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ANGELA ADDAMS



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Ghost Bride

Ghost Bride by Angela Addams

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By

Angela Addams

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Dedication

To Michelle V. Thanks for your unending support. (And for not thinking I'm a weirdo for writing this kind of stuff!)

Chapter One

Dasha knew she was dead. That was not the issue. It sucked, yes, but she wasn't confused about that part of her afterlife. What she didn't understand was why she was trapped in her home, roaming the rooms and halls, unable to remember how to leave or where she wanted to go.

Nor could she figure out why she was alone. *Isn't there supposed to be a welcoming party or something?* Her parents, her grandparents, her other dead relatives waiting for her on the other side? And if there wasn't going to be some kind of after-death party for her, shouldn't she at least be able to see the living? Rattle some chains, knock some books off shelves, moan and creak to scare the living heck out of people? A good old-fashioned house haunting at its best. *Isn't that supposed to be one of the pluses of being a ghost?* But no, there was nothing, only dreadfully boring nothing and nobody.

Where is Emma? Dasha moved for the millionth time into her kitchen, searching for some trace that her sister was still there, living in her home, mourning her death. Emma, had moved in with her five years before, living in and caring for the worn-down old country home as if it was her own. So it would stand to reason that Emma, at least, would still be there after Dasha's death. And Dasha so wished she could see her sister, let her know that she was okay, although admittedly ready to bang her head against the wall in an attempt to bring some excitement to her afterlife. She was bored and she was lonely. It wasn't like she had access to television or books. It was only in a fit of emotion, usually rage, that she

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even managed to pick something up, let alone gently open a book and start reading. So here Dasha remained, trapped and dying of boredom. *How ironic.*

She remembered her death in a vague sort of way: the rush of headlights, the crushing metal, the agonizing pain, and then nothing but darkness. Until—what seemed like an eternity ago—she found herself back at home, lying on her bed, perfectly fine, except for being dead.

She scanned the perimeter of her house from the kitchen window. Everything looked as it should, with tall, mature trees lining the property and her immaculate flower bed brimming with all kinds of beautiful flowers. It was comforting that everything looked the same, that the outside world was still there. The only problem was, she couldn't figure out how to get out of the house to enjoy it. Every time she tried to grip the doorknob, she couldn't. It was as if her hand were coated in some slick grease that prevented her from getting her front door open.

If this is some kind of punishment, it's working. "I'll repent all you want. I'll do whatever you say. Just let me get out of this house," she called, her voice echoing off the walls, knowing that no one could hear her but making the vain attempt all the same. All sense of embarrassment at talking to herself had disappeared long ago. In fact, it was the only thing that kept her sane. *Or as sane as you can be when you find yourself dead and alone and talking to yourself.*

She had forever been a homebody. She loved quiet things, reading, tending to her garden, studying for her college courses. When she wasn't at her job she was in the library or at home, working at one of the few pursuits that brought her joy and a sense of purpose. She didn't have a lot of friends, only her sister really, and her sister was so very different from her. Emma was always out and about, partying and having fun, constantly trying to convince Dasha to venture out and let loose once in a while. She didn't remember exactly where she'd been headed when she died in the car accident, but she had a sense that her sister had finally won because she'd been on her way out for a night on the town.

Dasha mourned her passing. Lamented what she was missing out on now that she could no longer participate. She desperately wanted to be

able to speak and have someone—anyone—answer. But she knew she had to accept the situation, work through the grieving process, and deal with the facts. Ever the practical girl. She was dead and damn angry to feel so helpless and trapped, but there was nothing she could do about it. She'd tried to leave the house, several times; finally she admitted defeat and clung to the hope that something was going to happen for her or to her to change her current state of limbo. What she wanted now, above anything else, was a chance to experience something, anything, beyond the walls of her house.

So she was left to marinate in her own thoughts all day and night. Trapped, not only in her house, but in her mind where she reflected on all of the opportunities she'd passed up, all of the chances she'd had to get out in the world and live like her sister had been doing.

Dasha had been a part-time student, taking random courses, mainly in literature, but had never actually committed to anything that would lead to a degree. She'd had a part-time job working at a used bookstore that brought in the other wallflowers of the town, people who hardly even acknowledged her when she rung up their orders. She didn't travel, she didn't party, she didn't socialize. When she wasn't at work or at school, she was at home and that was it. A boring life that she thought she'd been content living, even with Emma's constant nagging that she needed to get out and enjoy the world. But she realized now she'd thrown away her one chance at living. She'd missed out on so many opportunities that could have been exciting and fun, all because she wanted to stay in her comfort zone.

What bothered her more than she would ever admit out loud—not that it mattered anymore if she did admit it out loud—was the fact that she never experienced the one thing she had always wanted to do before she died: feel the hot passion of a torrid love affair. One of her greatest disappointments at finding out that she hadn't survived the car accident was that she had died a virgin. Why hadn't she ventured out more? Taken her sister up on the many blind dates she'd arranged? At twenty-one, she had yet to find the perfect man to give herself to. She hadn't wanted to give up her virginity to just anyone. She'd been waiting for Mr. Right.

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Dasha knew she was unusual that way, and that her virginity was probably more of a defense mechanism than anything else. She hid behind her virtue as if it were a shield protecting her from talking to men. Most girls her age had had sex in high school, but she was shy and awkward and hadn't bloomed until she'd graduated and moved on. By the time she started college, the guys were *very* interested in her, but she was too unschooled and unsure and ended up coming across as the inexperienced knob that she was.

She slammed her hand down on the kitchen table, the sudden burst of anger and disappointment giving her a rare moment of physical contact, satisfied when the wood groaned under her palm. Those moments of tangible connection gave her more hope than anything. If she could only master her ability to touch, maybe she could figure out a way to leave.

But for now she drifted from room to room, floating—or so she assumed because she couldn't feel the floor beneath her feet—through walls and furniture, mumbling to herself and hoping. A pitiful sight to be sure, so clichéd, the discontented ghost, moping and moaning her afterlife.

With a deep sigh, she moved back to the foyer, ready to do her circuit once again when she heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps across the hardwood floor above her. Her heart kicked up a notch and sudden excitement flooded through her with intoxicating effects. Someone was walking upstairs.

Emma, finally. Renewed hope ripped through her as she tore up the stairs, certain she would finally be able to see her sister after who knew how long a wait, determined to make her presence known in whatever way she could. Dasha didn't care if she scared the wits out of Emma with her thumping up the steps, because indeed she was thumping for once; it would be worth it if it meant no more endless days and nights of unremitting nothing.

She hit the second floor with a wide grin on her face. As she rounded the corner of the hallway, she opened her mouth to call out, heedless of whether Emma would be able to hear her shout.

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Her stomach plummeted; her mouth clamped shut. The noise of footsteps was not coming from her sister.

Before her stood a man.

Tall and brooding, his dark eyes cutting through her, she raised her hands as if to ward him off and took a tentative step back.

He moved a step forward. She froze again, her eyes wide with fear, her gut roiling. She tried to shove the panic away, but couldn't quite release the anxiety of finding a strange man wandering around her upstairs. Was he here for her? She sighed at her stupidity. *Of course he's not. I'm dead.*

A rolling wave of calm passed over her, pushing aside the panic from moments before. *He can't see me. It's just a fluke that he's looking this way.*

The tension eased from her shoulders as she moved to make her way back down the stairs. It was disappointing, to be sure. She really did want to see her sister, but seeing anyone at this point in her confinement was exciting. She paused, dared another glance in his direction, and did a double take. His gaze was still riveted on her as if he could actually see her standing there. She cocked her head to the side, a flutter of fear, excitement, something, passing over her as his dark eyes slowly shifted down and then back up her body, making her suddenly feel like she stood before him naked. A pulsing warmth rushed straight to her core and she staggered under its power. *What the hell?*

He took a step toward her. Her heart thudded with a flood of mixed emotions, but she didn't move. Nothing she was feeling at the moment was terribly bad. Exciting, heady maybe, but not bad.

"Dasha?" His voice was deep, just as she would have expected coming from such a large man.

She closed her eyes, took in a few deep breaths, willed herself to think clearly. *He didn't just say my name, did he?*

When she opened her eyes again he was standing so close that she could see the light shadowing of stubble on his chin, could smell his scent, a musky maleness mixed with a woodsy aroma, oddly appealing. A strange sense of calm fell upon her. She was not freaked out in the least at

having him so close to her, so in her personal space. Her body tingled at his proximity as her stomach fluttered.

“Dasha?” He whispered her name this time as he raised his hand to brush away a strand of hair from her face and God, she could feel him do it. His hand touching her cheek sent new tendrils of excitement through her.

She closed her eyes again as a wave of dizziness passed over her. She couldn't explain it. She wanted to reach out and caress him, this stranger, this man who knew her name. Somewhere deep down she knew that if she reached out, if she touched him, she'd graze his skin, his hair—she'd *feel* him. Seconds after the thought, his lips were on hers, firm, full lips that pressed against hers with an urgency she had never experienced before. She was compelled to return it with the same intensity and she did, with relish.

“My sweet Dasha.” He moaned against her mouth as he gripped her waist, pulling her closer to him.

He broke the kiss to brush light kisses along her cheek and she sighed contentedly, lulled by the sudden, explosive pleasure that such a simple touch could have on her, and from a stranger no less. She'd been unable to feel anything in her afterlife for so long that she'd forgotten how much she needed to be touched, to be caressed. He pulled away and she stared in awe at him.

“Who are you?” she whispered, her heart still racing, her mind reeling, tears burning her eyes with the intensity of it all.

He smiled down at her, his perfect white teeth framed by his generous mouth. “My name is Cole and I am your husband.”