

# Prologue

## subtitle

People say that if a death is violent enough or a soul is left with unfinished business when the flesh fails then the person wanders as a spirit until their unfinished business is done.

She'd always wondered if that could be true. Spitting blood out of her mouth she guessed she would find out soon enough. Her eyes refused to focus making her vision swim. She looked up at her torturer, her body limp as she waited for him to end it all.

"You're such a mess, hon." He said lovingly. She flinched as he wiped blood out of her eyes.

"You didn't clean yourself up." He sounded disappointed. She couldn't even muster enough energy to beg as she saw the hand clench into a fist. Her head dimly rang when he connected with her nose. Another bloom of pain. She drowned in a sea of it, hurting in places she never knew she had. The worse was in her stomach and womb, a warm wet feeling sloshed around her belly, held in by the plug he'd forcibly rammed into her after his last session.

"Aw, are you almost finished sweetie? Do you want to rest, to sleep? Don't worry dear, I'll put you to bed here in a moment."

Bed? That sounded nice. A way to leave this pain behind, forever.

For just a moment a vision appeared before her eyes, a small hazel-eyed face smiled up at her as she bent down to pick him up in a fierce hug.

Her brother! She had to get back to him, to tell him how much she loved him. She tried to speak to him, but the cloth gag in her mouth turned it to a weak mumble.

"Hmm, what's that hon? Got something on your mind? Don't worry about it, it'll keep. It's time to put you to sleep. Perhaps I'll have another go at you while you rest, since you like my dick so much." He patted her breast, the pain of his touch reaching her addled mind.

She tried to plead again, but stopped when she felt a cold surface against her throat. Her eyelids fluttered open and she looked into the gloating eyes of the man above her.

"One last thing. I know you won't rest easy alone, but don't worry. You have plenty of company here already, but I plan to add one more that you're familiar with. You'd like your brother to keep you company, wouldn't you?"

Her eyes widened in horror. He couldn't mean?

"Your little pal saw me with the knife earlier as I sharpened it." He said to her. "Can't have the little guy chattering away about it, can we? Besides, you'll sleep easier knowing he's there beside you."

She shook her head, gargling her denial. Her brother! She had to protect him! If she—

A slick feeling. Hot blood splashed down her naked chest and onto the ground already soaked with it. Her vision began to black at the edges and rush to the center. She forced her eyes to stare into his.

*Please, leave short stuff alone! Don't hurt my baby brother!*

Instead she saw him reach towards her. Her gag vanished. The restraints on her wrists released. Her body slumped backwards, her cheek pressing into the cold ground.

*Brother! I have to protect him! I can't let him die! I have to protect him! I WILL protect him. God, please let me keep him safe! Anything you want of me, I'll do just help me keep him safe!*

Her vision disappeared and she felt her muscles vanish. She'd died! Or at least, was about to die. Would she see Heaven's light? No! She didn't want to, at least not yet! She had to protect her family!

Her body wasn't going to be any help. Maybe there was something to this ghost thing. If she could just...

The clearing reappeared around her with a pop. She looked around in a daze, something about it seemed off. Where had all these women come from? And why did the world suddenly seem to end at the treeline?

"Hello there. He got you too, huh?"

She turned and beheld another girl. She looked about eighteen and very pretty, with long brown hair, a pixie face with swirls of adorable freckles on her cheeks and nose and lips a model would envy. Like everyone else, she was naked and looked like the loser at a gladiator fight.

"Hi, I'm Carrie. Carrie Carbuncle, but everyone calls me Ceecee. I was his victim the week before."

"Ceecee? Hi. How...how do we get out of here? I need to go back, I have to warn them, warn my brother! He's going to murder my brother!"

Ceecee's face twisted. She noticed a second smile where her throat had been cut and now that she looked closer Ceecee's shade looked like raw hamburger.

"I'm sorry. We can't get away. All of us have tried. We're stuck here where we died and none of us know why."

"No, I have to warn them! I have to protect my brother! I vowed!" she said desperately.

"I'm sorry, but...we can't do anything. We're ghosts! Where are you going?"

"I've got too! I promised!" she called back.

Heedlessly she raced towards the void. Fear gripped her, touching the inky black seemed like such a bad idea. She could vanish and never appear again. It wasn't worth the risk. She should turn around and wait with the others. Their voices whispered into her ear, but crazed with terror and anger as she was she hardly noticed.

Pushing into the boundaries she screamed her family's name as she pushed through.

Once outside the barrier, she felt a strong pull from above. Her feet actually left the ground and she appeared to be rising...

"NO! Leave me alone! I have to protect him! I have to save him!"

Stubbornly she gripped a tall pine tree to keep herself from going up. The feeling persisted a moment longer before breaking. She waited a long moment more before daring to let go lest it be a trick.

It was dark now, and she saw her killer head to his car already whistling a tune. Of her body she noticed a blue halo in the ground. Back towards the clearing. Bidding farewell to her body she fled. Following the car she found her form easily pacing the speeding vehicle. It gave her a direction at least, without risking climbing up a tree or floating high enough to be...whatever it was that would happen to her.

When he came to a stretch of parkland she recognized, she oriented for home and raced as fast as she could, flying above the ground, towards her neighborhood. She figured she had an hour, tops before the serial killer got to her house. She just prayed she'd make it in time.

Just shy of the hour mark she spotted her house and rushed up the stairs. Her body flashed through the door without trouble.

*Guess that's good. Gotta warn short stuff!*

Darting up the stairs she went to her brother's room.

His room was a typical kid's: he had Legos and Hot Wheels strewn about the carpet and on the dresser, his walls were adorned with posters of the upcoming Lord of the Rings movie coming out in a couple of months. Her heart pounded as she remembered purchasing the tickets to see the movie with him, they were still in her room for them both. Now...couldn't think about that!

Her brother slept in his racing car bed he'd begged for last year. She floated beside him, staring at his handsome little face that she remembered begging for more food or her help in getting away with one of his little jaunts with his friends. His eyes were scrunched up and he was tossing and turning as if he were in the grip of some nightmare.

A greenish flash of light jerked her eyes to his neck. He was wearing his lucky asteroid stone they'd found together while hiking in the woods. She remembered the outing well, and knew he'd loved it, and how proud he'd been of tying the rawhide strips into a crude necklace. Now it was turning an angry red and seemed to be getting hot, what if it burned him?!

Reaching for the glowing onyx rock to hurl it away without thinking about it, her fingers closed on the smooth and polished surface.

She reeled as power crackled through her. Her ears rang from a thunderclap that sounded as if it had struck right next to her. Her brother's eyes flew open in shock. Both of them stared at one another for an instant before she found herself painfully yanked into the stone.

*What happened?* She asked herself. She felt groggy, like she was drunk again. *Where is this place?* She looked around and stared.

She stood in the center of a large round space, maybe a football field long in diameter. Glowing green and purple crystals grew every which way from the onyx walls and ceiling. A green mist hung a few feet off the ground. It was at once ethereally beautiful and eerie.

"Like being in a cave but with glowing rocks around me." she muttered.

The sky above her swirled with more mist, like a technicolor cloud. Strange shapes could dimly be seen in it. She squinted and realized the shapes were actually dressers and things from Mark's room, moving slightly with every breath he took. She could see outside! Hungrily she tried to figure out what was happening.

Her brother was hopping out of bed. He ran to her room as fast as his little feet could fly and she saw the terribly familiar walls adorned with their posters of heroes like Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman into space, and others. Her bed was still as neatly made as she had left it this morning. Her books were undisturbed, her writing desk still had paper and pencils ready to go for homework when she got home.

Her brother called her name, and she felt her heart tremble. He sounded so scared and confused! She wished she hadn't gone out tonight, so she could hold him just one more time.

Her perspective shifted as he turned around and ran down the hall to the stairs. She frowned, why was he...?

She saw the front door open. The familiar face of the monster she'd thought her boyfriend stepped in. He looked up at them surprised.

"Hey sport." He whispered. "Watch'cha doin up at this late hour? Nah, don't worry 'bout it. Your sister's outside in the car getting your surprise. We spent all day hunting for it, she talked of nothing else. Something for that movie you two are goin' to see. If you want to see it, better make it quick before she finishes hidn' it."

The vision shook as her brother started down the stairs towards the open door and that monster. Her breath caught...he was going to kidnap her brother and murder him! He was going through with it!

Desperate rage roared through her. It felt almost like she stood in the center of a forest fire blazing out of control. She trembled at the power that flooded her. The crystals blazed like little suns.

She found herself outside, between her brother and that monster. Both of them jerked in surprised and gaped at her as she glared her hatred at her murderer.

"You won't have him!" she tried to say. Instead a shrieking wail burst from her, shaking pictures on the walls and striking them like a blow from a two by four. The silence shivered to smithereens and drove both of them to the ground with their hands clapped tight over their ears.

"Bitch! You can't be here! I killed you!" he shouted when the noise died down.

"Killed me! Yeah, you fucking did, but you aren't hurting my family you son of a bitch!" Amanda snarled. This time the wail drove him back towards the door before he collapsed in pain.

Leaping at him she scratched at him. She beat him with her fists. She screamed and bellowed in his ears until they bled. He cowered and held up his hands trying to protect himself from her fury. Deep gouges

appeared in his battered flesh. Blood dripped to the hardwood or flew through the air to spatter on the walls.

It felt amazing! But with every blow less damage appeared. Her body thinned and faded away. She let it, putting everything into hurting the man bad enough he'd flee and leave her family alone.

*Please, just please go away!* She shrieked at him in her mind.

"Fucking bitch! I killed you! Leave me the fuck alone! You can't do this to me!" he ranted. "I'll show you! I'll kill your fucking brother! I'll kill your whole fucking family! You can't stop me!"

He stood up and pushed through her thinning form, reaching for her brother curled on the stoop sobbing his little heart out.

*NOOOOOOOOO!*

She tried to reappear, to stand between them and keep the monster back, but he passed right through her again. Again she appeared in front of him, so thin and translucent as to be nearly not there and his face split into an evil grin.

Another roar behind her! Something passed through her body and lit into the gaping killer. Heavy fists smacked flesh furiously. He tried to draw a knife but her father brought the wrist against his knee and the bone cracked painfully, forcing the knife to drop from nerveless fingers and clatter to the ground below.

"You fucking bastard!" her father bellowed. "Where. IS. MY. DAUGHTER!"

Amanda gaped. She'd never seen him like this! Instead of his kindly smile a grimace of rage twisted his features into a grotesque gargoyle mask that completely hid the kind, gentle man she knew. His muscles flexed with savage delight at every satisfying hit like a barbarian crushing his foe. Arms that held her so gently growing up now seemed attached to a mindless creature bent on hurling the terrified sack of quivering raw flesh into the wall or ceiling or floor to batter it to pieces.

She heard more footsteps behind her and saw her mother gather up her baby brother and flee upstairs. When they reached the top step Amanda experienced a moment of disorientation, a feeling of being pulled, and she found herself by her mother and brother in their parent's room, the door barricaded by the dresser as her mother pulled the phone off the receiver and dialed 911, nearly yanking the cord out of the wall in her terror.

"Help! Police! My husband's fighting a murderer downstairs in our home! He says...oh God! He says he killed our daughter!" she burst into terrified tears.

"Hang on the line ma'am. Help is on the way." The reassuring voice of the operator came through the earpiece.

She sighed in relief. Thank God! Her family was going to be all right. As she felt herself relax her brother's stone glowed faintly and she found herself drawn towards its light.

POP.

She stood inside the clear space inside the rock, the crystals dimming as if they were being utterly drained of power. Disoriented, she tried to get her bearings. It looked so different now! Instead of empty space, a cozy stone cottage rose from the mist, the front door open and inviting. From the chimney she could see a tendril of multi-colored smoke rise shimmering into the air. Inside the open door she could see a mudroom entryway with lots of pegs as if ready to receive visitors.

She smiled.

"Looks like I'm home now after all." She said aloud.