

Eye of Destruction

As Father Greer and Leyland Cross began walking toward Hollingsworth Manor, Molly clutched Leyland's arm. "Wait!" she cried fearfully. "What exactly are ya gonna do?"

Behind his rimless eyeglasses, Leyland placidly blinked. "First, Ms. Crenshaw, Father Greer will bless the house's exterior, using holy water to mark each doorway, then he'll do the same on the interior, finally marking the urn containing Mr. Hollingsworth Sr.'s remains."

Constance, her fingers idly playing with her thin gold necklace, cleared her throat. "What effect will that have?"

"It sends the spirit on the way to wherever it's supposed to go," Leyland responded.

"Oh," tears sprang to Molly's eyes, "the both o' ya do be careful inside there."

"I won't be going inside," Leyland said flatly. "I'm only walking the perimeter of the house with Father Greer to make certain he doesn't miss any doors."

"Why aren't you going inside?" Stuart asked, leaning forward on his crutches.

Leyland Cross was silent for a moment. He turned toward the house, then turned back to face the small group. His face appeared thin and pinched. Slowly, he said, "I've learned through experience that it's best if I'm not nearby while the priests do their work."

Molly, seeing Leyland's expression, asked, "Does it hurt ya when they leave?"

Leyland slowly nodded.

"What about him?" Stuart jerked his head to indicate Father Greer, who was standing several feet away.

"No," Leyland said. "For whatever reason, the spirits won't harm a priest."

"God takes care of His own, huh?" Stuart smirked.

"Precisely," said Father Greer, narrowing his eyes at Stuart. Looking to Leyland, he said, "Let's begin. I have Mass this evening." With a last glance toward Stuart, Father Greer turned and walked toward Hollingsworth Manor.



It had been a long time since Dominique Carpenter had felt so happy. Walking in the midst of the Gossamer Falls Downtown Art Fair, one of her brothers and his family surrounding her, ice cream dripping from cones faster than they could lick it, Dominique felt, for the first time in years, as if she was part of a family.

Dominique grinned as Nathan laughed at her futile attempt to keep the mint chocolate chip ice cream from running down her arm. None of them had been laughing a short while ago; not after Harris had asked about the possibility of meeting her daughter and Dominique had had to tell them Tessa was dead.

Dominique's thoughts returned to the moment after she'd revealed Tessa's fate. As she'd struggled to hold back the tears that threatened to spill, she'd seen Lisa's face drawn with concern. An instant later, Lisa had been out of her chair and beside Dominique's, pulling her into an embrace. "I'm so sorry," she'd said.

Dominique had had to look away in order not to lose control. Nathan had looked confused, but Mark had appeared to understand what was happening. Harris had sat, stunned, for several moments before joining Lisa in embracing her.

"I'm sorry, Dominique," Harris had said, his soft beard pressed against her face. "I didn't mean to bring up a subject that would cause you pain." He'd pulled away from her then, and Dominique had seen the sincerity in his intense blue eyes.

Dominique, overwhelmed by both the pain and the Hollingsworths' collective gesture, had choked back a sob, then hurriedly brushed away tears as she'd noticed they were drawing attention from the other diners at the sidewalk café. She'd mumbled something about their having the crowd's attention, figuring that wasn't something they, as Gossamer Falls' premier family, would want.

To Dominique's surprise, Mark had simply shrugged and said, "We get that a lot around town." She'd had to laugh at his nonchalant manner, and the others had joined her.

Afterward, they'd eaten lunch, sticking to safe topics of conversation, none of them seemingly wanting to damage the fragile bond that had been established. After lunch, Harris and Nathan had been enthusiastic about ice cream and had talked the rest of them into getting a cone.

"What time is it, Harris?" Lisa asked, jarring Dominique from her reverie.

"A little after two."

Something unspoken passed between the married couple. Dominique saw it and recognized it for what it was: the almost telepathic connection between two minds that were so well acquainted with one another that words weren't needed to communicate. She and Ellis had once shared a similar connection, but that was so long ago....

"Dominique, we were planning on taking the boys to see a movie. Would you like to join us?" Lisa asked.

Dominique looked into their faces and saw the anticipation there. Hesitantly, she said, "I don't want to intrude on your family time."

Dominique knew Harris and Lisa were going to protest even before they opened their mouths, still she politely listened to their entreaties. "I thank you for wanting to include me," she said, "but I have somewhere I need to go."

"Oh," Lisa said. "Well, we don't want to keep you."

"Maybe we can do this again sometime," Harris suggested.

"Maybe we can," Dominique smiled.

"I hope so," Harris said, stepping forward and embracing Dominique. "I'm looking forward to getting to know my big sister."

Dominique could only smile and blink away tears as Harris moved away and Lisa stepped forward to embrace her.

"If she's Daddy's sister, what is she to me?" Nathan asked.

Lisa, stepping away from Dominique so Mark could give her a brief hug, said, "That makes her your aunt, honey."

Nathan beamed up at Dominique as he stepped in front of her and widely opened his arms for a hug. "May I call you 'Aunt Dominique?'"

"I think that'll be fine," Dominique said, pulling him to her.



On the grounds of Hollingsworth Manor, Leyland turned to Constance. "Are you okay, Ms. Hollingsworth?"

"Of course," Constance hastily said. "Why do you ask?"

"You're perspiring quite heavily," he said.

"It's a little warm outside today," Constance's gravelly voice intoned.

Leyland Cross nodded but said nothing.

Constance swallowed her irritation, trying not to let Stuart and Molly see it. Her mind reflected back to the previous day when Stuart had insisted Leyland Cross prove he could do the things of which he said he was capable. Foolishly, she had gone along with Stuart's suggestion and insisted Leyland Cross tell her something about herself that only she would know. She had hoped the self-styled paranormal consultant would fail, that he would be proven a fraud and that she could rid herself of the ridiculous notion that her dead husband's spirit was somehow affecting things inside the house. Instead, he'd handed her a sheet of paper on which was written the sentence: You have a heart condition and are on medication for it.

Constance cut her eyes toward Leyland, who was quietly watching her. Annoyed by the psychic's actions, she turned her gaze toward Stuart and Molly, who were engaged in quiet conversation and keeping an eye on the house. Constance followed their line of vision and focused on the house. She wished she'd remembered to take her medication before going outside.

Looking back to Leyland, Constance saw he was still watching her intently. *Damn. He knows, she thought. I wonder how much it'll take to keep him quiet?* Then, another thought occurred to her. *I wonder what was written on the piece of paper given to Stuart?*

Constance shook her head as if doing so would clear her mind. *I hope this situation is over soon.* She turned her gaze back to the house and wondered what was taking the damned priest so long.



"I can't believe they're acting so cavalier about this!" Abigayle Nguyen said, pacing Clifton O'Connor's living room. "They turn me into a laughingstock at work and then act as if *they're* the victims." She turned her fiery gaze upon Clifton. "Are you listening to me?" she demanded.

"Aye," the handyman replied from his seat on the couch. "And I think maybe ya could use a swig o' this." He extended a bottle of Jack Daniel's.

Abigayle snatched the bottle from his hand, took the proffered swig of whiskey, then downed several great gulps in rapid succession. "I tell you, Clifton," she said, brandishing the bottle, "I've worked too hard to let my parents screw up everything for me. They've always expected to see me fail, but, goddammit, I'm not going to give them the satisfaction." She took another hearty drink from the bottle.

"That's the kind of determination I like to see," Clifton said.

"Oh, really?" Abigayle asked seductively. She put the bottle of Jack Daniel's on the coffee table and peeled off her shirt. "I thought this was what you liked to see."

Clifton gaped appreciatively.

"And these," Abigayle said, removing her bra.

Clifton muttered words of appreciation as Abigayle pulled her to him and pressed his face between her breasts.

Whimpering with desire, Abigayle reached down and unfastened Clifton's pants as his hands and tongue roamed her body. A moment later, he had laid her backwards onto the couch and moved on top of her.



On any other evening, the smooth ride of the red Porsche might have put Kris Hollingsworth into a fast, peaceful sleep. This afternoon, however, she was full of energy from a day well spent and much enjoyed. She looked over to Edward, who sat regally behind the steering wheel, his crystal-blue eyes fixed firmly on the road.

The wine tasting had been a fun diversion, one to which she'd never expected Edward to invite her. He'd been the perfect gentleman all day.

Kris focused on an octagonal street sign ahead, completely understanding the subliminal message of the big white letters upon the red background. *Okay, so the day wasn't quite perfect, but it was close*, she admitted, seeing no need to be dishonest with herself.

At one point, she'd been afraid things were going terribly wrong. The whole scene still puzzled her, causing her mind to ask strange questions.

About halfway through the taste-testing session, Edward had sipped a Chablis that Kris adored, suggestively swishing it around in his mouth as he stared into her soul. He'd smiled and leaned back, his line of sight moving over Kris' shoulder. An expression his wife had never before seen had passed over Edward's face, his eyes going wide in surprise. Then the choking had begun as he swallowed part of the wine and spit the rest into a napkin.

Kris had tried to help him, but he'd simply waved her off and left the table, muttering something about going to the men's room to clean up. None of the wine had appeared to get on his suit, though, which had left his wife more than a little worried. Edward *never* got flustered.

As she'd watched him disappear into the lobby, she'd been a little disappointed. The Edward of old had been present, bringing a wave of memories back with him. Kris did not like being put in the position of staying behind as the dutiful wife to make excuses for her husband.

When he'd returned a few minutes later, he'd seemed distracted and slightly irritable. Edward had explained that he was upset because of the scene he'd made, and she'd accepted that as best she could. It hadn't taken Edward long to recover, which he'd done in fine fashion, once again concentrating on his wife.

Kris decided it was just a momentary lapse. Everyone had them, after all. Edward was no different. On the drive home he'd been charming and interested, as he always seemed to be these days.

Smiling, she looked to her husband again. Sometimes she couldn't believe how happy she was. For the millionth time, Kris silently thanked whoever was responsible for Edward's changed attitude.

Pulling up to the east gate at Hollingsworth Manor, Edward pushed a button on the remote control hooked to the Porsche's sun visor. Much to his wife's surprise, he waved at the guard as they passed his small station, apparently surprising the onlooking man as well.

"This is interesting," Edward said.

Kris looked toward the house to see about what he was talking. On the front lawn stood Molly, Constance, Stuart, and a short, bald man she didn't recognize. "I wonder what's going on?"

"I have no idea, but I certainly intend to learn."

Edward slowly maneuvered the Porsche up the drive, stopping near the small

group of people. Eight eyes were torn away from the Manor, looking at Edward as if he were from Mars. Kris chuckled at the bizarre looks on their faces. This was definitely going to be an interesting story.

Always the man of action, Edward exited the car and walked toward his mother. Kris could see Constance's chest heave in a large sigh, and the matriarch did not look happy to see her eldest son. Edward got that a lot.

The young woman lowered the window so she could hear what was being said. If it weren't for her high-heeled shoes, she would have gotten out of the car and walked over to where they were, but she hated to make holes in the finely manicured yard. And since her mother-in-law did not look to be in a fine mood, Kris didn't mind not incurring her wrath.

"Mother, do you care to explain what is happening here?" Edward asked her.

Constance stepped toward Edward, moving in front of the red-headed stranger. "Edward—"

The remainder of Constance's statement never reached Kris' ears. Instead, a boom roared through the air, pushing painfully against Kris' senses. As her hands covered her ears, she looked toward the house, from where the sound had come, to see debris exploding outward from every window and heading toward her and the small group of people gathered on the lawn.