by Lynn Viehl

"You don't really want this place," Betty-Ann the property agent told me. "Let me show you that pretty little townhouse I was telling you about, over on Royal Palm."

"That's okay." I looked around the estate cottage one more time. Two rooms, five windows, completely furnished, no neighbors. Writer heaven. "This is perfect."

"You don't understand." Her thready soprano dropped to a less annoying octave. "The last tenant who lived here died suddenly. He was sitting right there on that couch reading, then he just keeled over. Poof. He was gone."

"Better than dying slowly." I reached in my purse and pulled out my checkbook. "First, last, and security, right?"

She shook her head, and her sprayed, tinted hair bounced like a loose helmet. "I shouldn't say this, my new boss will kill me if he found out." Her eyes moved right, then left. "Mr. Noble, the tenant before, well, some people say he was murdered."

I glanced around the floor, but no sign of bloodstains or brains. Not even so much as a hint of a chalk outline. "How did he die?"

"They just found him on the floor, dead." She sounded like he'd done it on purpose, to ruin the lease value. "No apparent cause, it said in the papers."

I wanted to write my check and start carrying in boxes. "Maybe it was old age."

"That's just it, he was only forty." B-A gave me a troubled look. "And he was a detective. A real one."

The facts and the name suddenly clicked. "Devin Noble?" When she nodded, I grinned. Life generally stinks, but sometimes, it tosses up a little well-deserved revenge. "Now I have to have it. How much?"

She told me, then added, "You still want to move in? Knowing he died here and all?"

"Devin Noble was presumptuous egotistic bastard who had about as much charm as a diseased hyena. I'll bet some client he swindled did the world a favor and smothered him in his sleep." I started filling in the check. "On, my goodness." Betty-Ann managed to look both horrified and impressed. "You knew him?"

"Nb." I ripped off the check and handed it to her.

"Then how" she made a helpless gesture.

"He sent me some fan mail." In which he'd told me, repeatedly, that I knew nothing about real detective work and should stop writing mysteries - not that I was going to tell B-A that. I smiled. "I kept every letter he wrote." And had used each one to line the cat's litter box.

"Well." Betty-Ann folded the check in half and tucked it in the date book she carried. "I hope you'll be happy here."

In the place where my severest critic had met an untimely death? "I'm crazy about it already."

* * *

Faust shot out of his carrier the minute I opened the little mesh door, took one look around, and hissed.

"What's the matter, baby?" I asked as I put the empty carrier in the closet. "Can you still smell the big fat jerk who used to live here?"

My cat gave me a disgusted look and stalked off to patrol the premises.

It had taken me a couple of hours to transfer everything from my truck to the cottage, but I was almost done. My computer was set up, my suitcase was stowed, and the books I couldn't live without were stacked neatly on the shelf above Devin Noble's desk.

My desk, I thought as I ran my fingers over the glossy mahogany surface. He'd rented the cottage, too; there was no reason to assume all this stuff had been his.

A cool breeze rushed in through the window I'd opened, and I shivered. It was March in South Florida, but a cold front had moved in and the temperature was supposed to drop to an icy forty degrees by night. As cold as New York when I'd left it. I decided to make some tea to warm myself up and then get right to work.

As I prepared the kettle, I thought about the rather weird series of events that had brought me to this cottage. After the horrors of 9/11, I didn't feel safe in New York anymore, and I was tired of the cold weather. Florida had always been one of my favorite vacation spots, but I couldn't afford to make the move.

Then my last novel, a funny little cozy featuring a grocery cashier sleuth, had unexpectedly popped out of the midlist and started climbing the bookseller

charts. Within a month, I'd hit the New York Times best seller list. Even better, I'd stayed there for seven months.

Everything changed. Editors who couldn't be bothered to read my submissions or return my e-mails were suddenly calling me "Ms. Anderson" over the phone and asking me out to lunch. My agent sent me a dozen roses with my last royalty check, which had increased by four pretty hefty digits. Reviewers called me "the overnight sensation" or "the hidden wonder" of the mystery genre.

You're not hing but a hack.

The voice sounded so real I actually turned around. "What? Who's there?" No answer.

"I've got to stop rehearsing dialogue in my head," I muttered.

Someone knocked on the front door. "Ms. Anderson? You still up?"

Maybe he'd called out before and that was what I'd heard. I went and found a short, stocky bald man in a beautiful suit hovering on my new front step. He was carrying a small bunch of daisies and looked totally miserable.

"Yes?" I looked from the daisies to him "Can I help you?"

"I'm Marc Waynewright." He nodded toward the big mansion on the other side of the property.

"My new landlord." I smilled and held the door open. "Come on in."

He shook his head and thrust the daisies in my hand. "Haven't been able to come in here since my wife left me. She used to live here, too."

I didn't know what he was talking about, but I gave him a sympathetic smile anyway. "Sorry."

He glanced at the living room floor. "Did you, uh, know about Dev?"

"Betty-Ann told me." And I was still gloating over it.

"Maybe you should reconsider, you know." He peered furtively over my shoulder. "The last couple who rented it left the day after they moved in. They said this place is haunted."

Only by the smell of testosterone. "I'll be fine. Thanks for the flowers."

"If you need anything." He made a vague gesture toward the house again before he trudged off.

I put the daisies in a vase I found under the sink, made my tea and carried it out to the computer, which I'd left switched on. Marc Waynewright seemed terrible upset about . . . his wife? I vaguely remembered some article about her in the paper. She'd run off, maybe. Shame, he seemed like a nice, if rather easily spooked, guy.

I went to start writing, only to find the screen was dark. I frowned as I knelt next to the tower and checked the various connections. They were all tight, so I got up and tried rebooting it. My word processing screen instantly came up, and there were words typed on the blank page.

I said, you're not hing but a hack.

I chuckled. "Oute. Someone trying to make me believe there's a ghost in here or something?" I did a one-eighty. "Come on out."

The property agent didn't come out. Marc Valynewright didn't come out. No one came out.

A tapping sound made me turn and look at my keyboard. The keys were

moving up and down. By themselves.

I stared at them until they stopped moving. Then I looked up at the

screen. There were more words typed on the page.

You're a hack, your cat is ugly and you've got too much stuff, but I like

the dress.

A wisp of breeze tugged at the hem of my skirt, and an invisible, icy

finger brushed across my lower lip. The keys began moving again.

Still want to be roomies with me?

* * *

I'd never had a paranormal experience before, so I did what any sensible woman would do - I screamed, and ran out of the cottage - or tried to. The front door wouldn't open. I jerked and pulled and twisted the knob, but it wouldn't budge.

"Leaving so soon?"

I went still and my throat dried up. I knew how many ways you could kill someone using ordinary household objects. I'd researched it for my last novel.

"I have a gun. Get out of my house."

"No you don't, and it was mine first."

Slowly I turned around. I don't know why - that was usually the point in all the slasher movies I'd seen when the victim got a hatchet in the face. Then I saw him standing by my computer.

He was short and blond and not particularly handsome. He wore a turtleneck sweater, pegged jeans and work boots, all in various shades of faded black. A chunky old watch wrapped around his left wrist. His almost-white hair was pulled back from a widow's peak into a longish ponytail. He stood with his thumbs hooked in his belt loops, like a hood.

He was also semi-transparent and floating six inches off the floor.

For some reason, that didn't bother me as much as the smirk on his face. "Who are you supposed to be? Jacob Marley Meets the Beach Boys?" I demanded.

He folded his arms. "Guess again."

"All right." I scanned the room, looking for the projector beam. "Fun's over. Turn off the light show and come out here, before I call the police."

"It's no light show, Andy." He walked - well, floated - toward me. "I'm Devin Noble." I snorted and circled around him, looking for whatever was creating this not very impressive illusion. "And I'm the Easter Bunny." I poked behind the entertainment center. "Come on, Betty-Ann, I'm not giving up my security deposit that easily." And how did she know my nickname was Andy?

"You don't believe it's me?"

"No, Casper, I don't." I jerked open the closet door, but Faust's carrier was the only thing inside. "Harassing a tenant isn't too wise. There are laws against this kind of thing."

"Okay, you asked for it." That chilly breeze touched the back of my neck like a lover's caress. "In my first letter, I told you that your characters were made of cardboard and your plotting was romance writer stupid. In my second, I suggested you try talking to a real cop instead of turning them all into pansies in your stories. In my third, I told you I was going to write a book just to show you how it was done. Then my first book hit the bestseller list, and I sent you a signed copy. That enough, or you want more?"

I slowly swiveled around. The man was right in my face, only an inch away. He wasn't hovering now, and he looked pretty solid. "You are Devin Noble." "I was." He sighed. "Look, we've got work to do."

"Do we?" I slammed my fist into his belly, and watched him double over as I rubbed my knuckles. "You know, you feel pretty corporeal for a ghost."

He sank to his knees, still clutching his abdomen, and groaned. "I knew you'd be a total bitch in person."

"I'm calling the police now." I went over and picked up the phone. "Faking your own death is a hell of publicity stunt, Dev, but I'm pretty sure it's illegal." He didn't make a sound, so I glanced back. "On, come on. I didn't hit you that hard, you wimp-"

But the unconvincing ghost of Devin Noble was gone.

* * *

The cop who'd taken my statement was sympathetic, but not very optimistic. "Sounds like a bit of a practical joke to me, ma'am. I'd get your landlord to change the locks and put in a security system"

I was calling Marc Waynewright first thing in the morning. "Thanks."

After he left, I searched the entire cottage for whatever Noble had used

to create the illusion of the ghost. And found nothing. By the time I was

Faust, who was in an equally foul mood, then grabbed a sandwich for myself.

I ate at my computer, as usual, reading the last chapter I'd worked on before my move. The new novel was coming along nicely, and I expected to finish it by the end of the month. My editor was certainly frothing at the mouth, anxious to read it.

"I don't know why. A four-year-old could figure out the puzzle."

I grabbed the baseball bat I'd taken from my truck and jumped into a batter's stance. "Where are you? Come on, Noble, you rat. Show yourself."

Some pretty lights twinkled in the middle of the room. Just like the sparkly trail the cartoon fairy left when she flew around the Disney castle. I got the distinct feeling I was in for paranormal experience #2.

"Put that down, you're just going to hurt yourself," he said, his voice coming from the center of the lights.

"Come out!" So he could throw his voice. I could knock a baseball out of the park. "I mean it, you louse!"

"Okay, keep your panties on." The lights intensified, stretched, and

for med into a body. Slowly they faded until Devin Noble appeared.

"Wow, special effects." I strode over and took a swing at him - and watched my bat pass through his body. I turned around in a circle. "Get your ass out of my house, Tinkerbell."

"It's real. I'm real." He caught the bat when I swung at him again, and tossed it across the room. Then he walked into me. And through me. My body temperature dropped twenty degrees as the freezing patch of air went through me and back again. He appeared in front of me once more. "Is that enough proof?"

"No." I shook my head, trying to keep my teeth from chattering. "The villains on Scooby-Doo are more convincing." I picked up a chair.

"Put that down and stop trying to bludgeon me." He took the chair out of my hands and jerked it away. Then he started fading again. "I need your help."

"You do." I lifted a hand and tried to touch him. And felt my fingers chill to the bone as they slid through his arm. "With what?"

He reached up and tapped the end of my nose with an icy finger. "Nailing the guy who killed me." A half hour later I sat in my kitchen drinking tea while Devin Noble's ghost sat and finished telling me about his murder.

"I figure it's someone involved in the last case I worked on." He watched me sip. "Marcus Waynewright, the guy who owns this place, hired me to track down his ex-wife, Linda. She used to live in this cottage, but she's been missing since Christmas. Linda's mother, Isabel, is convinced Marcus killed Linda and disposed of her body. Marcus thinks Isabel is hiding her daughter somewhere, trying to get him thrown in jail. I was getting close to solving the case toward the end."

"Hmmm" I smelled jasmine, and looked out the kitchen window. I'd seen a huge bush of the night-blooming variety outside when I'd moved in. The beautiful scent only added to my bizarre situation. "Kind of a short list of suspects. Didn't you see who killed you?"

"No. I don't even know how they did it. One minute I'm relaxing with a book on the couch, then next, I'm like this." He gestured toward his now transparent body.

* * *

"How come you don't stay solid?"

He grimaced. "It's too hard. I can only do it for fifteen, twenty minutes at the most. Tires me out so much I fade away for a couple of hours." Then he leered a little. "But that's enough time for some things, if you don't mind

getting a nice, hard, cold -"

"In your dreams." I finished my tea. "And where do you go when you fade?"

"A place that sucks. Nowhere. I just hang in between this world and the next." He eyed my mug. "You want more?"

"No, I think I've had plenty." I went to the sink and rinsed out the cup. "Devin, what do you want me to do? Go question these people? Tell them you're haunting the cottage? You're really pissed off? What?"

"I was writing a book based on the Waynewright case. Just before I was murdered. I'd gotten some threatening letters-"

I huffed out a "Ha."

"-so I hid everything under the floorboards in the closet." He glared at me. "Take it out and read it tonight. Then we'll talk."

"Tomorrow. I need to get some sleep." I didn't want to read Devin's book.

I didn't want to talk to his ghost anymore. The letters sounded promising,

though. "Tell me something. Did you have anything to do with me coming here?"

"No. It's the way this stuff works out. Karma," he added when I gave him a blank look. "I did something for you in life, now you get to do something to avenge my death." He yawned. "I'd better go."

"Wait a minute." My eyes narrowed. "What, exactly, did you ever do for me? Other than bore me to tears with your whiny little letters?"

"They weren't whiny. I mentioned your last novel to one of my reviewers." He sounded disgusted. "She's a big mahaff over at the New York Times."

"You hat ed my books."

He met my gaze straight on. "Yeah, I did."

"You told her it sucked, didn't you?"

"Words to that effect." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter now."

"You sent it to her and told her it sucked so she could rip it apart in a review." I wanted to kill him all over again, until it dawned on me. "And it backfired on you. She loved it."

"Yeah, she did." He gave me a testy look as he started to fade away. "You

goddamn women al ways stick together."

"I'm liking karma already," I said, and laughed until he was gone.

* * *

When I woke up the next morning, it seemed like I'd just had a really

spectacular bad dream. I don't think it really hit me that I'd spent half the night talking to the ghost of a man I detested until I found Devin's manuscript hidden in the closet, exactly where he'd said it would be.

"Jesus." I sat on the floor and looked at it for a few minutes. "It wasn't indigestion or a nightmare."

The heavy file folder nearly spilled all over the place when I picked it up. There was a manuscript inside, bound with a wide rubber band. The first page read "'Til Death Do Us Part" and "A Novel by Devin Noble."

"Cheesy title." I set the manuscript aside. There was a notebook, filled with Noble's atrocious handwriting, a couple of photographs of a beautiful blonde in a microscopic bikini, a dark brunette in sunglasses and an ugly dark suit, and three folded pieces of paper with bits of newsprint pasted on them.

Aha. I took out the three letters. The good stuff.

As threatening letters went, they were short and pretty juvenile. The

first read, Stop investigating Linda Waynewright or you'll be sorry. The

second read, Drop the case now before you get hurt.

It was the third that made me take in a quick breath. Leave town

tonight or I'm going to kill you.

I spent the rest of the day going through Dev's notes, reading the police reports, studying the letters and finally, reading the manuscript.

As soon as I finished the last page, a familiar voice asked, "Great story, huh?"

Lights coal esced in front of me. I stood up, yawned, and stretched, then carried the manuscript and folder with me into the kitchen to fix myself

somet hi ng edi bl e.

"Vell?" he demanded as he materialized next to me.

I nearly dropped my mug. "Well, what?"

"Pretty fantastic, isn't it?" He smirked.

It had been great; I couldn't put it down the whole time I'd read it.

"Marginally."

He didn't seem to hear me. "When this is done, you've got to finish it and send it to my editor. It's guaranteed to blow Grisham off the charts."

"So now you need me to solve your murder and finished your book." I turned on the gas stove and smiled as I picked up the title page. "How's the byline going to read? A novel by Devin Noble's ghost and the romance writer stupid girl?"

He glanced at the title page I was holding over the flaming burner, then solidified and grabbed my wrist. "You wouldn't."

I flashed him some enamel. "No, but you would not believe how much I am tempted." I waited a few more seconds, then set the title back on top of the manuscript. "Lucky for you, I'm not a malicious vindictive envious jackass megalomaniac intent on destroying someone else's career."

Dev released a long breath. "Okay, I deserved most of that. Not the envious part, of course. But it doesn't matter. I'm dead, and you're alive." He leaned into me. "In the end, you came out on top, babe."

"Don't call me babe." I gave him a good shove and went to the fridge. "So

where do we go from here? And if you say the bedroom, I'll going to call an exorcist."

"Keep your chastity belt on, Anderson. You need to go up to the big house and talk to Waynewright. I'm not going anywhere." At my look, he spread his hands. "I've tried, but I can't. I'm stuck here in the cottage for the duration." "Lucky me."

"How do you think I feel about it?"

"Like I care. And Waynewright really didn't have a motive to kill Linda." I retrieved some cold rotisserie chicken I'd picked up at the market and brought it to the table. "They had a pretty amicable divorce, remained friends, and even lived on the same property. In your notes, you said Marcus often came to the cottage to have lunch or dinner with her." I frowned. "Kind of a weird divorce, if you ask me."

"Linda found out Marcus was having an affair with the exotic dancer, and decided to call it quits. She may have looked like a bimbo, but she was a pretty old-fashioned girl." He rolled his eyes, like that was a bad thing. "Marc talked her into taking the cottage as part of the divorce settlement. Maybe after it was over, Linda found herself a new boyfriend, and ex-hubby walked in on them"

"You think he was jealous?" I cut off a leg and peeled off the skin. "When he was screwing around her?"

"Any man can play dog in the manger, Andy."

"I'll take your word for it." I gave him a brilliant smile before nodding at the file. "About the photos -- the blonde is Linda, right? So who's the brunette?"

"His mistress, Elisa. She danced at a club down on the beach. He paid her to leave town after Linda left him, hoping it would save the marriage." He openly checked out my legs. "You would have made one a hell of a stripper."

"Gee, Mr. Noble, did every woman you hit on really fall for that lame line?"

Hs blond brows lowered. "Babe, if I was hitting on you, you wouldn't have a prayer."

"I'd become a lesbian first." I batted my eyelashes at him before I took a bite of my chicken and chewed. "Okay, so I go up and interview Marcus. What about the nother?"

"Isabel couldn't have killed Linda; she was in Nassau on vacation at the time." He rubbed his chin. "You really aren't attracted to me?"

"No, I'm not. Live with it. And, by the way, you can buy yourself a Cuban hit man for twenty bucks and a carton of cigarettes in Little Havana." I shook the chicken leg at him "And you don't know Linda's even dead. Isabel could have taken her off to the islands, according to Marcus's theory, and is keeping her there to put the squeeze on him"

"The police have kept the case open, but they're not pursuing Marcus – or anyone, at this point." He stared at my plate. "Damm, I miss eating, even if I don't get hungry anymore." His gaze shifted up. "Among other things."

"Maybe she had you murdered out of pity for the rest of my gender."

"Or to jump start the case." He sighed. "I just don't know."

I wiped my hands and mouth on a napkin, then put the chicken away. I felt frustrated - what did he expect me to do? "I've got to go make the rounds and talk to these people."

"Tomorrow?" he asked in a hopeful tone.

"I'm not a lady of leisure, Dev." I planted my hands on my hips. "I have a deadline to meet on my latest book."

"I'll help you write it. Would only take me a few-" He saw my expression. "Okay, bad idea."

"Yeah. Here." I picked up the manuscript, and held it out. "Go put this back in closet and get out of here, I want to take a shower." I paused. "And no popping into my bathroom when I'm naked."

"You should have mentioned last night."

He disappeared before I could punch him again.

* * *

I spent all of the next day interviewing the two main suspects - Marcus Waynewright and Nancy Hilerman. Both were completely convincing, sincere, and hated each other guts to the point of where I was surprised they hadn't tried

to kill each other.

"That controlling witch would love nothing more than to see me go to the electric chair," Marcus assured me when I went up to the main house to speak with him. "She filled my wife's head with all that nonsense about the divorce, then got pissed off when Linda settled for the prenup amount we agreed on. She won't be happy until she ruins my life."

"Marcus Waynewright is a lying, murdering adulterer who deserves to be filleted with a rusty fish knife," Linda's mother told me an hour later, when I stopped by her house on the beach. "He murdered my poor baby because she wouldn't demean herself by tolerating his sordid affair with that disgusting snake dancer. I won't rest until he's brought to justice and given the death penalty."

I stopped for lunch, then went back to the cottage and started making phone calls. I spoke to a dozen of Linda's friends, the modeling agency she worked for, and slowly put together the events that led up to the time of her disappearance.

As the sun set, I was about to give up, when a FAX copy of the police report on Devin's death came it. After I finished reading it, I was more confused than ever.

"The house was locked, the police had to break down the door." I got up and walked to a stretch of floor in front of the coffee table. "Dev's body was right here." I looked at the scanned photo from the crime scene. No signs of violence, not a thing out of place.

What had he said? One minute I'm relaxing with a book on the couch, the next . . .

I peered at the scan again. There was no sign of a book anywhere in the picture. Slowly I got down on my hands and knees, and felt under the sofa – and came up with a rather dusty copy of my last novel.

"I'll be dammed. He told me he put this in his wood chipper."

That was the moment when everything came together. I went to my computer and started typing furiously.

* * *

"You're not working on that book of yours, are you?" Devin asked from behind me.

"No. Shut up." I finished the page and scrolled up, then read through everything. Then I queued it up to print and turned around. Dev was ghost-pacing – hovering back and forth across the floor. "Stop that, it's annoying." "So is looking at your back. Your front is a lot more interesting." He

gestured toward the printer. "What have you got?"

"A new suspect." I removed the pages from the printer, stacked them neatly, then held them out. "You read, I'm going to take a shower. Then I'm going

to see the police."

He waggled his brows at me. "Need me to help scrub anything?"

"Yeah. Your mind. Use a big bar of soap."

I spent ten minutes soaking under a hot spray, wondering if my suspicions were right. If they were, I'd have to vacate the premises immediately.

The shower curtain jerked to one side, and I screamed.

"Get out." Betty-Ann was holding a very large gun, pointed at my chest,

and a towel. "Here." She thrust the towel at me.

"Did my security check bounce?" I asked.

"Get dressed." She gestured toward my clothes with the gun.

I dressed, then marched out into the front room. Devin was nowhere in

sight. Neither were my notes.

"I know about you and Marcus, Betty-Ann." I paused. "Or should I call you

日 i sa?"

"You don't know anything about me," she said, and shoved me down on the sofa. "Marcus and I are getting married."

I glanced at my computer. The monitor was smashed, and the tower was overturned and in three pieces. So much for my records.

"Marcus had an affair with you that cost him his marriage. He paid you off as soon as Linda left him, and told you to leave town." I slid forward, perching on the edge of the cushions. "But you didn't, did you? You couldn't accept that it was over, that he was trying to get Linda back."

"No, he wasn't. She was distracting him, that's all."

"You changed your name, dyed your hair, and got a job working for his property management company, and used it to keep an eye on things. You saw Marcus coming to the cottage practically every day." I gave her a measuring look. "It must have driven you crazy, watching him drool all over her, trying to convince her to come back."

"It was a game - she was punishing him for loving me."

"So you killed her, and you got rid of the body."

She finally smilled. "Those gators in the Everglades? Will eat anything dead."

"And then Devin Noble moved in, and started investigating the case. You were afraid he'd find out you were Marcus's old girlfriend, and make the connections."

"He thought he was so smart. Well, I fixed his wagon." She eyed me. "How did you figure out it was me, anyway?"

"The cottage was locked when the police discovered Dev's body, so the killer had to be someone with a set of keys. But you know what really gave it away? You told me Devin was reading on the couch when he was murdered. When the cops found him, his body was on the floor, and the book he'd been reading had fallen under the sofa. The only way you could have known what he was doing was only if you'd been the last person to see him alive."

"Huh." Not impressed by my sleuthing, she gestured toward the door with the gun. "Outside."

I shook my head. "I'm not going anywhere with you. If you're going to kill me, you'll have to do it right here. Just like you murdered Dev." "Fine." She took something out of her pocket with her free hand - a syringe. "This is faster anyway."

Whatever was in it was clear. "Some untraceable substance, I suppose?" "Venom I handle snakes in my act." She glared. "But you found that out when you called my club to check on me."

As she came at me, I pretended to cringe. "Why didn't the ME find the needle mark on Dev, or traces of the venomin his bloodstream?"

"They didn't bother to look at his scalp, and after three days the venom is untraceable," she told me, eyeing my short cap of red hair. "There's a spot at the base of your skull where the needle slips right in."

"And how did you know that?" I saw Tinkerbell lights forming in the air behind Betty-Ann.

"She got it from my first book," Devin said in a low, nasty voice. "I gave the bitch an autographed copy when I moved in."

Betty-Ann swung around, and shrieked. While I lunged for the gun, Dev knocked the syringe to the floor, where it shattered. I ended up wrestling with her, trying to get the gun away. She was a lot stronger than she looked, but I was turbocharged with adrenaline. For a few seconds, it looked like I would win.

Then the gun went off, and I fell to my knees. The front of my blouse slowly turned red as I stared down at myself. "Uh. . . oh"

Devin shouted something and ran at Betty-Ann, his arms outstretched. She shot at him until the gun was empty, then screamed as he took her down. By then I lay on my side, and breathing became a real chore. I thought I saw more Tinkerbell lights, then a beautiful blond woman catch Dev's arm as he went to punch Betty-Ann.

"Go take care of your lady, Dev." Linda Waynewright stared down at Betty-Ann's bulging eyes. "This one is mine."

I was pretty far gone by the time he got to me. He cradled my head on his lap, and stroked my cheek with his cold hand. "On, shit, Andy, I'm sorry. I never meant for it to end this way."

"So...rewrite."

floor. "I'll make sure the cops find it."

"When I saw her come in, I put all your notes in the file in the closet." He looked over at Linda, who was lowering Betty-Ann's lifeless body to the "Want...my...own...byline."

"You'll get it. Something else I should tell you - I was just jealous of

you, you know. I loved your books. Every single one of them"

"Li ar." I wheezed in a breath. "See . . . you . . . soon."

* * *

"You don't really want this one," the new property agent told the middle-aged woman standing on my doorstep. "There's this fabulous two bedroom bungalow over on Sample; it would be perfect for you."

Dev looked up from the book he was reading. "Listen to her, honey. She knows what she's talking about."

"Stop being obnoxious." I glanced over at him from the window. Being dead would have been no picnic, especially during the long interval I'd spent in the place between worlds. But Dev had stayed with me the entire time, and when we came back or were sent back (I still wasn't clear on how that worked) we were together.

Since then, he'd become my companion, my lover, and my best friend. "We're friendly ghosts, remember?"

"I prefer this one," the prospective tenant said.

Dev snorted. "You're so friendly you scared off everyone for the past six months."

"On, yeah?" I came over and poked him in the back. "Who wasn't able to

pull the case file out of the closet when the cops got here?"

"Fighting Betty-Ann took a lot out of me." He slammed his book shut. "And the cops didn't come back, and you've terrified every wuss who's walked in here."

"I have not. This is your chance to redeem yourself, pal." I walked over

to the new tenant and studied her from all sides. "She seems nice enough."

"She's short."

I sniffed. "So are you."

"You never complain about anything when we're horizontal." He gave me a familiar look. "Want to go get possessed again?"

"Twice a day is enough for me." That was the other good thing about being dead - sex in the afterlife. It was, up, pretty interesting stuff.

"This seems ideal," the woman said to the agent as she came in and walked

around, smiling at everything. "I love it already."

"I could get fired for telling you this, but" - the agent grimaced- "a bunch of people were murdered in this house."

"I know." The middle-aged woman didn't seem shocked at all. "I'm planning to write a novel based on the Anderson-Noble case. I thought it would help if I lived here, get a feel for the atmosphere."

Dev and I looked at each other, then at the closet, where the case file and manuscript still lay undiscovered.

The middle-aged lady took out her checkbook. "First, last, and security,

right?" she asked the agent.

I let out a breath l'd been holding. "I get equal credit."

Dev glowered at me. "It was my case first."

"You promised me before I died." I made an airy gesture. "And I solved the case."

He considered that. "Okay, you get credit, but I write the final chapter."

"We write it together - with her." I held up a hand before he could

reply. "This is non-negotiable, lover boy. You still owe me some major karmic

payback."

"Yeah, yeah." He scowled until I kissed him. "Just don't turn me into a

pansy, okay?"

I sat on his lap and hugged him "I'll try to restrain myself, roomie."