'll have your soul!"

Tara's firelight curls fell over her shoulders and down her back in wild abandonment as she shook free memories of that horrible, fateful night. Sliding her hands up the sleeves of her oversized lamb's wool sweater she hugged her tall, slender body against the chill both from the air and her thoughts.

Leaning her head against the window pane, her dark green eyes peered at the blanket of frantic white snowflakes as they billowed toward barely visible outbuildings. The howling gales of winter echoed throughout the rolling Pennsylvania valley with a resemblance of a collective of musical instruments paying homage to old man winter while they shook the one-hundred-eighty-year-old house; rattling its windows with such force that one might expect the antique dwelling to be swept into the Land of Oz.

The nor'easter had arrived with a vengeance, showing no mercy for the impuissant inhabitants of the land. She'd

focused so hard on preparing the grand old house for the oncoming winter that the equally grand stable hadn't received the attention to insure its strength for a season of storms such as this.

The storm made it easy for her to come to terms with her decision to find a handyman to finish the needed repairs. She filled her lungs with the crisp air that managed to find its way through her newly caulked windows and hoped the outbuildings were sturdy enough to make it to spring in one piece; after which she'd give them the attention they required.

She snuggled beneath the afghan her Aunt Eva gifted her at Christmas. The roaring fire in the newly renovated fireplace illuminated the rustic red bricks that spoke of days gone by. She missed her aunt and was eager for her next visit. Her loneliness was accentuated not only by her missing Eva's vibrancy, but Dennis was on vacation down south and her father had called her last minute full of excitement about his archeological find and begged to be excused from the holidays because he didn't dare abandon the dig and risk vandalism. Tara understood but was still saddened by his absence.

The warmth emanating from the dancing flames struggled to evade the draw of the chimney that permitted it to merely hover within feet of the open hearth, leaving the rest of the room prey to the icy air that crept steadily through the badly insulated walls and windows. The

dilapidated steam radiators that were installed throughout the house soon after their invention provided little assistance. She stood up and pushed the sofa closer toward the fire, being Her daydream was so real, her lungs actually felt singed. She drew in as much cooling air as she could one more time and then released it slowly, focusing on the light mist that formed from the moist warmth of her breath on the cold windowpane.

She was always active and outgoing. Finding herself snowed in with limited connection to the outside world for over a week took its toll on her mood. It gave her far too much time to think. It ripped at her soul to know that because of her and her stupidity in summoning the dark side -followed by her poor choice in men- many had suffered loss and heartache.

She walked over to the large, overstuffed horse-hair sofa she recently had restored and snuggled under the thick multi-colored blanket, being careful not to get so close that a stray spark might damage its rich, newly applied tapestry upholstery. Resuming her spot under the afghan, she passed the dismal afternoon hours in cozy slumber.

The setting sun crept over the distant mountain top before Tara roused herself from her blissful snooze. The fire needed attention. She debated whether to add more wood and stoke it back to its former level or let it die out for the night. The house had eighteen fireplaces and, although she enjoyed the ambience of her downstairs study, surely, she

could find a room more protected from the outdoor elements and start a warming fire there. Deciding it was best to close the room off until its leaks were tended to, she pushed the glowing remnants of heat under a pile of thick, lifeless ashes and felt the last hint of warmth trickle away. Satisfied, she rubbed her upper arms against the impending cold of the night yet to come and left the room.

The antique grandfather clock that stood regally at the far end of the second-floor hallway chimed six o'clock. It was time for Sugar's nightly feed.

She pulled on her heaviest hooded sweatshirt and thick insulated socks, followed by her goose down parka, insulated gloves, fur lined rubber boots, thick woolen neck scarf, and a pair of snowmobile goggles. True warmth spread through her chilled body for the first time all day. She was sorry to have to ruin it by going out into the cold, but she had responsibilities that were unavoidable.

Pushing the solid oak exterior door -that she was told was an original part of the house- open against the elements that were raising havoc wasn't an easy feat. Gusts of pelting ice mixed with snow still dominated the atmosphere. Pulling her woolen neck scarf over her nose, she plunged forward. It took all her strength to forge her way down the one-hundred-yard path to the stable. She could hear the crunch beneath her well protected feet as she broke through the mid-calf high seemingly endless sea of crusted snow.

Even with all the layers of warmth on her body, she felt the cold. Her moist breath left tiny frozen crystals along her lips and in her nostrils. She focused her flashlight in all directions while she checked for unwanted creatures lingering in the night, a habit she developed after her encounter with Dominic's demon beasts.

Time dragged as she plunged her way through the blinding blanket of white. When she finally reached the stable, she stared in breathless dismay at the amount of ice and snow that needed to be removed before she could slide the door far enough to pass her slender body through.

The sudden realization that she left the snow shovel on the opposite side of the door resulted in one of the loudest wails of frustration she could recall ever emitting. The urge to kick the door was overwhelming, but her legs were held hostage in the ever-deepening heavy snow. The best she could do was lean her body against the side of the building and slam her heavily mittened fist against it. Sugar's whinny had a calming effect on her and she relaxed enough to think how to get into the stable.

Thin, icy tree branches lightly brushed her head as a gust of wind whisked a thin layer of the tree's burden off into the night. She would have found the spindly boughs of an ancient apple tree, that were laden with a thick coat of snow atop icicles that reached low to the ground, wonderfully marvelous to gaze upon under better circumstances. Wiping the excess snow from her face, she studied the tree and its

position to the building. Its thick trunk indicated it was much older than the stable.

The thud of the branches scraping against the wooden door to the hay loft added percussion to the melodious whistling of the wind. She shone her flashlight to inspect the situation as best she could. Even laden with snow, the branches looked sturdy enough. If she was careful, she could climb up and enter through the loft. Under the best of circumstances Tara would have been hesitant to climb a tree, but she saw no other option. Once inside she'd be sure to grab that darn shovel and keep it in a place of easy access.

Tucking her trusty flashlight in the inside pocket of her coat, she wiped the melting snow from her goggles and gripped the lower branch of the ancient and gnarled apple tree.

“Here goes nothing!” she shouted into the night.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the lack of the flashlight's helpful beam, but soon she was maneuvering with confidence. Although her slender frame was in prime physical condition, heaving her heavily clad body out of the deep snowy wells that sucked at her legs like quicksand felt almost unattainable. The exertion left her body wet and clammy with perspiration. She felt laden with damp, cumbersome, and smelly fabric. She was just about to give up when she found reserved strength to pull her out of the snow and make her way from one branch to the next.

Now that she was up the tree, the door was further from the branch than it looked when she was on the ground assessing things. She hadn't realized the actual extent of the ice on the branches either. She was higher than she thought she'd be when she first started this venture and, from her present position the branches felt dangerously feeble. The gnarled and rickety limb that she just hoisted her weight from threatened to rot away from the ancient, gnarled tree trunk. The new branch that she balanced carefully on felt like it might be a little too thin to hold her much longer. Looking closer, she realized that the old fruit tree was actually in need of serious TLC. She cursed the darkness. If she'd accessed the situation in the daylight, she wouldn't have climbed the tree to begin with.

As she stretched her body as much as she could, she caught a glimpse through the pelting snow into the endless darkness below. Climbing back down the prime candidate for the wood pile looked even more precarious than making her way to the loft door from her not-so-sturdy perch. She grabbed the frame of the loosely hinged door and from a crouched position, flung her body hard against it. It all happened as if she'd performed a choreographed stunt in a movie. Her body hit its mark and the door flung open. She landed unceremoniously onto a pile of old, dusty hay.

Bits of sharp, dust riddled straw sent her into a fit of sneezing as her nose did its best to cleanse her nasal cavities, stopping only when it succeeded in flushing the

majority of it out and leaving her sadly in need of a handkerchief. Rummaging through her pockets and coming up empty handed, she shrugged and used the sleeve of her down jacket; shuddering at her own actions. She grabbed a fist full of snow from the door frame and wiped her sleeve with it.

The ache on her rib cage reminded her of the location of her flashlight. Wincing, she reached in and pulled it out by its thick barrel and clicked on the beam. She'd been in this part of the loft only once and had never really taken the time to inspect it closely. Sugar's quarters were on the far end of the building. Shining the flashlight's beam through swirling particles of dust and bits of hay that rode the occasional gusts of winter through the loft door, she was surprised to come upon a group of portraits leaning against the interior wall.

Looking closer, she saw they were of people dressed in eighteen and nineteenth century attire. Interestingly, one man was in a confederate soldier's uniform. She was no expert, but after a more in-depth examination of the paintings, she was certain that they weren't recently painted. They were surprisingly well preserved, but clearly quite old. Tara felt certain the artist managed to portray a very strong likeness to the people in the paintings. She wasn't sure how she knew this. It was just something she felt.

The sound of her mare's stomping below brought Tara back to matters at hand. Making certain to securely latch

the loft door, she searched for the ladder that would take her to the main floor and carefully picked her way down it. Once her footing found the concrete base of the stable she relaxed. She was on familiar ground now and, although the flashlight came in handy, she could actually accomplish what she needed to do without light if the situation called for it. Fortunately, the electricity hadn't been interrupted by the brutal storm and she was able to light up her surroundings with a flip of the switch.

Sugar's excitement in seeing her was barely contained. There had been no telepathic communication between them since the night of Maggie's brutal murder, but there was no need for Tara to understand her four-legged friend's greeting. The mare was happy to see that her owner and caretaker had arrived, and her needs would be tended to.

The mare's part of the old stable was fairly well protected from the storm. Tara lowered the scarf from her face and removed her thick mittens, so her hands could maneuver more comfortably. The heat of Sugar's breath as she nuzzled her affectionately was a welcome sensation. Working as quickly as she could, she refreshed the water bucket, put a wedge of hay in the hay rack, a scoop of grain in the feed bucket and made certain the mare's blanket was secure before she reached for the pitch fork to remove the soiled hay.

She thought nothing of the piercing cold on her cheeks and continued pitching hay, hoping to finish quickly and get

back to the comfort of a hot bath and a snug blanket. When the cold grew bone chilling, she couldn't ignore it any longer. This part of the stable was too well protected for this type of cold to be assaulting her. She checked around for its source. Her breath caught in her throat and her chest constricted as she found herself staring into the large, brown eyes of the old man who hadn't appeared in months.

Unlike the other times when he was there and then gone almost as quickly, he stood zombielike and as three-dimensionally opaque as any human would be. The only thing differentiating him from Tara was the hazy glow around his body. Every nerve stood at attention while she debated what to do. Running away was her first inclination, but a ghost could pop in and out whenever and wherever it desired, so running would be futile. Besides, how far could she possibly get in that blizzard? She longed for Maggie. Maggie would know what to do and Maggie wouldn't be so frightened.

With trembling hands, Tara moved the pitch fork in front of her and continued to clean Sugar's stall. Perhaps, if she ignored him, he'd go away. Sugar scraped her hoofs and snorted her disapproval. The air bursting from her nostrils created tiny clouds that floated into nothingness. The ghost wasn't going to go away, but it wasn't saying anything either. As if seeing a ghost wasn't frightening enough, his staring was creepy.

She was about to confront him when he uttered “Lucy”, in an almost inaudible voice that held a distinct and thick brogue and then faded into nothingness.

Tara was dumbfounded. It took a stinging slap across her face by Sugar’s coarse tail to bring her back to reality. Her body trembled, but at least the air warmed up to the point where her breath was barely visible. She recalled that the book Maggie gave to her explained why the air got so cold when a ghost appeared, but she couldn’t remember the details. She’d forgotten a lot of the teachings Maggie had worked so hard to instill within her along the way. They were locked up tight in the recesses of her mind; too painful to remember, for by remembering them she remembered Maggie. She shook her head. Did the reasons why the air got cold when a ghost appeared really matter after all was said and done? She thought not.

“It’s for the best,” she said aloud, “I don’t need to know all of that mumbo jumbo. Look at what it got me. Not to mention what it got Maggie. It’s just as well that I forget it all.”

She hurried to complete her chores. The encounter with the ghost was quickly pushed into the back of her mind, along with the other memories she wanted to diminish and, hopefully, forget.

TWO

The storm ceased sometime during the early hours just before sunrise, leaving behind it mini mountains of icy snow to be removed before her home could run at its normal pace.

Tara sighed. Winters in Manhattan were so much easier. She couldn't have imagined such burdensome weather and was therefore not totally prepared for it. She was grateful for the good sense she exercised in following Maggie's suggestion to purchase the small tractor with a snow plow attachment. A cold reminder of her friend, the valuable piece of equipment was left dormant since the day it was delivered.

Today it would make its debut.

She'd programmed her coffee maker prior to going to bed and wafts of the dark liquid's rich aroma lured her out from beneath the warm security of her goose down comforter. She hated the cold and often wondered why her crazy ancestors settled in the north. Even if they had come from a cold climate, surely, they could have acclimated to the warmth of the south had they given it a chance. She dreaded the air that awaited her outside her covers. She'd have stayed in it all day if she hadn't had duties and responsibilities. They forced her to brave the brisk air of the large, poorly insulated rooms of the great house.

She'd just reveled in her first sip of coffee when the telephone rang.

She rushed to answer it, hoping it was Dennis calling to tell her he was on his way. He'd urged her to join him on his vacation down south, but she neither felt the inclination to go, nor was she as free as she was when she boarded Sugar elsewhere. Now, if she wanted to go somewhere for any length of time she had to hire someone to look after her mare, her kittens, and her house. She wasn't up to entrusting people she didn't know with her most precious possessions. After her nightmare with Dominic, her trust level was exceedingly low.

Looking at the aftereffects of the horrendous storm, she wondered if leaving Manhattan was the wisest thing. She wasn't a farm girl and didn't profess to have any skill with something as formidable as a tractor and snowplow. The thought of having to sit on the mini-monster and maneuver it through the thick blanket of heavy, crystallized precipitation that went on for as far as the eye could see was horrifically intimidating. She fervently hoped that it was Dennis calling to tell her he'd returned early from his trip.

"So, how goes it out there in no man's land?" Mitch's sarcastic tone of voice that accompanied the equally sarcastic remark grated on her already frazzled nerves. "I understand you had a whopper of a storm last night. I just called to see how you survived it."

"I hoped you were Dennis," Tara grumbled.

“I see you’re your usual sunny self in the morning. No coffee yet?” he sighed.

Having her rudeness so clearly pointed out startled Tara into realizing just how much she’d changed since she moved into her beautiful country estate.

As if reading her mind, Mitch continued, “You know, the Tara O’Shea that I knew and loved would have never been so curt and thoughtless, no matter how she felt inside. She was always the epitome of social etiquette. I’m not sure how I feel about the Tara you’ve become since you moved to the country. I think the hustle and bustle of Manhattan produced a much more amiable female.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not feeling all that great today,” she said earnestly. After a moment’s silence she added, “I hear you’re in love. Congrats.”

“I am and thanks. I want you to meet her. I think you two will get along great. She has a lot of qualities you’d like. It’s like you two could be sisters or something,” Mitch said and then quickly added, “That’s not why I’m with her. I love her for who she is. In fact, I asked her to marry me.”

“I…” she started before he continued and interrupted her.

“I thought we’d pop out to your place this weekend,” he said brightly. “Dennis should be back by then, right?”

Tara groaned inwardly. The last thing she wanted to do was entertain her former love and his new love, but things had smoothed out between them enough to make

being around him tolerable and she didn't want them to revert back to the tenseness that dominated their interaction after they broke up. She regretted the fact that Dennis was good friends with him. She saw no way out of playing hostess to the new lovers.

"You're more than welcome," she lied.

Although the sun lit up the thick white blanket of endless crystallized sea, the air was still brutal. Mitch's voice faded into the background as she focused on the cold that consumed her room. There were some portions of the house that she hadn't yet managed to protect against the elements, but this particular room was one of the very first to be renovated. She watched the first flakes of snow fall with the illusion that she'd be warm and snug in this room at least.

The bitter cold she experienced now was disheartening. What could she have missed? What didn't get patched, insulated, caulked or weather-stripped? The tickling of the back of her neck as her hair stood at attention alerted her that she wasn't alone in the room. These feelings only happened when something not human appeared. It was an explanation for the cold, at least. She wasn't sure if she should be happy or unhappy about it.

Not up to facing whatever it was, she closed her eyes and prayed it would go away while Mitch continued with his recapitulation of the events leading up to his meeting and falling in love with Alana. He rambled on, completely

unaware that his audience was only half listening. She finally let her eyes comb the room for the intruder. It was only a matter of seconds before she spotted him.

The old ghost was back.

She wasn't sure if ghosts were telepathic, but she sent him a message to leave anyway. Whether he heard her thoughts or simply felt it was time to go, she wasn't certain. Whatever the case, she gave a sigh of relief as she watched him fade away.

Just as his shape reached the point of being barely visible, she heard a faint "Lucy" in the same thick brogue that was spoken the night before. She had no idea why this ghost would be

calling her Lucy and for the present she had no desire to find it out.

"Does that work for you?" Mitch's question brought her back to reality.

"Does what work for me?" she asked.

"I said," Mitch's impatience was clearly noted in his tone, "we can be there about five o'clock on Saturday."

"I'll make a pot roast," she said as she tried to reign in her focus.

"Sounds good," he replied.

Without seeing if Mitch had more to add to the conversation or even politely saying 'goodbye', Tara returned the receiver to its cradle and sat down to drink her coffee.

Who was this ghost and why did he keep coming around?
She didn't like it. She didn't like it one bit!

She missed Maggie.

Tara had only just started allowing herself brief glimpses into her memories of her time with Maggie. Little by little the shock of Maggie's brutal death at the hands of Dominic and his evil beasts was ebbing away and she was able to feel again. She could finally grieve properly. Now seemed like a good time to cry, so she did it with gusto. Since there was no one in the house with her except her rapidly growing kittens, there was no one to stop her; no one to comfort her; no one to care. Even though she knew this, she still imagined Maggie walking in her usual unannounced way through the door to linger in the recesses of her mind.

Tara fidgeted with her long firelight curls as she watched the tall, slender form of the future Mrs. Mitchell Longworth -better known as Alana- slide gracefully out of the late model Jaguar he'd miraculously maneuvered down the long, tree lined driveway she'd made a pathetic attempt to plow. The enormous fur hood hugging Alana's face and neck made it impossible to tell if she was a blonde, brunette, or redhead, but Tara lay dibs that Mitch's goddess was a blonde. Her breath caught in her throat as the woman looked in her direction. Mitch hadn't done his future wife justice. He'd declared her beauty over and over, but it always

seemed that perhaps his vision was clouded by love. She could see now that it wasn't. Alana had to be the most beautiful woman Tara had ever laid eyes on.

Doing her best to arrange a few stray strands of hair with her suddenly clumsy fingers and wishing she'd chosen an outfit other than jeans and oversized hand knitted cotton sweater that hung loosely over her slender hips, she ran to the doorway to welcome her guests.

"Damn, it's cold!" Mitch said as he stomped the snow from his boots. He kissed Tara on the cheek and pulled his fiancé forward for a proper introduction. "I want you to meet Alana. Alana, this is Tara."

Alana was surprised when Tara showed no signs of recognition. Dominic had spoken truth. Alana could always tell when Lucy was lying. She'd clearly lost so much of her memory she actually thought herself to be Tara O'Shea. Well, at least she remembered the O'Shea.

"Welcome," Tara said with a little too much exuberance.

She hoped her words came across sincerer than she felt as she hustled her guests into the house and out of the bitter cold.

Mitch wasted no time in shedding his coat and scarf.

"I can't believe how fast this weather came upon us," he said. "One day I was enjoying a balmy fall day and then I woke up and there was snow everywhere!"

Tara furrowed her brows as she listened to Mitch ramble on. He seemed nervous. Was he worried she hadn't approved of his fiancé? What did her opinion matter anyway? Was there

something about her that would make her not approve? She looked from Mitch to Alana for a clue.

"Your home is lovely," Alana said.

The words glided off Alana's tongue and past her perfectly aligned, pearly teeth just as gracefully as she'd glided out of the car. Tara was duly intimidated.

"It's a diamond in the rough," Tara managed to say, "but I'm excited about the end result. I have a vision in my mind of how it should be. I want to restore it as much as I can to its original condition."

"Really," Alana mused as she walked to the banister and caressed it admiringly. "I suppose that would be nice. Some people would take a fine structure like this and bring it up to date; modernize it. I think the old fashion is still beautiful." Alana flashed a smile that would melt a snowman in seconds, "Very beautiful."

Tara held her arms out to receive Alana's coat and hung it on the antique coat tree that came with the house. She only recently got it back from the furniture restorer she discovered while looking for a handyman. His work was excellent, and his rates were surprisingly reasonable.

"I agree," Tara said awkwardly. "I put in a few new windows and an intercom system, but otherwise I'm doing

my best to keep it as real as I can. Can I get you something hot to drink... coffee... tea... hot chocolate?"

"Brandy?" Mitch said with amusement.

"Can she drink?" Alana whispered to Mitch.

"Brandy it is," Tara replied, choosing to ignore Alana's question.

Tara suddenly regretted telling Dennis he didn't have to rush over. He'd sounded so exhausted from his fun in the sun that she insisted he relax and not rush coming to her house, but she really didn't want to be left entertaining his good friend -who was also her ex-boyfriend- and his gorgeous catty fiancé on her own. She was extremely uncomfortable.

At one time, Maggie would have been here with her; her bubbly personality dominating the room. The wave of sadness that consumed Tara didn't go unnoticed by her guests. Mitch and Alana exchanged looks with raised brows.

"Is everything okay? Are you okay? You seem sad," Mitch said with gentle concern; a factor that didn't pass by Alana.

He touched Tara's elbow lightly, adding to her sadness as it brought back memories of the good old days.

A dark cloud swept over Alana's brilliant blue eyes while she contemplated the exchange of emotional familiarity between Mitch and Tara. Their touch was too familiar for her not to question if there was more between these two than the good friends Mitch claimed they were.

Alana was gorgeous, and she knew it, but Lucy was a beauty in her own right and could potentially pose a threat to her position with Mitch and her plans. Familiar feelings of rivalry surfaced. She wouldn't let Lucy beat her, memory loss or not. She needed to act quickly. Inching closer to Mitch, she touched his forearm seductively.

"Mitch, honey," she purred. "Perhaps our hostess is just tired. I mean... look at her, she looks worn out and it's no wonder. If what you tell me is true, she cares for this big place all by herself."

Mitch didn't catch Alana's undertone, but Tara certainly did. She would have been offended if Alana hadn't been so right. She was exhausted, but not from maintaining the place. She was tired from life. She felt like a bedraggled mop after what she went through. She probably did look as bad as she felt, but for a perfect stranger to say such a thing to her host was both appalling and insulting.

Tara locked eyes with Alana. Each woman did her best to relay her position with expression. Tara wanted Alana to know that she was on to her phoniness and Alana wanted it to be clear that Tara wouldn't beat her on anything.

Tara sighed. Leave it to Mitch to bring a viper into her home. Hadn't she been through enough?

Their silent exchange passed right past Mitch without notice.

"Well, hell Tara! Why don't you get some help out here?" Mitch asked as he twisted his head to look through

the doorway of the parlor. “Where’s that old woman who’s always here? Dennis told me she’s been good company for you. What’s her name again?”

“Maggie,” Tara said softly. Tears surprised everyone as they slid down Tara’s cheeks while she choked out the words, “She’s dead.”

Mitch was horrified.

“Tara. I’m sorry,” he said apologetically. “Dennis never said... I didn’t know... Dead? When? How?”

“A few months ago,” Tara said as she sniffed back the tears. She wiped at her moist cheeks with her sleeve, not caring about the impression such an unsophisticated action made on Alana and added, “I’m really not up to talking about it.”

“Sure,” Mitch replied. He put his arms around his former love and held her close; ignoring the jealous snorts emitted by his future wife, who remained close at his side. “I’m sorry I brought it up. I didn’t know. I’m sorry. I just didn’t know.”

“It’s okay,” Tara assured him.

Her voice was muffled as she buried her face deep into Mitch’s chest. It was some time since she felt the strong support of a human hug and she wasn’t anxious to give it up. Knowing that his catty bitchy fiancé was standing nearby and wasn’t happy with what she witnessed, Tara kept her eyes closed to avoid having to face the consequences of her actions for just a little longer.

Alana snarled inwardly. Mitch's display of concern for Lucy made her stomach turn. She smiled inwardly about the fact that she'd deliberately destroyed Dennis's letter telling Mitch what happened to Maggie. He told the whole sordid story of how Dominic tried to marry his sister in order to get possession of the house and find something. Fortunately, they never found out what that something was, and poor, poor Lucy was far too traumatized to use her brain and think to look for it. She didn't doubt the whiny thing would tell the story to Mitch during their visit, but she planned on finding the crystal key and getting out of there before Lucy knew what happened.

Mitch interpreted Alana's thoughtful scowl as disapproval of his attempt to comfort Tara. He knew that in spite of her almost overwhelming beauty, Alana was a jealous female. Tara's beauty could easily rival Alana's. Hugging her was asking for trouble. He shrugged his shoulders and gave a look of chagrin, hoping to lighten the situation as much as he could as he gently pushed Tara away.

To his surprise and relief, it worked, and Alana's scowl gradually transformed into a broad smile. Tara pulled herself together.

"Let me show you to your room so you can get comfortable," she said as she directed her attention to Alana. "Are you hungry? I made pot roast."

Alana sniffed the air and said in a sickly-sweet tone, “It smells wonderful.”

Tara flashed one of the warmest smiles she could muster in Alana’s direction, hoping to smooth over the tension. She had no idea why such a gorgeous woman would be jealous of her, but it was written all over her face; if only for a moment. As she guided them to their room, she was grateful her home was so large. She’d decided to put them in a room at the far end of the house that had only recently been furnished and prepared for guests rather than her normal guest rooms, which were closer to her own. She wanted to have Alana’s negative jealousy as far away from her as possible while she was in the vulnerable state of sleep.

While passing the full-length mahogany trimmed mirror that was centered along the wide, elaborate landing that attached her quarters to the guest quarters, she caught a glimpse of herself.

Alana was right. She looked worn out. There was nothing for her beautiful guest to be jealous about in this house, nothing at all.

Suddenly Tara regretted the bad start they’d had gotten off to. After all, it wasn’t as if she wanted Mitch for herself. As for the woman’s phoniness... well, it was probably standard in beautiful women. Beauty could be a powerful tool when dealing with men such as Mitch. Tara could hardly hold Alana’s use of what nature bestowed against her.

Alana walked up behind Tara and stood looking at their reflection. Tara gasped as she realized how closely they resembled each other. Mitch was right. They could be sisters; with Alana being the prettier one. She watched as Alana adjusted a few stray hairs with the grace of a debutante and sighed. Tara craved female companionship and she wanted to get to know the future wife of her former love. Well, it wasn't too late. Perhaps, after everyone rested and dined she'd try to mend the fence between them before it got even worse.

Dinner went smoother than Tara imagined. After a hot shower and short nap, Alana's mood was more amiable.

She expressed a deep appreciation for the old house. Thrilled to have someone share her passion for everything vintage, Tara happily accommodated her with a tour. The two used their time alone to break through the icy chill that started their relationship and get to know each other a little better. Tara showed Alana every nook and cranny of her grand abode. Alana took in everything like she was burning it to memory.

Mitch, never an admirer of anything old, opted to relax in the den by the fireplace with a good scotch whiskey in his hand.

Tara found the amount she had in common with Alana remarkable. They not only looked similar, but had similar tastes in just about everything, including men.

The hours passed quickly and before she knew it, it was time to say good-night. Mitch and Alana's trip over snowy and sometimes icy roads in a sports car was tedious and tense. The exhaustion from the trip combined with full bellies, alcohol, and a blazing fireplace, had practically put them to sleep in their chairs. Tara felt a little guilty for not considering their situation earlier and waiting until they could no longer disguise their yawns and droopy eyelids before suggesting they call it a night. Since she'd already shown them to their room and Alana now knew her way around the house almost as well as she did, Tara opted to remain downstairs to tidy up before retiring.

Feeling wonderfully cozy and satisfied with the way the evening went, she kissed the couple on their cheeks and bid them good night. It was good to have life in the house again. She'd missed the companionship more than she realized.

Humming a non-descript tune, she picked up their glasses and the Mikasa snack dish that at one time sported an array of gourmet crackers and cheeses, but now, thanks to Mitch, had barely a crumb left and headed for the kitchen sink. She would wash them in the morning.

The cold chill down her back practically took her breath away. She didn't need to look around to know what was going on.

He was back.

Her exhaustion combined with the frustration over the appearing and disappearing of the resident ghost -mixed with the generous amount of brandy she'd consumed during the evening- gave her an abnormal sense of bravery.

"Who are you and what do you want!" she demanded while she continued to pick up the dishes. When she received no response, she continued, "If you aren't going to tell me, then just go away. I'm tired of your tedious visits. Speak or get out."

"Lucy," the ghost whispered.

"Who's Lucy?" she asked impatiently.

Tara set the glass she just rinsed off on the drain of the sink and turned to face the semi-transparent old man. As she did so, he faded away, but not before he issued a warning.

"Come home... danger," he said in a barely audible whisper.

Tara stood, motionless, as she stared at the spot where the old ghost had appeared. She had no clue what he could possibly be saying. She tried to remember the other times he'd shown up.

What was occurring in her life when he'd appeared before?

The first time she saw him was after she fell into the well. Then, it was around the time she read from Maggie's book. These were all very different times, but they all

revolved around danger. She wished Maggie was there to could confer with her. Maggie would have an explanation; she was certain of that.

She wondered if she should speak to Mitch about it. What would he say if she told him? Would he think she was crazy? She was sure he would. It would be better to hold off and talk to Dennis when they were alone.

She rubbed the chill from her arms. The wind had picked up outside and the house was cooling down. It was time to head upstairs to snuggle under her thick goose down comforter. She would get a good night's sleep and then decide if she would confide in Mitch or not in the morning.

As she flipped off the light switch it dawned on her that the first time she saw the ghost wasn't in her bedroom after the accident. It was while speaking with Mitch on the telephone. In fact, every time the ghost appeared, Mitch had either telephoned, was visiting, or was on his way to visit.