

# *So Evil My Love*

by Susan and Dana

The tall, redheaded man who stepped through the doors of her office didn't seem like her usual type of client. Through alert blue eyes, she scrutinized the long, lean, cool drink of water. His mug was handsome, although handsome men in Hollywood were a dime a dozen. He was clearly moneyed. His bespoke double-breasted gabardine suit jacket—which revealed his muscular physique in a way no off-the-rack jacket could—was a dead giveaway of his social status. The well-made fedora that he held in his hand so matched the gray of the suit that she wondered whether it had been custom made to do so.

Serious green eyes assessed her; not in an overt sexual way, but in a more professional manner. As if he wondered whether the petite, twenty-something blonde standing in front of him could really help him solve his problem—whatever it might be.

She had happened to be crossing in front of her worn, oak desk instead of sitting behind it when the stranger had entered, and now she stood in front of it, facing him expectantly.

"Miss Belden?" The deep timbre of his voice spoke to his masculinity.

Trixie ignored the odd rush she felt rip through her at the sound of his voice. "Yes. How may I help you?" She was nothing if not professional.

"Your brother suggested that I might be able to benefit from your services."

"I have three brothers," she returned. As a female in a man's world and a man's profession, Trixie protected herself with an armor of curt mannerisms. They might be described as brisk or abrupt, but they never crossed the line into rude. Unless she needed them to.

"Brian. He's my physician. And my sister's physician."

"And you are?"

The redheaded man looked embarrassed as he realized that he had not properly introduced himself. He transferred his fedora to his left hand and offered Trixie his right. "The name's Frayne. Jim Frayne."

Trixie took the proffered hand, once again ignoring the sensation she felt upon touching the man's strong hand and warm skin.

"Nice to meet you, Jim Frayne."

"You, too, miss."

He was certainly more polite than most of the hard-boiled "gentlemen" who walked through her door.

"Have a seat," Trixie said with a gesture toward the worn walnut chair in front of her desk. Meanwhile, she took her own spot behind the desk, casually tossing the folder that she had been retrieving from the battered file cabinet onto the scarred oak surface and leaning back in her chair. Although she looked the picture of blasé indifference, a carefully crafted act for clients, she was taut inside, waiting to hear the details of what could be her next case.

"How can I help you, Mr. Frayne?"

Trixie waited to hear the usual sob story about a crooked business partner or a cheating wife, but instead, Jim took a deep breath and starting talking about his sister.

"Her name is Madeleine," he explained, "but everyone calls her Honey because of her light brown hair and sweet disposition. Lately, she's been real...nervous, anxious. I took her to see her physician—your brother—and he let me know that he was worried about her."

Trixie's sandy eyebrows shot up. Her oldest brother was a by-the-book kind of Joe, and the young investigator was surprised that he would have broken patient confidentiality.

Jim seemed to understand her look, and he hastily explained, "She gave him permission to. There was nothing untoward or improper."

Trixie nodded her head slightly, tacitly encouraging him to continue.

"It seems that Honey has been...seeing things."

Trixie frowned. "Seeing things?"

"Things that can't be possible. She's hearing things that shouldn't be possible, either. Footsteps upstairs when no one is home. Music playing from the parlor that goes silent when she goes to check it out. Things moving about the house of their own accord."

His green eyes pierced Trixie's blue ones. "It's very disturbing, and I'm very worried about her. She's always been rather fragile, but she's also always had a good head on her shoulders. Now she's become very fearful, afraid of her own home, and I'm worried that she's bordering on hysteria."

"And Brian, Dr. Belden, told you what I do?" Trixie asked.

The fact was, Trixie ran a dual business. She was a private investigator, eking out a living investigating the underbelly of the City of Angels for clients actually willing to hire a woman. But there was another side to what she did.

Never one to follow the norm, Trixie had gone to college after high school instead of simply trying to find a husband. While she had been a student, she had heard of an interesting opportunity to work for Harry Price, the famed British psychic researcher. For a year starting in May of 1937, she had lived at Borley Rectory in Essex, reputed to be the most haunted house in all of England. She had been one of 48 students who had assisted Price in his research, observing and recording paranormal activity throughout the house.

After the year had been over, she had returned to the States with a hearty enthusiasm for paranormal investigation, and she had had the moxie to hang up her own shingle, even though she was a dame. Her reputation was growing, and although she still took the usual jealous wife and crooked business partner cases to pay the bills, it was the paranormal cases that fulfilled her. Having this additional specialty helped to set her apart from the males in her profession, so that she was able to snag more cases.

Jim responded to her question. "He said that you have a unique talent in this area."

"So, you want me to prove her house is haunted?" Trixie asked.

Jim shook his head vehemently. "I want you to prove that it isn't!"

Trixie furrowed her brow as she looked at the agitated man. Before she could say anything, he continued, "I think her no-good husband is behind it. She married a man named Sinclair Kane. It was a whirlwind courtship, as they say. Our father did a background check on him after they became engaged. He didn't find anything, but there's always been something about him that I just don't like. I can't put my finger on it, though."

Jim shook his head ruefully as he continued, "She seemed happy enough, but now..."

"Now she's verging on hysteria," Trixie finished.

Jim nodded glumly. "Honey made the appointment with Dr. Belden to ask him for barbiturates to help with her nerves. I didn't realize that when she asked me to drive her to the appointment. The request worried him greatly, and he asked her if it was okay to speak to me about her condition. That's when the whole story came out. She's been hearing and seeing things for months. When I asked her why she didn't just suggest to Sinclair that they move, she explained that she had been begging him, but he has refused, telling her that it's all in her head."

Trixie's eyes hardened at this statement, and she finished, "So you think that Sinclair is behind it. If he cared about his wife, he'd move."

Jim nodded. "But if he continues to drive her crazy, then he can institutionalize her and take control of her trust fund."

"Which is sizable, I imagine."

Jim confirmed this, and his face took on a pleading, almost pathetic quality. Trixie felt sorry for the ruggedly handsome man sitting in front of her, someone who exuded strength but now was also showing his vulnerable side as the worry for his sister took control of him.

"She broke down yesterday, telling me everything. She kept saying that the barbiturates were her last hope and even though she loathed the thought of taking them, she was desperate. Seeing my sister, who only rarely has a glass of champagne, desperate enough to seek a solution in something she abhors..."

Jim didn't finish. He didn't need to.

"I'll take the case, Mr. Frayne. Whatever is causing the activity in your sister's home, man-made or not, I will get to the truth," Trixie promised.

Jim's body sagged in relief. "Thank you, Miss Belden. I don't know how to thank you."

"You don't need to thank me—you just need to pay my retainer, hourly fee, and all expenses."

That brought a smile to the man's face. "Of course," he agreed.

Trixie named a price double what she normally charged. She felt a bit of a twinge taking advantage of the fact that this man was obviously wealthy, but she needed the dosh. Ultimately, she knew that she would deliver results, though, and that his sister's piece of mind was worth far greater to him than what she was charging him.

After the pair had agreed on payment details, and Jim had written a check that Trixie nonchalantly tucked under the blotter on her desk, Trixie started a file, labeling it "Kane, Honey" in her messy scrawl.

She took pertinent notes from Jim, obtaining the address of the supposedly haunted house as well as background information about the dame and her husband. When she thought that she had enough to start with, she stood. Jim stood as well.

"I think I have everything I need for now, Mr. Frayne. As soon as I have some news, I'll let you know."

"Thank you," Jim said, offering his hand. Trixie shook it, and Jim turned to leave. Just before he reached the door, however, it flew open. A young man with shortly cropped blond hair and blue eyes entered breathlessly.

"Hey, Trix—" he stopped as he saw that Trixie had a visitor. He immediately stood a little straighter and straightened his tie, which only served to move it more askew.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know that you had company," he murmured.

"My guest was just leaving, Mart," Trixie said, ever the soul of discretion did not mention her client's name—or even confirm that he was, indeed, a client.

Jim nodded one last time and disappeared, shutting the door behind him. Trixie's older-by-eleven-months brother Mart stood there gaping after the visitor.

Trixie had no patience for her brother's antics and closed the Kane file, sliding it under the blotter next to the check. Her brother was a reporter for the *Los Angeles Examiner*, and there was no way that she was going to give him any information for one of his exposés, especially unintentionally.

She had just tucked the file away when her brother turned back to her. "Do you know who that is?"

Trixie nodded and rolled her eyes, slipping into sarcasm. "He was actually very polite and introduced himself."

"Is he a client?"

"Mart..." Trixie said, a warning note in her voice.

Mart sighed. "I know, I know. Confidentiality and all that. You and Brian both! I picked the wrong profession if I wanted help from you guys! But, seriously, do you know who he is?"

Trixie leveled blue eyes into a pair so like her own, but she didn't say anything. She knew her latest client's name, of course, but apparently, the pants was *somebody*. If she just stared at Mart, he'd sing like a canary.

"It's Jim Frayne!"

Trixie continued to stare.

"The adopted son of Matthew Wheeler?"

Now *that* was a name Trixie knew. There weren't many people in Hollywood who didn't know the name of one of the most powerful movie moguls in Tinseltown. No wonder he had looked into his daughter's future husband when they had become engaged. Matthew Wheeler was known as a cagey businessman, and he certainly would have wanted all of the information he could find about his future son-in-law.

"That means nothing to you?" Mart's voice dripped with incredulousness as Trixie's poker face stayed in place.

He threw up his hands. "Whatever! But if you can feed me a crumb along the way, you will, right?" His hopeful expression actually made Trixie crack a smile.

"I'll see what I can do," was as far as her promise went. "Now, what did you need? You were pretty hepped up when you came flying through my door."

It turned out that Mart had been in the area investigating a story and had decided that since he was so close to his shamus sister's office, he would stop in to get some advice about the new dame he was seeing. As her brother chinwagged about this girl's great beauty, black hair, and violet eyes, Trixie thought she sounded a lot like that new actress starring in *National Velvet*. Although her mind was on the Kane case, the young private dick could tell that her brother was smitten with this barn burner, and Mart wasn't normally one to be a sucker for a well-turned ankle. So, Trixie did her best to give him some advice, meager though it was, about how to woo one Miss Diana Lynch. Mart thanked her and was on his way to do some more investigating for his story.

Finally alone in her small, plain office, Trixie took the Kane file and began reading it again. After she had gone over it a few times, she decided that her first order of business would be to pay a call on Honey Kane. The address that Jim Frayne had provided for his sister and her husband was in West Adams, a neighborhood to the south of her Hollywood office that boasted large, old Victorian mansions.

The perfect place for a haunting.

Trixie climbed up the staircase, exiting the subway station, and blinked rapidly as she entered into the bright afternoon sunlight. She had taken a Red Car from the subway station a block from her office and had exited at one about a block from the address Jim Frayne had given her.

It was a bit of an adjustment, used as she was to the noise and bustle of the street below her Hollywood office. The quiet tranquility of the neighborhood of old, beautiful Victorian era homes was quite a shock to her system. As she walked down 18<sup>th</sup> Street, she enjoyed the gentle wave of the large palm trees that lined the edges of the stately properties by which she passed. Even to someone who liked to consider herself as tough and hard-as-nails as she was, a little bit of awe crept into her gaze as she admired the palatial-looking houses she could see on both sides of the hushed street.

Finally, as she reached the end of the beautiful road, she saw the large, rambling Victorian house of Sinclair and Honey Kane.

The blue-gray multi-storied house appeared as if it had just been built, with its pristine white trim, large, sparkling front picture window and the meticulously cared for lawn with its splashes of beautiful floral color in the flower beds along the porch.

Jim Frayne had assured Trixie that his sister spent most of the day alone at the house while Sinclair traveled to his Santa Monica office to work on contracts for the actors who worked for his father-in-law's studio.

Trixie reached the wrought iron gate in front of the house and stopped for a moment, looking. This was likely the biggest client she'd had in her short career as an investigator and she didn't want to screw it up.

*C'mon, Belden. No ghost or snobby socialite husband is going to best me.* Inhaling deeply, she squared her shoulders and unlatched the gate. She climbed up the short flight of stairs to the porch and rang the bell.

Nothing happened after several moments. Trixie frowned, looking at the bell as if it were the problem, even though she had distinctly heard the bell ring inside. Impatient, she rang the bell again. Before her hand had barely released the bell, the door opened.

The woman who answered the door was as different from Jim Frayne as night was to day. She was tall and slender with long, elegantly styled hair the color of amber or honey. Large hazel eyes, wide in the young woman's pale face, stared at her, a mixture of puzzlement and anxiety in their gold-flecked depths.

"Can I help you?" she asked, her tones dulcet and cultured.

Everything about the young woman said privileged, wealthy and pampered. From the golden loose crafted curls to the cream-colored dressing gown to her satin slippers, Honey Wheeler Kane looked to be the quintessential society lady.

But then, as Trixie looked more closely at her, she could see the shadows under the hazel eyes, and the tense, nervous way she held herself, and the slender hand that hadn't stopped moving—pulling on the neckline of her gown, straightening one of her cuffs—since she'd opened the door.

"My name is Trixie Belden," she said, pulling out a business card from the pocket of her tailored suit. "I'm a private investigator." She gave her a small, polite smile as Honey took the card, studied it, and then returned her gaze to Trixie's, still assessing her, with questions in her hazel eyes.

"A private investigator?" Honey handed her back the card with a frown.

"Yes. I am a private investigator." She paused a moment, took a breath and continued, "I also investigate paranormal activity."

Honey stared at her blankly for a moment, before a variety of expressions crossed the beautiful woman's face: surprise, fear and then relief. "Paranormal activity? You mean ghosts."

"Yes, sometimes," she said. "Can I come in to speak with you?"

Honey looked torn for a moment before she gave her a nervous nod and opened the door to let her come inside.

She followed the elegant lady down a long hallway before turning into a room that appeared to be some sort parlor. Honey fluttered a hand toward one of the gold-colored divans that flanked the low-lying maple coffee table in the center of the room. "Please have a seat."

Trixie walked across the room and sat down where Honey had indicated while the other woman sat in the matching sofa across from her.

Honey looked at her in inquiry, then, gesturing in a vague way behind her. "Do you want something to eat? The maid is off for the weekend, but I'm sure we have something in the kitchen..."

Trixie shook her head. "No, thank you, Mrs. Kane. I'm fine."

"So, tell me about your investigation, Miss Belden," Honey said quietly, crossing one elegant leg over the other. "How can I help you?"

"Honestly, it's more how *I* can help *you*," Trixie said in her normal, frank way. "I understand, from my client, that you have been plagued with paranormal activity in your home. I've been hired to investigate and help you determine the truth of what exactly is going on."

Honey stared at her a moment before a scowl crossed her face. "Jim did this, didn't he?" She rose to her feet and began pacing in long strides across the very expensive cream-colored carpet. "I should have known when he took me for my appointment that he wouldn't let things go. He and Daddy never can leave anything well enough alone." She shook her head. "Sinclair is going to be *furious*."

"Is he wrong, then, your brother?" Trixie asked, interrupting her tirade in her blunt fashion. "Is it a mistake? You aren't experiencing any paranormal activity?"

Honey faltered, mid-stride, and stared at Trixie for a long time before she sank down on the divan on which she'd previously been sitting. "Sinclair thinks I'm crazy," she whispered. "Maybe I am." Her face crumpled, and she put her face into her hands.

Trixie shifted uncomfortably on the divan, wishing she had better tact and knowledge about how to handle situations such as these. She could see, from the woman's easy tears and anxious demeanor, why Jim Frayne had been so worried. She leaned forward and awkwardly patted the other woman's knee, trying to provide some level of comfort. "Why don't you wait on labeling yourself crazy until we find out what we're dealing with here?"

Honey looked up at that, tears still glistening on her cheeks. "What?" she said, her voice tremulous.

"I can help. I investigate the paranormal. I've worked with Harry Price overseas, studying the paranormal activity at one of the most haunted houses in England. I can find out what's happening and help you deal with what I discover."

A flicker of hope leaped into Honey's eyes, but her face was still troubled. "Sinclair won't like it," she said, a frown turning down her mouth. "He doesn't believe in anything supernatural. And I've tried to tell him about what I've seen...and heard...and he doesn't believe me." Without even realizing it, her fists clenched, and she said in a low, anguished voice, "I don't feel like I'm crazy. I don't. I *know* what I've heard. But it sounds insane even to me, when I talk about it. And he's so certain and so self-assured..."

Trixie tried to hide the disgust she could feel crawling over her. Whether or not Sinclair Kane was behind the trauma Honey Kane was going through, his cruel lack of empathy and support already had her disdainful of the lawyer husband. She interrupted Honey again, saying gently, "Let's try this. Give me one weekend. This weekend. I can come and stay here in your house. I will be here if any activity happens. I can check to see if there are certain areas of the house that have problems. I can get to the bottom of this." She reached across and put her hand over Honey's clenched ones. "I can help."

Honey breathed in, a deep, shuddering breath, before she finally exhaled and nodded. "Jim hired you, right?"

Trixie hesitated. "My client...I can't..."

Honey waved her hand dismissively. "I know it was him. He was worrying and fretting over me the whole way home from the doctor's office this week. If he thinks you can help, then, well, maybe you can." She twisted her hands together fretfully. "But Sinclair really will not like it," she whispered.

"We don't have to tell him," Trixie pointed out. "I can come as...a friend. Some sort of long lost friend you haven't seen in years."

The other woman's lips finally curved up a little at that. "Sinclair knows all my friends. He wouldn't believe that."

"All right," she said, considering for a moment or two. "How about your brother's? I could be a friend of your brother's. Or a sister of a friend of your brother's. Someone who's in town for the weekend and doesn't know anyone and needs someone to take her under their wing to show them the town and give them a place to stay." She raised an eyebrow at her. "Your husband will never need to know."

Honey hesitated, her face wavering, before she finally nodded and said, "Okay. All right. I can't believe I'm doing this, but all right." She looked at Trixie for a moment and then continued, "But you will need to have Jim bring you here. If Sinclair's going to believe this, you'll need to have Jim help with this story."

Trixie inwardly sighed. Somehow, trying to get Jim Frayne to agree to such a scheme sounded more complicated than finding out what truly was happening inside the Kane house. But Honey Kane had tugged at her heart strings. Her pale face, her anxious, nervous disposition, and the way she kept saying, "But Sinclair wouldn't like it" made Trixie absolutely determined to banish the shadows from the golden-haired girl's eyes.

"I'll get your brother to bring me here. Don't worry." She gave the other woman a smile. "It'll all be okay. We will solve this mystery."

Honey gave her a shaky smile. "Thank you, Miss Belden. Thank you very much."

As Honey let her out of the house a few minutes later, Trixie felt positive. As if perhaps she could turn a bad situation into something good. It was a feeling she liked. One that she rarely felt anymore, working as she did within the seedy underbelly of the otherwise glittering Tinseltown.

Trixie was already down the stairs and through the gate, heading toward the street and the subway beyond, and didn't see the shimmer of white on the upper balcony of the front window that briefly flashed before disappearing, the flutter of the window curtain the only evidence of any disturbance.

**A little while later...**

After a brief phone call with Jim Frayne, once she'd returned to the office, and a quick trip home to throw some clothes in a suitcase, Trixie found herself ensconced in one of the most luxurious cars she'd ever had the pleasure to see.

The dark green Lincoln convertible was polished to a beautiful shine, and the leather seats were so soft that she felt as if she could just melt into them. As Jim put her small suitcase in the trunk of the car and went around to the driver's side to get in, she surreptitiously pulled down her suit skirt, which she noticed had risen up when she'd seated herself.

Jim got into the car, and she noticed that his emerald eyes lingered for a moment on her bare tanned legs. She wished desperately that she hadn't ripped one of her last two pairs of nylons earlier that week when she'd crouched on the edge of a fire escape, getting the final proof of Herman Frederickson's adultery for his long-suffering wife. But it fed into the image she was pretty sure she would have to present to Sinclair Kane, so she would take the hand she'd been dealt and work with it.

Besides, with the money from Jim Frayne, she could afford to get another pair of nylons. Perhaps even a pair of real silk stockings.

He finally averted his eyes and started up the car. "So," he said, "exactly what is it that you need me to do?"

"I spoke with your sister."

"And?" he asked, his voice quiet as he edged his car out of the parking space into the traffic flow on the darkened street. The flicker of the street lamps above them cast shadows on the strong line of Jim's jaw.

"You're right. She's very...nervous. The entire time I spoke with her, she couldn't sit still. She said that her husband thinks she's crazy."

A tight, grim look crossed Jim's face. "If she's crazy," he said in a low, harsh voice, "it's because he's making her that way."

Trixie slid a glance at him but didn't comment further on that. Instead, she said, "I got her to agree to let me stay in their house over this weekend. I will look for evidence as to whether the sightings and sounds and other paranormal activity she's claiming to see and hear is real or whether it is being manufactured or..."

"...or if she's actually crazy," he said flatly.

"There always is a possibility of that," she said in a quiet voice. "It's probably not a very likely possibility, and I am not going into this with that as my hypothesis, but it has to be considered. She's nervous and anxious. She's suspicious and afraid of her husband."

"I'm not paying you to find my sister crazy," he snapped.

One of the streetlights flickered as he turned down Western Avenue, heading south. "You paid me to find out the truth. You may not like the truth, but that's what I deliver." She tilted her head as she considered him. "Truth can be ugly, Mr. Frayne. But even the ugliest of truths is better than the prettiest of lies."



He didn't respond, staring out the window, his jaw set and tight. He didn't respond until way past Olympic Boulevard. Finally, he asked again, "What do you want me to do?"

"I told her that we should tell her husband that I was an old friend coming to stay."

"He'd never believe that." Jim turned the steering wheel as he slid into the upcoming turn lane. "He knows everyone. And he's careful. Very, very careful about who he's seen with and who he allows to be connected to him. I'm sure he checked out every friend of Honey's, no matter how remote the connection, before he married her."

"She said something similar. Not so much about the checking out, but that he would know I wasn't one of her friends."

"So what plan did you come up with to get around this?"

"You." She gave him a slow smile. "I'm a connection of yours. You can make me a relation of a friend of yours—some poor cousin from a hick town in Iowa, if you like. Someone who needs a place to stay for a couple of days before she returns back to her small town."

He gave her a skeptical look, but then the look turned thoughtful. "A relation of some friend?"

"If you like," she said, "we can play it up romantically. You're sexually interested; you can't have me stay at your place for propriety's sake."

Jim snorted.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "He is likely a manipulator who uses people for his own purposes. People like that expect everyone they come in contact to be the same. He would *expect* you to be hiding your unacceptable girlfriend somewhere so that no one would know you had her."

"I don't operate like that," he said stiffly.

"Maybe you don't. But he likely does. And that is what you need to do. Play his game." She held her right hand up, waving it, drawing Jim's attention to it. "You put the shiny object up here, so he doesn't see the hidden one..."

She slid her left hand into his pocket and retrieved a money clip with a wad of bills. Then, she waved them in his face. "...over here."

His eyes widened as she held out the money to him, her eyebrow raised in an imperious challenge.

He took the money and tucked it back into pocket. He turned on to the same quiet street Trixie had visited earlier that day and pulled his car up into the horseshoe drive in front of the house. Jim killed the engine and then turned to face her. "So, you want to play the girlfriend, do you?"

Trixie felt the age-old flutters in her stomach as he leaned more closely toward her, his green-gold gaze intense and his face as shadowed as his voice as he whispered, "That's a game I think I can play."

His face had grown so close to hers that she could feel the velvety caress of his breath against her skin. Her pulse rate accelerated and she waited, anxiously, almost desperately for the feel of his lips against hers.

For several tense moments, she hovered in anticipation, waiting...wanting.

And then...

Jim pulled back, tilted his fedora brim low over his eyes, but not low enough to hide the wicked grin that curved his sensuous lips.

As she stared at him, shocked, he pulled the keys out of the engine and got out of the car, whistling a cheery little tune to himself.

She finally, grumpily, got out of the car as he went around to the trunk to retrieve her suitcase, and she thought to herself that Honey Kane wasn't the crazy one. She was. For ever taking on this case.

As she followed Jim up the steps to the palatial Victorian home, Trixie urged herself to forget her pique...and the attraction to her client...and be thankful that at least Jim's swanky car had saved her from riding the Red Car...or worse, shank's mare. Navigating the Southland without a car was definitely a challenge. Sometimes she was able to borrow her brother's beat-up jalopy when her cases required her to travel a bit of distance, but it couldn't compare to the luxurious, dark green Lincoln parked behind her.

Trixie put all of this out of her mind, however, as Jim rang the doorbell and the pair waited. When the heavy oak door was opened, Trixie had her first glimpse of Sinclair Kane. He was handsome, the young private investigator could not deny that, but in a slick, almost oily, way. Immediately, she pegged him as a sheik. She found rugged, down-to-earth good looks much more appealing herself, but she wasn't here to judge Honey Kane's taste in men. At least not directly, anyway.

Sinclair's thick, black, wavy hair was parted on the side and slicked back with some kind of pomade. Trixie wondered if he'd ever heard the motto, "A little dab'll do ya."

He smiled at Jim, but Trixie noticed that the smile didn't make it north of his nose. Sinclair then turned his mug toward Trixie, and his dark eyes bored into her own blue ones. His glancing appraisal of her was brief before his sharp gaze traveled back to Jim.

"Hello, Jim," he greeted his brother-in-law, and the knowing, smug lewdness he injected into that simple greeting made Trixie's skin crawl. "I hear your...*friend* is staying with Honey and me this weekend."

Out of the corner of her eye, Trixie saw her client's jaw tighten, and she knew that Mr. Honorable was having second thoughts about their story. In an attempt to calm him down, she placed a light hand on his arm, even though she knew the gesture, however innocent, would fan the flames of Sinclair's crude imagination.

Jim slowly exhaled and greeted his brother-in-law. "Sinclair," he said with a nod. "This is Miss Trixie Belden. Miss Belden, may I introduce you to Mr. Sinclair Kane?" Jim paused for a beat. "I hope that having Miss Belden stay here will not be too much of an imposition for you and my sister. I sincerely wish that I could offer her lodging, but you know..."

Jim let his sentence trail off. Sinclair's eyes gleamed with something vulgar, and Trixie began to wonder in earnest how Honey, whom Jim had assured her was a sensible young woman, could have fallen for this cad.

Trixie's host for the weekend swung open the door farther and stepped aside, gesturing for the pair to follow him. Jim removed his fedora and motioned for Trixie to precede him through the portal.

Although she had already seen the inside of the opulent Victorian earlier that day, Trixie made sure to act as though she was seeing it for the first time. "What a lovely home that you have, Mr. Kane."

Sinclair shut the door and said, "Thank you." Then to Jim, "You can leave Miss Belden's valise here. I can take it up to her room later for her."

With that, the pair followed him down a hallway to the parlor in which Trixie had met Honey earlier. For the second time that day, she sat down on the gold-colored divan.

"I'm very grateful that you and your wife are allowing me to stay here," she said.

Sinclair waved an airy hand and headed over to a handsome maple bookcase stained the same shade as the elegant coffee table in front of the sofa. Most of the bookcase shelves were filled with impressive-looking tomes, but one shelf held three cut-crystal decanters with matching cut-crystal glasses. The oily man picked up one of the decanters.

"Jim, Miss Belden, may I offer you something to drink? Scotch or bourbon or perhaps some fine Irish whiskey?" he asked as he poured the amber liquid into a glass.

Jim shook his head, and Trixie declined in what she hoped was a demure manner.

As Sinclair took a sip from his glass, he glanced toward the entrance to the parlor. "I'm not sure where my wife is..."

But at that moment, Honey Kane made an entrance. She had changed out of the elegant cream-colored gown in which Trixie had seen her earlier, but she still looked refined and beautiful in the pale gold angora sweater and matching skirt, her swan-like neck highlighted by the cream-colored Peter Pan collar. It was a casual outfit for lounging about the house, well for the rich anyway, but Honey managed to elevate it to chic sophistication. As she stood to greet the woman, Trixie surreptitiously looked down at her stubby nails and slightly rumpled, olive green cotton skirt suit.

Honey crossed the room and gave her brother a fierce hug. Trixie couldn't help but see the mixture of adoration and worry that Jim showered on his sister as he returned the embrace.

"Hi, Jim," the honey-haired woman said as she pulled away slightly and looked over to where Trixie stood expectantly. "I hear that you have a friend visiting. From the Midwest?"

Honey extracted herself from her brother and glided toward Trixie, her slender arm extended toward her visitor as if they were meeting for the first time. Trixie admired the woman's cool.

Trixie took the proffered hand. "Iowa," she responded. "I'm Trixie Belden, Mrs. Kane, and I was just telling Mr. Kane how grateful I am that you both have allowed me to stay with you."

"Please, call me Honey. We're happy to have you," Honey assured her, and the predatory look in Sinclair's eyes confirmed his wife's statement.

Trixie stood taller, hoping that that if she exuded confidence, the cunning man would realize that she was not easy prey.

The foursome sat down then and commenced in small talk for the minimum amount of time considered polite before Jim glanced at his watch.

"Father is expecting me soon, so I really need to excuse myself and take my leave," he said as he stood. The other three stood as well.

Jim's eyes flicked toward Trixie's. "You'll be okay?"

Trixie nodded and gave him what she hoped was a smile that conveyed intimacy, although she didn't think that Sinclair really needed any more encouragement to believe their cover story. "I'm sure I will," she said, "until I see you again."

Her words apparently had the right effect, because Jim looked more uncomfortable than ever, and the knowing gleam in Sinclair's eyes returned immediately.

Jim stuck his hand out and gave Trixie an awkward handshake. But no matter how self-conscious the gesture was, Trixie still felt a jolt of electricity slide up her arm at his touch.

It wasn't until later, much later, in her room that Trixie allowed herself to think about the shock that she felt whenever she touched her client. She had spent the evening surreptitiously investigating the house and scrutinizing Sinclair, but now that she was alone, her mind wandered to her client.

After she had changed into her simple cotton pajamas, the blonde sleuth slid between the softest sheets she had ever had the pleasure of experiencing. Just before turning out her bedside lamp, she set the Westclox La Sallita alarm clock for three o'clock. Contrary to popular belief, the "witching hour" did not occur at midnight. If Trixie wanted to find proof of the supernatural activity in this historic mansion, then three o'clock in the morning was her best bet.

She settled back into the plush goose-down pillow, feeling like she was nesting in a cloud. She could get used to this luxury very easily if she let herself.

Unbidden, her thoughts once again drifted to Jim Frayne. "It doesn't matter what you feel, Belden," she whispered admonishingly to herself as she drifted off to sleep. "He's your client, off-limits, and let's not even think about how your standing is worlds apart from his."

Trixie felt as though she'd only been asleep for minutes when a shrill scream made her sit upright in bed. Reflexively, she reached for the French porcelain lamp on her bedside table, and a moment later, the room was flooded with light. She sprang up, and a quick glance at the clock told her that it was fifty minutes past two in the morning. Trixie was in the hall and entering Honey Kane's room just moments after she had heard the scream.

Both of the French porcelain lamps on the nightstands on either side of the bed were throwing off a soft glow, so Trixie was able to see that Honey was sitting up in bed, white as the proverbial ghost, and Sinclair was staring at his wife in surprise. Trixie had to admit that if Sinclair was behind this latest fright, he looked genuinely shocked at the current situation. Of course, this was the Southland, and there were actors everywhere—and not all of them in the moving pictures.

"What happened?" Trixie asked. "Are you all right, Honey?"

Trixie felt silly asking the question, as her hostess looked anything but all right.

Sinclair was the one to answer the young woman's question. "My wife had a nightmare, Miss Belden. Nothing more. You can go back to bed now. I'm sorry that you were disturbed by Honey's nerves."

Trixie looked to Honey, ignoring Sinclair. "Was that all it was? A dream?"

Honey smiled weakly and nodded, but she still looked frightened and pale. "It must have been."

"What was the dream about?" Trixie persisted.

"Miss Belden—" Sinclair started to object, but Honey interrupted him.

"It's all right, Sinclair. Maybe talking about it will help me." She looked up at Trixie. "I was awakened by a noise...well, in my dream, I was awakened by a noise, and this room looked exactly the same in my dream as it does right now. Well, it was slightly darker, because the lamps weren't lit, but the moonlight allowed me to see things relatively clearly." Here, Honey hesitated, swallowing before continuing, "There was a woman standing by the bed. Except she was hazy. I...I could almost see through her."

Sinclair made a doubtful noise. "It must have been a dream, Honey, if you could see through her."

Trixie forced herself not to react to his derisive tone as she prompted Honey. "What did the woman look like?"

Honey closed her eyes, remembering. "She had light blonde hair. Straight, in a bob cut. She was young, pretty. Maybe in her twenties? She was wearing a drop-waisted dress with a matching sash. It was light green, made of a shiny silk or satin."

Trixie frowned. The dress and hairstyle Honey described had been fashionable more than two decades before. Could there be a young woman from the flapper era haunting the house? Trixie made a mental note to ask her brother to do some digging for any deaths of young women in the house during the 1920s.

"Did she say anything? Do anything? Or was she just standing there?"

"At first she was just standing, looking at me. I was so startled by the sight of a strange woman standing next to my bed that I couldn't speak at first. I just stared at her."

"She wasn't standing next to our bed, Honey. It was a dream," Sinclair interrupted, the frustration in his voice and on his mug evident.

Trixie gave him a sour look and then turned back to Honey. "She just stood there?"

Honey shook her head and shuddered. "No, then...she raised her hand and pointed and whispered, 'Beware.' That was when I screamed."

Trixie nodded sympathetically. "I can imagine. I'd scream, too, if some strange woman told me to beware," she said.

Inside, her mind was churning. Trixie didn't believe for a second that Honey Kane was merely dreaming. She was convinced that Honey had seen a spirit. She would need to find proof of this, of course, but she had a strong gut feeling. The question that Trixie really wanted to know was whether the spirit was concerned for Honey and warning her about something—or if she wanted to harm Honey and was issuing a threat. And whether she had been behind all of the mysterious happenings that Honey had experienced.

Just then, the shrill sound of a bell split the air, making all three of them jump. Her heart thudding, Trixie realized that it was the alarm that she had set.

"It's the ghost!" Honey cried.

Trixie cursed herself for not turning off the alarm, but the need to find the source of the scream had been more urgent at the time. Without a word, she raced to turn it off. When she returned, this time wearing slippers and a housecoat, she found Sinclair berating his agitated wife, instead of trying to calm her.

"You're overreacting!" he was saying sharply. "No ghost set off that alarm!"

Despite the fact that she wanted to knock the smug attitude right out of Sinclair Kane, Trixie was forced to agree with him.

"It's my fault, Honey," she assured the distressed young woman. "I set the alarm, and I guess I accidentally set it for the wrong time."

Honey looked at her houseguest doubtfully. "Are you sure?"

Trixie nodded emphatically, her tousled curls bouncing with the effort. "I am. I know I set it before I went to bed, and when I just checked it now, it was set for three a.m. I meant to set it for six a.m. I would think that if...something else...was making it ring, it would still be set for six a.m. So, I must have set it wrong. I am so sorry to add to your troubles."

Honey waved her apology away. "It's fine. I'm sorry I overreacted."

Her husband looked triumphant. "I told you that there were no such things as ghosts!"

Trixie couldn't help herself that time. "I didn't say that, Mr. Kane. I only said that a ghost didn't set off the alarm," she informed him in an even tone.

Sinclair turned fuming eyes at her, but before he could respond, there was an abrupt, loud banging on the front door.

For the second time in a few minutes, the three of them jumped.

Sinclair threw aside the covers and stood up. "What now?" he grumbled as he angrily stalked out of the room to answer the urgent pounding on the front door.

"Will you be okay?" Trixie asked her hostess. At Honey's nod, Trixie quickly followed Sinclair down the stairs and into the front entryway.

She was just in time to see Honey's husband open the front door to find another tall, dark man standing on the front porch. In contrast to the smooth, pampered good looks of Sinclair, however, this man had a worn hardness to him that spoke of a more working-class existence. His suit was slightly rumpled and more than a little ill-fitting. Trixie wondered what he was doing in this neighborhood.

Her inner question was answered almost immediately as he flashed a badge and introduced himself as Detective Dan Mangan.

*Great!* Trixie thought as he explained that there had been a complaint of screaming coming from the house and he was there to investigate. *The last thing I need is a flatfoot butting in on my case!*

"Everything is fine. My wife merely had a nightmare," Sinclair was assuring the detective. He paused for a moment and then asked, "With all due respect, may I ask why a detective is answering a disturbing the peace call and not a uniformed officer?"

Trixie could hear Detective Mangan's grunt from where she stood in the hallway, even though she had remained several feet from the door.

"I happened to be close by investigating another case, so I answered the call. A pair of patrolmen should be here soon."

His words were proven correct even as he spoke them. A black-and-white pulled into the horseshoe-shaped drive, its boxy shape silhouetted against the low evergreen hedge that separated the house from the street. Trixie saw two uniformed coppers step out of the vehicle. When they reached the porch, the pair introduced themselves as Officers Kendall and Cassidy. Trixie watched as Mangan flashed his badge and explained that he had arrived on the scene first, and the home's owner had explained that his wife had had a nightmare.

At that, the detective looked over Sinclair's shoulder to Trixie. "Is that true, ma'am? Did you simply have a nightmare? Are you hurt?"

Sinclair turned, and Trixie thought her host's head was going to unbutton as he realized that his houseguest was standing behind him, taking in everything.

"I'm not Mrs. Kane," Trixie hurriedly explained. "I'm a guest of the Kanes. Mrs. Kane did tell me that she had a nightmare, though."

Sinclair turned back to the detective. "Thank you for checking on us, Detective Mangan, but as you've just heard, my wife is just fine." He started to shut the door, but the gumshoe stopped the movement with a strong hand.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kane, but I'm going to need to speak to Mrs. Kane herself." Detective Mangan's voice was steel beneath the velvet politeness, and he didn't sound one bit sorry, Trixie noted.

Trixie couldn't see Sinclair's face, but she could hear the irritation in his voice as he answered, "Of course" and invited the man in. The detective indicated to the officers that he would take care of the situation, which made Trixie wonder why. It was after three in the morning. Why wouldn't the higher ranking detective turn a routine case over to the uniforms and go home and get some shuteye?

Sinclair shut the door behind Mangan and turned to Trixie. "Miss Belden, would you mind very much fetching my wife so that this policeman can see for himself that she's in the pink?"

Trixie would have much rather stayed downstairs and interrogated the flatfoot, but she had no choice but to acquiesce.

Within a few minutes, she returned with Honey, whose color had returned. The lady of the house assured the detective that she was fine, but he still looked at them all suspiciously, his nicotine-stained fingers clutching a notepad and pen as he prepared to take notes.

"When we received the call about the scream, we were told that this is not the first time that there have been screams heard from this house. The caller was finally unnerved enough to report this incidence because it's begun to be a regular occurrence." His voice indicated what he thought of a citizen who had waited so long to report a possible crime.

"My wife has been having nightmares lately, Detective. It's simply nerves," Sinclair explained glibly.

"During the day?"

"Excuse me?" Sinclair's slick façade faltered.

"The caller indicated that sometimes the screams occur during the day."

Sinclair looked at his wife and then back to the gumshoe. "I'm at my office during the day, but I imagine that my nervous wife takes naps and has nightmares then."

Trixie bristled at Sinclair once again painted his wife as a Nervous Nellie. Honey's experience earlier had convinced the young private dick that the house was genuinely haunted, but the way Sinclair was so eager to brush off her fears and portray her as nervous made Trixie suspicious. She tended to agree with Jim's assessment that he was trying to get control of Honey's trust fund through nefarious means.

Honey shook her head. "That's not true," she asserted, and Trixie was pleased to hear the woman speak up. Honey continued, "I don't take naps during the day. It's true that I've been a little more...tense than usual lately, but I do not take naps."

"Can you explain the screams then, ma'am?" Detective Mangan asked gently. "You're alone in the house during the day? Your husband doesn't come home for lunch?" Trixie could tell that Mangan was convinced that Honey was a battered wife, and her husband was responsible for her screams. Trixie was sure that he was, too, but not in the way that the flatfoot thought.

"No, my husband doesn't come home during the day, that I know of, and as far as I know, I'm alone in the house," she answered, apparently reluctant to admit that she heard and saw things that she shouldn't be if she were truly alone in the house.

"That you know of? As far as you know? Can you explain the screams, Mrs. Kane?"

Honey sighed. "I've been startled a number of times by noises. But I'm sure that there's a logical explanation for them," she said.

Detective Mangan nodded, but Trixie could tell that he was not persuaded.

"Detective, it's very late," Sinclair said firmly.

The other dark-haired man nodded and closed his notepad, clearly realizing that he didn't have probable cause to stay any longer.

"Of course. I'm sorry to have kept you up so late, but you can understand why repeated screams from the same location would be worrisome." He withdrew a small white rectangle from his pocket and handed it to Honey. "If you...*hear things* during the day and are frightened, Mrs. Kane, please don't hesitate to call me."

Trixie could see the suppressed anger on Sinclair's mug, and he didn't look at all handsome in that moment. It was a little untoward of the detective to give his business card to the lady of the house instead of the husband, but Trixie knew exactly why the detective had done so.

After the detective had left, and the three occupants of the house were safely ensconced in their bedrooms, Trixie tried to contact the wraith whom Honey had seen earlier. She wished that she could hold a proper séance, but she hoped that just speaking to the young woman might be enough.

"Hello," she said to the air, not feeling the least bit silly sitting on the edge of the bed trying to contact the unseen. "If you can hear me, please let yourself be known. I'm a friend. I've been hired by Honey Kane's brother to find out what's going on here. I know that you revealed yourself to Honey earlier. Are you a friend? Are you trying to help her? Can you help me help her?"

There was only silence in response to her plea, and Trixie sighed resignedly. If there was indeed the spirit of a young woman haunting the house, she was choosing not to reveal herself to the sandy-haired woman with the tousled curls.

Trixie was about to get up and stealthily investigate the house for signs of a fake haunting when she noticed the curtains billowing as if carried by a gentle breeze. But the windows were closed tightly, and there was no source of wind in the room. As she watched, a young blonde woman appeared, dressed just as Honey had described earlier.

She whispered one word before disappearing.

"Piano."

Trixie sat in stunned silence. *Piano?*

Trixie thought back to her interview with Honey's brother. *What had he said about music?*

The sleuth considered for a moment and then remembered that there had been two references to music. Honey often heard music coming from the parlor, but when she arrived in the parlor, it stopped. There was no radio in the parlor, no obvious source for the music.

The Kane residence also boasted a music room in which there was a baby grand piano that had been in Honey's family for three generations. Jim had explained to Trixie that his sister loved the piano so much that her mother had given the piano, which had belonged to Honey's maternal grandmother, to her daughter as a housewarming gift when the new Mrs. Kane had moved into the Victorian mansion. According to Jim, Honey had confided in him that she heard the piano playing by itself during the day, when no one else was home, but when she investigated, the piano would still.



Trixie wasn't sure whether the ghost had taken to playing the piano and was the source of what Honey had been hearing or whether the ghost was trying to give her a message that something else was going on. Either way, Trixie knew that it behooved her to check out the music room, one of the rooms in which she had not been yet. She had helped Honey prepare dinner in the well-equipped kitchen in the maid's absence, and the threesome had eaten dinner in the elegant dining room on delightful Beswick china, but Trixie had not yet made a visit to the music room.

It was definitely time.

Trixie cautiously opened the door to her room, listening. The stillness of the house convinced her that her hosts were sleeping. The young sleuth extracted the flashlight from her suitcase and tiptoed down the stairs in her slippers. Stealthily, she carefully navigated the house, thankful for the full moon whose light helped to illuminate the dim interior. She didn't want to turn on the electric torch that she carried and bring attention to herself unless she absolutely had to.

As she made her way through the first floor, she ruled out those rooms she knew not to be the music room. She knew that the parlor was off to the left of the entryway. The kitchen and the dining room were straight ahead. That left two rooms to her right unexplored. She carefully turned the knob to the first room she came upon and peered inside. Although her eyes hadn't entirely adjusted to the dark, she could tell that this was not the music room. Instead, it appeared to be a masculine sanctuary, and the young shamus would take odds that it was Sinclair's office-away-from-the-office. She quickly closed the paneled door, knowing that she would need to investigate this room at some point, and moved further down the hall.

This particular room was not shuttered by a door. Instead, an inviting oak-paneled doorway beckoned her into the airy, open space. Trixie's eyes had adjusted to the dim light, but even if they hadn't, two large bay windows holding court on two walls allowed an abundance of golden moonlight to enter, bathing the room in a soft glow. Potted ficus plants dotted the room, but even in the faint illumination, Trixie could tell that the beautiful baby grand piano was the showcase of the otherwise relatively simple room.

She moved toward it, awed by the polished maple, which still managed to gleam in the low light. The impressive instrument didn't seem ominous in the least, but Trixie remembered Jim's voice as he described Honey's fear of the thing that she had once loved most, and she remembered the old-fashioned girl with the blonde bob and pert nose whispering a single word.

*Piano.*

Trixie doggedly searched underneath and on top of the baby grand to no avail. The smooth sides yielded no additional clues. The private dick slid her fingers over every inch of the instrument and its matching bench, convinced that she would find a hidden compartment of some kind.

No such luck.

Finally, Trixie stood, hands on her hips, glaring hard at the object that refused to reveal its secrets. What in the world could the spirit have been trying to tell her? What clue did this wretched piece of furniture offer? Why had she been led here?

As she assessed the piano, she had a sudden realization. She had, indeed, combed every square inch of the top, bottom, sides, legs, and bench.

But she had not explored the *inside*.

With renewed vigor, Trixie carefully raised the lid and hoisted it on the lid prop so that she could peer inside without worry that the lid would fall on her noggin and alert her hosts to her snooping.

As she squinted at the strings and hammers in front of her, she realized that she had no idea what she was looking for. What did she know about the insides of a finely tuned, highly regarded musical instrument? Trixie decided that it was time to risk turning on the flashlight so that she could better investigate the guts of this magnificent wooden-and-string creature before her.

*Piano.*

That whispered word had to mean *something*, and as Trixie flashed her light to and fro in the belly of the musical beast, she was suddenly breathless, and she saw exactly what the ghost had wanted her to see.

She knew, in that moment, that the source of the music Honey had been hearing was not ghostly. It had been orchestrated by a very human hand.

Installed inside the otherwise respectable piano, handed down through three generations of a venerable family, was a perforated roll of paper. This incriminating object turned the stately instrument into a common, bawdy, *player* piano.

Someone had gone to great lengths to turn this family heirloom into a piano *that could play by itself*.

In her mind, Trixie could triumphantly hear the imaginary click of a tumbler falling into place as she catalogued the first real clue to this mystery.

Even as she heard a grandfather clock somewhere in the recesses of the large house chime four, Trixie could not deny the sudden energy that she felt, urging her to keep going. She knew that no one in Honey's family had installed that piano roll. But Sinclair had had the means, motive, and opportunity—the trifecta of crime.

Spurred to find more evidence, Trixie decided to investigate the other source of the music that Honey had heard. She switched off the flashlight so that the Kanes would be less likely to find her skulking around their house in the middle of the night and crept through the downstairs hallways along the familiar pathway to the parlor.

Once inside, Trixie shut the heavy wooden door behind her and clicked on her trusty flashlight, convinced that she would find her next clue. As she searched for evidence, she knew that she wasn't imagining the guiding force of a friendly presence. She was on the right track.

As she swung her flashlight around, Trixie looked for something obvious, anything out of place. But nothing in the pristine room appeared to be. The gold divans were impeccably kept, with not even a stray dust mote appearing out of place underneath. The low coffee table offered no clue, so Trixie turned her attention toward the bookcases that lined the fourth wall of the stylish room.

As the light from her electric torch splayed over the leather bindings arrayed on the shelves, Trixie wondered what exactly she was looking for. What she could possibly hope to find.

What did she think was hiding among the Shakespearean plays, the Greek tragedies, the essays by Emerson and Thoreau, the modern classics? Her light caught the impressive display of *Encyclopædia Britannica* volumes on the bottom shelf, right next to a series of red leather tomes devoted to physics, electricity, and wire recording machines.

Trixie was about to give up in frustration when suddenly something within her brain clicked.

*Wire recording machines.*

Mart had recently bragged that he had begun to use one to document interviews after a fellow reporter, Ty Scott, had introduced him to the handy devices.

Trixie hadn't really thought too much about the new-fangled device, but she suddenly realized that a hidden wire recorder would be the perfect contraption to play disembodied music meant to scare someone, namely Honey Kane.

The sandy-haired sleuth dropped to her knees and reached for one of the leather-bound hardbacks. Instead of the single book that she grabbed sliding out by itself, the entire series came along for the ride. Barely able to contain the exhilaration she felt, Trixie realized that these "books" were merely a façade—one that hid a wire recording machine.

She fought the urge to playback whatever recording was contained on the spools, knowing that she could awaken Honey or Sinclair. She didn't want to frighten Honey, and she didn't want to alert Sinclair that she had stumbled onto proof, however circumstantial, that he was playing tricks on his "beloved" and trying to send her to the loony bin.

Realizing how late—or early—it was, Trixie returned the books to their spot, crept stealthily up the stairs to her room, and once again settled beneath the satiny sheets, her mind racing with the import of what she had discovered. It was only as the sun began to rise that she finally drifted off to sleep, and she knew that she wasn't imagining the blonde flapper beside the bed smiling down upon her.

Trixie allowed herself to sleep for a couple of hours, but it was still rather early when she awoke, ready to find more than circumstantial proof that Sinclair Kane was trying to scare his wife—right into an asylum. She quickly dressed and headed downstairs and into the dining room, where she thought that she might find the Kanes enjoying a leisurely Saturday morning breakfast.

She was half-right. Sinclair Kane was just finishing up breakfast, and Trixie was happy to note that he was wearing olive green plus fours and a white open-necked shirt. If he was dressed for golf, then he would be out of the house for the morning. That suited the gumshoe just fine.

"Good morning, Mr. Kane," she greeted him.

"Good morning, Miss Belden. You're looking well this morning." Even the simple, polite greeting managed to sound lewd when uttered from his thin lips.

Trixie forced herself to keep her smile in place even as her skin crawled. "Thank you. Playing golf this morning?"

Sinclair looked down at his outfit and then back up at her. "Yes, I'm headed to Pasadena for a round. But for business, not pleasure, I'm afraid."

"I'm sure the walk will be nice, even if you must conduct business."

"True enough, true enough, except that I'm going to have to go in to the office afterward, and I won't be home until well into the evening," he said and stood. "Honey is in the kitchen. On account that the maid is off this weekend at her daughter's wedding, my wife was kind enough to fix me breakfast before my game, despite her nerves. I'm sure that she would be happy to fix you something."

Trixie shook her head. "I don't want to put her out."

"Honey won't be put out," Sinclair assured her and then took his leave. Trixie went to the front door, and after she watched him drive away in his gleaming black Cadillac convertible, she found Honey in the kitchen. After bidding her hostess good morning and assuring her that she did not want breakfast, she asked if it was possible to use the telephone.

Honey told her that she would find an extension in the parlor. Trixie sat on the divan and lifted the receiver of the ivory Bakelite telephone that perfectly matched the ivory-and-gold décor that Honey Kane seemed to favor. It was a novelty to Trixie, who had only seen black Bakelites. The telephone company charged extra for phones that were not black.

The sandy-haired woman's first call was to Mart, and she was happy to find him toiling away at his desk at the *Examiner*, feverishly finishing his latest article for the afternoon deadline. After she finally promised to give him the exclusive rights to any story that might come from doing her this favor, he agreed to research any deaths in the 1920s of young women at the Kanes' address—after he finished his article.

Her second call was to Jim Frayne. When she heard his rich, melodic voice on the line, she said, "I think that I have good news, Mr. Frayne. Can you be available at your sister's house tonight at eight p.m.?"

Mr. Frayne reported that he was indeed available, as Trixie knew that he would be if it involved getting to the bottom of "this business with my sister." However, even as he pressed for details of her "good news," Trixie firmly informed him that she would share the details with him that evening, assuring him that his sister was not crazy. The young detective could tell that he was not happy to be put off, but he finally agreed to wait until that evening to be briefed.

After she disconnected with her client, Trixie stared at the telephone, wondering whether or not to make the next call that she was contemplating. She knew that if her plan worked, she would need the coppers. But being a private dick, it went against everything within her to call and ask for a flatfoot's help. In the end, she decided that she trusted Detective Mangan. There was something about a detective that showed up when he didn't have to, stayed when he didn't have to, and clearly knew that there was something more to the situation that met the eye that spoke to his professionalism and determination.

The question was whether *he* would want to work with *her*, especially after he heard her plan. Flatfoots weren't exactly champing at the bit to associate with private dicks—especially one who wanted to hold a séance to force a confession from her suspect.

Trixie looked at the business card that she had nicked from her honey-haired hostess and, taking a deep breath, dialed the number.

*I hope this works.*

It always amazed Trixie that when you didn't have anything important to do, time seemed to drag interminably and, on the other hand, when you had a looming deadline, time seemed to fly out of your grasp so quickly that you wondered how you would ever get done all that you needed to do. Today was one of the flying out of your grasp kind of days.

Mart had come through on the information she'd needed. One Veronica Echolls had died of consumption in the Kane house, some twenty years previous. The family had been wealthy and important enough to get the girl a picture and a rather lengthy obituary in several of the Los Angeles newspapers, including the *Examiner*. The obituary picture showed a woman who very easily could be a carbon copy of the shadowy figure Trixie had seen earlier in Honey Kane's house.

Trixie had scanned through several of the papers that Mart had brought for her, including a few file pictures from the young woman's funeral of her devastated husband and father. As far as she could tell, it appeared to be an open and shut case of the ravages of consumption. And as the wealth had come from the girl's husband's family, she didn't think this was a second case of a husband trying to scare his wife insane.

Trixie traced the edge of the girl's face thoughtfully. *Why hadn't she gone on? What was it that Veronica was waiting for?*

Most ghosts, she'd learned, remained because of some sort of "unfinished business". Veronica had, in her short life, done quite a bit to help others, had married someone who seemed to truly care about her, especially considering that he'd had yet to remarry since her death, and her death hadn't been one of suspicious circumstances—just a bad hand of cards in life.

She sighed as she refolded the papers and put them and the photographs back into the large envelope her brother had given her earlier that morning. Whatever the reason Veronica was still lingering around the Kane house, Trixie knew that spending time investigating it was not why she had been hired. Veronica Echolls had given her solid proof of what Sinclair Kane had been up to. Now just to make sure that proof got him solidly convicted...and away from Honey.

Her next stop took her to the police's Central Bureau. The non-descript gray brick building that housed the area's police department wasn't much different than the one several blocks from her house. As she entered the building, Trixie noted its standard issue officers in uniform, bullpen of desks, ringing telephones and general air of busy-ness. Its similarity with her own local precinct was striking. The only difference was that the detective she needed to approach was not the vacant, dull-headed Dick Duncan, but a much more savvy and difficult to manage Daniel T. Mangan.

He hadn't been available when she'd called. The officer taking the message had offered to have Mangan return the call, but she didn't want to risk it. Too many problems could crop up with that scenario. And she was pretty certain the officer thought she was a crank, just by the way he'd talked to her. That "humoring the little lady" voice drove her up the wall. She wasn't about to leave a message with him. The call had been a frustrating enterprise from start to finish. Finally, she'd given up and decided to corner the man in person instead.

She strode into the office, trying to look as dignified and professional as possible. As usual, it was to little avail. All men ever saw was a very short dame with blond hair, great gams and killer curves.

At her hail, the officer at the main desk looked up at her in polite inquiry, which turned into a more appreciative perusal. Trixie suppressed a roll of her eyes as she asked to be shown in to see the detective.

The officer asked her to wait before disappearing into a glassed-off office near the back of the precinct's bullpen. A few moments later, the man himself followed the officer back to the front area. He approached Trixie, his dark eyes considering, and reached out his hand in greeting.

"Detective Mangan," he said. "I saw you at the Kane home. You're the Not Mrs. Kane houseguest."

"Trixie Belden," she replied, accepting his hand and shaking it firmly. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

He motioned toward the glassed-off office. "Come this way," he said, his tone polite.

Trixie followed him through the maze of desks, doing her best to ignore the speculative look of the uniformed cops sitting at them. She was already a bundle of nerves just being here. Cops and PIs did not get along as a general rule. And a woman paranormal investigator, well...

But she needed Daniel Mangan to make this work. Now just to see if she could convince him.

He walked into the office, holding the door open for her and letting her pass through before closing it and walking around the battered desk to the other side. He gestured at one of the straight-backed wooden chairs in front of his desk, relics from about ten years previous, and waited until she'd seated

herself before doing the same in an equally rickety roller chair on the other side of his desk. "So, how can I help you, Miss Belden?"

Trixie studied the detective for a few moments. He had the standard, tough, police detective look to him—that very unique combination of world-weariness and stubborn resistance to the world's evils that marked him a cop in a way nothing else quite did. He pulled out a crumpled box of cigarettes from his suitcoat pocket, offered it to her and, upon her refusal, took one for himself, lit it and took a deep inhale off of the gasper. He blew out a trail of smoke before he raised an eyebrow at her. "Miss Belden?"

She took a deep breath, gave him a game smile, and then began her story.

By the time she'd finished, the detective had smoked two cigarettes, and his face had grown to a level of skeptical incredulity she'd only seen on her brothers' faces. Trixie sighed and shifted her weight, switching her legs from a more formal, polite, knees-together version to one crossed over the other, her oxford-clad foot swinging impatiently.

"Let me get this straight," he finally said, a frown between his dark brows. "You're a..." he paused at this point, struggling with getting the words out. "...a paranormal investigator. You were hired to look into whether Mrs. Kane's bouts of hysteria are the result of actual ghosts in the attic or if her husband is trying to drive her insane by making her *think* there are ghosts in the attic."

"You've got the basic gist of it," she replied, her tone clipped.

"Sinclair Kane is a well-paid lawyer for hotshot actors," the detective pointed out. "Why would he want to drive his wife insane?"

"He might be well paid, but for a man like him, there isn't money enough in the world to satisfy his appetite for it." Her lip curled as she thought of the slick, oily man. "Honey Kane has a very large trust fund, courtesy of her mother's family. Millions and millions of dollars at her disposal. And who do you think takes over control of that trust if she's institutionalized?"

"Sinclair Kane," Mangan replied, his voice flat and disapproving.

"Exactly."

"So, what? You're holed up in their house as a houseguest?"

"With Mrs. Kane's knowledge and permission," she added with a toss of her head.

"And you plan on exposing Mr. Kane for the Johnson brother that he is." At her nod, his infernal eyebrow went up again. "How?"

"I'll give you the lowdown on our way to the Kane house. I need you to be inside before Sinclair Kane returns home from work."

He frowned at that. *Okay. Time to bring out the big guns.* She leaned forward, her freckled face pleading. "Honey Kane is a wreck. Her husband might not be beating her with a stick, but he's doing something just as bad—if not worse. I really think she's in danger from him. And my plan isn't going to work if I don't have a good witness." Trixie exhaled. "Do you really think the word of a woman paranormal investigator is going to hold up in court against someone like Sinclair Kane?"

Mangan studied her for several moments before he finally ground out his cigarette in the ashtray on his desk, grabbed his weathered fedora from the chair behind him and stood. "C'mon," he said gruffly. "We're wasting time chinning here."

With a flash of her satisfied smile, Trixie got to her feet. *One more quarter down. Now, let's hope that Miss Lynch is as good of an actress as Mart claims she is.*

**Later that evening...**

Trixie was amazed that she'd been able to pull it off. For all the scrapes and schemes she'd been a part of all her life, none had seemed so close to the edge of falling apart as today's. Trying to convince Daniel Mangan, Jim Frayne *and* Mart Belden to do something she wanted all on the same day seemed to defy the laws of physics itself. The fact that she'd done so was something to congratulate herself for.

But not at that moment.

Instead, she wanted to admire the stage that had been set for Sinclair Kane's downfall.

The formal dining room had been transformed from a stately, elegant proper room for the most genteel of eating to a shrouded, secret pathway to another world.

Miss Lynch, it turned out, had a flair for the dramatic. She had burst in upon the mansion an hour or so before Sinclair Kane was due to leave his Santa Monica office. With her direction, Honey, Trixie and she had managed to transform the room into an explosion of brilliant shades of purple, blue and red. A perfectly round globe sat in front of the chair at the end of the table, its internal white swirls making for a fine crystal ball. Vivid drapes of rich purple and striking blue hung around the room, setting an aura of mystery as well as providing a convenient hiding place for a tall detective.

A blood-red cloth covered the walnut table, and candles were set in strategic places to not only bring light but to also create a visual focus that would draw away from the edges of the room where the detective would be hiding.

Trixie had stressed the importance of not leaving any visual clues around for the unsuspecting Sinclair to pick up on. Dan Mangan had flatfooted it to the mansion rather than driving, and his battered fedora was whisked away to be hidden in one of Honey's fancy hatboxes, stored on a high shelf. Miss Lynch took one of the detective's cigarettes, and after Mangan lit it for her, she blew a long swirl of smoke, clothing herself in the detective's signature brand, so that any smoky smell might be attributed to her.

The doorbell rang precisely at 8 p.m., and when Honey opened it, she was startled to see not only her expected brother, but her cousins, Ben and Juliana, and Juliana's husband, Hank. After greetings were exchanged, she looked in surprise from one to the other. "I don't understand!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad to see you all, but what are you doing here?"

"I heard you were doing a séance tonight, and I couldn't resist!" Juliana clapped her hands together. She put her hand on Ben's arm and grinned up at him. "Ben got in on the annual séance for Harry Houdini last Halloween, and he said it was a scream. When Jim mentioned you were having one, well, you know I wasn't going to miss it!"

Honey looked bewilderedly at her brother as Trixie ushered the others into the parlor for drinks. "Miss Belden thought an even number around the table and three extra unaware, relatively unbiased witnesses would be a very good idea," he murmured. "And I have to say, I quite agree with her."

Honey bit her lip, glancing toward the door, as if Sinclair would walk through it at any moment. "I hope you're right," was her whispered reply.

"Trust her," Jim said, putting his arm around his sister and giving her a kiss on the top of her golden head. "I think she's on the square. She'll get to the bottom of it all."

The door opened a moment or two later, and Sinclair walked in. He frowned upon seeing Jim—a frown that he quickly cleared from his face. Ignoring his wife, he set his briefcase down on the bench in the hall tree near the front door and then offered his hand to Jim. "Good evening, Jim! I didn't know you'd be joining us for dinner this evening."

Honey hurried over to her husband, giving his kiss a cheek before saying in a cheerful hostess-esque type of voice, "Oh, darling! I thought a family evening with Jim and the cousins would be perfect. Miss Belden doesn't know anyone in town, other than Jim, of course, and what better way to get to know people than at a small dinner party?"

The frown returned to her husband's face. "Are you certain you're up for that, my dear? You've been rather...unwell as of late."

Jim's own face began taking on the telltale signs of an eruption of his famous temper. Honey patted her husband's arm. "I am perfectly fine," she said with a smile. "And Jim has arranged for the most fun evening's entertainment! She's a..." Her voice trailed off as she looked at her brother in inquiry. "What's the word again?"

"She's a medium. Does parlor tricks like palm reading and peering into crystal balls. Things like that." Jim gave him a grin. "I'm sure it's a bunch of bunk, but lots of people enjoy the show. She's agreed to do a séance for us. A couple of Dad's friends had her over for one of their parties and it was a terrific hit." He gave his brother-in-law a one-shouldered shrug. "I thought a small dinner party with just family might be a good way to try her out before Dad hires her for one of his large business parties. He's eager to know how she does."

A mention of Matthew Wheeler and his business parties usually was enough to silence Sinclair's objections about anything. Sinclair didn't exactly look up to his father-in-law. No. He wanted to *be* his father-in-law. Because Wheeler was so successful in his career, anything he did was usually something Sinclair wanted to emulate. No matter what he would have personally thought otherwise.

True to form, an affable expression crossed Sinclair's face. "Well, if it will help Matt out, by all means!" he said, smiling in his normal oily fashion as he hung up his fedora, which, Jim noted, he'd neglected to immediately take off in the presence of his wife. Then, he looked from Jim to Honey in question. "Where is everyone? I should go in and say hello before I go wash up for dinner."

"In the parlor, darling," Honey said with a smile that didn't reach her hazel eyes.

He gave her an absentminded peck on the cheek before making his way into the parlor with a booming, "hail fellow well met" tone to his voice as he greeted the others in the parlor.

"I can't wait to see that bastard hoisted on his own petard," Jim muttered in a low tone.

Honey squeezed his arm but did not further reply as she led her brother into the parlor to join the others.

Dinner had been a riotous family affair in the kitchen. Trixie admitted to herself that the Frayne-Wheeler clan were a very fun group of people. She could see the resemblance between the teasing Ben Riker and his more reserved cousin. Although Riker was blond, he had the same slender height and gold-flecked hazel eyes. Juliana, on the other hand, was petite and blonde and had a magical tinkling little laugh that made everyone around her laugh, too. She was an heiress to Will and Betsy Marsden, two very famous silver screen stars, who had died in a tragic car accident with Jim Frayne's birth parents, Win and Katie Frayne, when Juliana and Jim had just been children. Matthew Wheeler had brought the two youngsters into his family—Jim as his son, and Juliana as his niece, adopted by Ben Riker's parents. Looking at the lot of them, you couldn't tell that they hadn't started out as family. The laughter and joking was much the same as you saw around the Belden family table.

Hank Vorwald was much quieter than the rest, but he had a kind face and made an effort to bring her into the conversation as much as he could. Trixie appreciated the young man's thoughtful nature. It was rare in Tinsel Town.



"So, James," Ben called out lazily from his end of the table, "I hear you've got a séance all planned for us."

Juliana whirled around toward her cousin, her blue eyes lit up with excitement. "Oh, yes! I've been looking forward to this all day! When do we start?"

Jim gave his cousin an easy smile. "Well, we could take our drinks in and begin, if that's okay with you, Hon."

Honey gave him a nod and a return smile. "Sounds lovely."

Sinclair hadn't said a great deal at dinner. He made his attempts to charm Juliana and Ben, who had been seated on either side of him at the kitchen table. Trixie suspected that their placement was deliberate. Hank didn't seem to care for his cousin-in-law and had trouble keeping the dislike from his face when his gaze was on him. Honey had been seated at the opposite end of the table from her husband, and Jim...

Trixie hid a smile. Jim's dislike of his brother-in-law was pretty evident on his freckled face. She was pretty certain that Sinclair put up with Jim's scorn mostly because of Matthew Wheeler. She didn't know what the movie mogul thought of his son-in-law, but if he was anything like his sweet daughter or his cheerful, teasing nephew, she suspected he didn't think much of Sinister Sinclair either.

Trixie had kept up the wide-eyed Iowa girl act all during dinner. Even being seated at the end of the table with the two people who knew who she really was, she hadn't wanted to have a false moment or give Sinclair any reason to doubt her. And she'd found it rather easy to be breathless and a little shy when looking across at the handsome redhead who'd been at the back of her thoughts since the moment she'd met him.

Juliana had already risen from the table, pulling Sinclair to his feet with a tinkling laugh. "Oh, Sin! It'll be so much fun!" She threaded her arm through his as they walked toward the dining room. "Maybe we'll be the ones who finally reach Houdini." She tossed a look over her shoulder at her brother as they walked toward the other room. "What was that phrase again?"

"It's 'Rosabelle, believe,'" Ben replied promptly.

Jim shook his head at them. "Houdini meant that message to be a private one with his wife. Isn't she dead or something? Why would he bother to try to communicate with her now that she's over there on the other side with him?"

"Good point," Hank said with a small smile.

"Oh, pooh," Juliana said with a toss of her hair. "You're no fun. And I don't think she's dead yet, is she? Maybe she'll finally get her chance to communicate with him someday."

"I still say if Houdini's going to communicate with someone, it isn't going to be us. It'll be the wife." Jim winked at Trixie before he opened the doors to the dining room and ushered her in before him. "We'll probably get an answer from his pet Chihuahua."

Sinclair leaned down with a wolfish smile to Juliana and said, "I'm sure we'll connect with someone far more interesting than Houdini. Who knows? Maybe William Desmond Taylor will tell us who shot him."

Juliana batted her eyes at Sinclair and shivered dramatically. "Wouldn't *that* be exciting?"

Trixie couldn't help her own shiver as the small group filed into the darkened room. Diana Lynch sat at the head of the table, a colorful red bandana tied around her gleaming blue-black hair. Her eyes were closed, and she was murmuring in soft words that were too lowly-spoken to be understood. Her gypsy

costume exposed a quite generous bosom and her uncovered face, neck and arms were a creamy alabaster color. Her sensuous lips stopped moving as Jim shut the door behind him, closing them all into the eerie setting. Her eyes fluttered open, and Ben Riker let out a low whistle.

Trixie hid a smile as all four of the men's mouths fell open a little. She had to admit that Miss Lynch was, indeed, breathtakingly beautiful.

The woman looked at each person in the room before she let a smile curve her lips upward. "Welcome," she said in a breathy voice. "Please. Sit."

The group looked amongst themselves before heading toward the table. Trixie had been prepared to force Sinclair in the seat next to Diana, but it didn't take much for the lawyer to quickly take the seat to her left. The horrid man was near to drooling.

Trixie glanced at Honey, but the young woman seemed to take no notice of her husband's rather rude behavior. Instead, she seated herself opposite Diana at the other end of the table, as they'd planned, nearest to where Detective Mangan was hiding. Hank and Jim, both fairly radiating disapproval, immediately flanked her, sitting on either side of her, which left three seats at the table. Ben gestured to Juliana. "Go sit with your husband, Half-Pint. Miss Belden and I will hold up this side." He grinned at Juliana, who stuck her tongue out at him, before she did as he asked, sitting between her husband and Sinclair.

Trixie took the middle seat next to Jim, who still wasn't looking at her. A muscle worked in his freckled jaw as he stared down the table at his brother-in-law. Sinclair didn't appear to notice, mostly because his face was riveted to the expanse of chest that Diana displayed in her tantalizing costume.

Trixie put a hand on his, finally drawing his reluctant attention. She whispered, "Remember the distraction."

He looked at her for a moment before he said in a low mutter, "I remember. You didn't say anything about having to *like* the distraction."

Trixie slid her gaze quickly to Sinclair, who had suddenly seemed to remember where he was, and had lifted his head to look down at their end of the table. She gave Jim a deliberate, gentle caress of his hand as she let go of it, dropping her hand into her lap.

Jim's own gaze was shuttered, so she had no idea what he was thinking. But Sinclair's knowing smirk left no doubt as to his thoughts.

*Just a little longer, and his goose will be cooked.*

Juliana, happily, was already distracting everyone with her cheerful little clap. "So, how does this séance thing work?" Her question was posed to Diana, who closed her eyes again and waved her hands over the crystal ball.

"The spirit presence in this house is strong," she said, her voice the perfect blend of drama and husky whisper. Diana opened her eyes again and gave them a Mona Lisa smile. "The odds are good that we will be able to speak with him or her tonight."

As Juliana's own smile widened, Sinclair gave a little skeptical laugh. "The odds are good? I thought the odds were one hundred percent with all of you fortune teller types."

Diana clucked disapprovingly. "There are no guarantees. Sometimes, there aren't spirits around at all. Other times, spirits are reluctant to manifest themselves." She shrugged then. "And then there are the ones who aren't interested in talking." Her violet eyes gleamed as she looked at him. "They were once people. People don't react the same to anything in life. Why should death be any different?"

Sinclair's skeptical look didn't change much, but he didn't press the point further. Juliana, in the meantime, leaned forward and asked excitedly, "What do we do?"

"All of us should join hands together."

The participants of the room looked at each other and then, with slight shrugs, hands were extended and taken, creating a loose connected circle around the table.

"Now everyone close their eyes," Diana continued.

Trixie kept watch as the eyelids fluttered down. Even Sinclair had his eyes closed, a resigned but amused look on his face. Diana stared down at Trixie a moment before she, too, closed her eyes. Trixie finally joined the rest.

"Oh, spirits of this house, we ask you to join us here. Make your presence known to us." Diana's voice was as beautiful as her face. In fact, the eerie mysterious rasp she put into her voice made Trixie wonder if she had been a medium at some other point in her life.

Trixie had coached Diana with certain things to say in the event that Veronica did not make an appearance. Diana's words to Sinclair were true enough. Spirits were a fickle bunch, often reluctant to put on a dog and pony show for people sitting around a table wanting their appearance. But somehow, Trixie knew that Veronica would not let them down.

"Someone is here," Diana's voice almost lulled as she spoke in the low, sonorous tones. "Someone very sad. She..." Her voice stopped almost abruptly as a series of gasps traveled around the table.

Trixie herself had difficulty repressing a shudder when she felt what seemed like an icy finger trailing across her neck. She couldn't help, at that point, letting her eyes blink open. Too much was riding on this to not pay attention to what was going on around her.

Three candelabras stood in a spaced-out row on the table. One, near the end where Honey sat, her face pale and her mouth set; one in the center, its flickering glow making Juliana's hair glow gold in its reflected light; and one at the other end, near Sinclair and Diana. As she watched, the candlelight began disappearing, as if each candle was being snuffed by an invisible hand.

By this point, everyone's closed eyes had popped open. Apparently, Trixie thought to herself, she wasn't the only one not willing to remain unnoticed of unexplained things happening around her.

The snuffing of candles stopped once the candelabras near Honey and Juliana had been put out. The candelabra in front of Sinclair remained lit, the light casting shadows on his face.

"Do you have a message for us?" Diana was remaining cool under pressure, which was quite impressive under the circumstances.

There wasn't any response. She could hear the rasp of Honey's terrified breath. The grip of Jim and Ben's hands on hers was tight. Sinclair, Trixie noted, was still shadowed by the candles and hadn't moved much from his seat. The room was otherwise silent.

"Can you hear us?"

The only response to Diana's words was the tinkle of far away music. *The piano*. The tune, however, was not the one she'd seen earlier on the roll inside the piano. It was different. A jazzy tune popular about twenty years earlier.

Trixie's gaze flicked over to Sinclair. He looked pale. Nervous.

"Spirit, we want to communicate with you." Diana was nothing if not a plucky dame. Her face was also very white, and Trixie noticed she'd had to lick her lips a couple of times before she could get the words to come out.

Juliana let out a little scream as the sound of falling books startled them all.

"What is going on?" Sinclair hissed, his eyes narrowing as he tried to make out the figures of the others around the table.

The light in front of him whooshed out in one blow, as if an icy winter wind had blown in from outside through a window. Only this was southern California. And the dining room *had* no windows.

The room was pitch black. The only thing anchoring Trixie in the room was her continued grip on Jim and Ben's hands. That old sense of mystery, of the unknown, filled her. She knew what would happen next. She inhaled, preparing herself.

Almost as if a movie projector had been started, a white image flickered into view. Everyone in the room, including Trixie herself, gasped.

Veronica Echolls had been a beauty. Her blond bobbed hair curved against her elfin heart-shaped face. She wore a white, old-style flapper dress, complete with fringe and beading that was so intricate, Trixie wondered if it had been her wedding gown.

She stood, if one could say such a thing about a ghost, on the opposite end of the room from Diana. She considered the wide stares and open mouths of those around the table before she moved with deliberate slowness toward the other end of the table, her gaze intent and focused on Sinclair.

"What is this?" he demanded, his voice harsh and laced with fear. "What *is* this?"

"I tried to tell you, Sinclair," Honey suddenly said. "You didn't believe..."

"No! This is some sort of trick!" he shouted. "You all are playing a trick!"

Veronica continued to move steadily forward, her gaze not wavering from him for more than a second.

"It's real, sir," Diana said, her voice shaky but determined. "She's real. She's..."

"No. No, no, no, *no*!" he screamed as he shot to his feet. "This has to be a trick! There isn't any ghost. There never *was* any ghost. I didn't set this up. It isn't right."

"Set this up?" Ben's voice broke into Sinclair's frenzied diatribe. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Tell them, Sinclair," Veronica's eerie voice sounded amused. "Tell them your little plan." She ran a ghostly finger across his jaw.

In response, Sinclair yanked his hands from Juliana and Diana's. "No. This doesn't make sense." He backed away from the table, panting, his face a terrified mask. "You're not real. I made you up. You are only supposed to be real for *her*. She's the only one who's supposed to see and hear ghosts. Not me. *Not me!*"

Juliana gasped, and Ben got to his feet, ripping his hand out of Trixie's as he did so. "Is that son of a bitch saying what I think he's saying?" he demanded.

Veronica looked over her shoulder at them and smiled. A cold, angry little smile.

Light flooded the room, suddenly, and as everyone turned to look as to who had turned on the lights, Veronica vanished.

Dan Mangan leaned against the wall, his finger on the light switch, a grim, satisfied smile on his face. "Sinclair Kane, I think we need to have a little talk. Down at the station."

Honey's pale face suddenly suffused with color. Her hazel eyes flashed with fire as she looked at her still-terrified husband. "I want a divorce," she said, her voice full of icy fury.

As Detective Mangan led out a much-subdued Sinclair Kane, and the others flocked to Honey, hugging and exclaiming in anger and worry over her, Trixie leaned back in her chair and blew out a long breath. Her gaze traveled the room, noting that the sound of falling books they'd heard had likely re-uncovered the wire recorder hidden in the other room.

Veronica had done everything she could have dreamed of. The sense of satisfaction she felt only increased when she saw a slight flicker out of her eye and noticed that Veronica Echolls stood near the elegant front door, this time wearing a luxurious fur coat and holding a small bag in her hand. The ghost gave Trixie a smile and a little salute before she turned and traveled through the door, disappearing from view.

One wife saved from being driven insane by her husband and another one sent off to her Great Reward to wait in the hereafter for hers.

A good day, Trixie thought to herself. A very good day.

#### **The next day...**

Trixie had spent the morning on one of her most hated activities—math. After working a while trying to calculate all of her hours and expenses, she finally had a handwritten invoice finished. Her nose wrinkled as she looked over at her ancient Corona 3 typewriter, the thought of having to struggle through the old machine's quirks to get a typewritten invoice sending a groan through her. Trixie put her head down on her arms. "I need a secretary," she moaned.

"Naturally." Her brother's sarcastic voice broke through her lamenting. "Your handwriting is atrocious, and that typewriter is older than Old Man Lytell of the corner grocery and is about as efficient."

Trixie tilted her head up, giving him a sour look. "Oh. Great. It's you. The *Examiner's* nosiest reporter." She pushed herself the rest of the way up. "Is there something you want?"

"Someone promised another someone an exclusive story," Mart said as he took a seat in one of the chairs opposite her desk. "Remember?" He gestured at her as he settled his feet on the edge of her desk. "I spent hours digging through old newspapers for you."

"Don't give me that," she scoffed. "You had the information for me within a half hour."

"Hours, half hours, what does it matter?" he demanded. "I did you a favor. I scratch your back; you scratch mine."

"You'll get your story," she said firmly, "but not from me."

"What?" he exclaimed, sitting up from his slouch in the chair and his feet falling to the floor with a loud thump. "What kind of mess is this? You've been stringin' me along? My own *sister*?"

"Quit your yammering. It's giving me a headache." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I thought you'd be much more interested in getting the story from an interested but unbiased observer." Her blue eyes gleamed. "Such as an aspiring actress? Dark hair, violet eyes..."

Mart's own eyes grew round. "What? What are you saying?"

"You've been chinwagging for weeks now about Diana Lynch. I thought those acting skills you've been praising to the skies ought to get a run-through." She gave him a grudging nod. "She's as good as you said she was."

"I told you!" he exclaimed proudly.

"And for her trouble, I think she might just get a chance to talk to someone who can make a career for her happen." She opened her purse and pulled out a business card to hand to him. "But I thought you might want to get the goods on what went on at the Kane place from her rather than me."

He leaned forward and snatched the card from Trixie's fingers. "You're a real doll, Trix, you know that?"

"I know. I know." She waved her hands to shoo him. "Now get out of here before we get all mushy."

Mart got to his feet, gave her a cheeky grin and headed toward the door. As he opened it to leave, he stopped suddenly, his progress halted by the man standing there. "Excuse me," he said, grandly pulling the door open to let Jim Frayne inside.

"Thank you," Jim replied politely as he walked in, whisking off his hat as he did so.

Mart raised his eyebrows at his sister before he grinned again, exited and closed the door behind him.

"Please, Mr. Frayne, sit." Trixie motioned to the chair her brother had so recently vacated.

The good-looking man took the seat she'd indicated and gave her a crooked smile. "I just wanted to thank you—for all you did to help my sister. My family and I...we're very grateful."

"Just doing my job," she said. Trixie fidgeted, as she always did when she was praised, uncomfortable with the words. "Besides, I don't like seeing people taken advantage of. A special...dislike, if you will."

Jim's smile grew larger. "A dislike of mine as well."

Trixie had already cataloged the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, the upward curve of his surprisingly sensuous lips and the strong line of his jaw when she realized she'd been staring. Staring far too long for what was polite.

She could feel the blush travel up her cheeks and she quickly averted her eyes, scanning her desk for anything to distract her and lead the conversation in a different direction.

"I owe you for your time, as well," he continued, then, "and any expenses." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Do you have a bill ready for me? Or will you be sending it by mail instead?"

"No, I..." Trixie grabbed the handwritten invoice and hesitated before handing it to him. "I haven't had a chance to type it up. If you'd like, I can..."

"No need." He took the piece of paper from her, glanced at it, and then pulled a large checkbook from his pocket. In a few moments, he tore a check from it and handed it to her.

She took it from him, looked at it and immediately frowned. "This is much more than..."

"You've earned it," he said firmly. "Don't argue with me about it. You won't win."

She blinked at the grin that flashed across his face. *God, he was a handsome devil!* "You win a lot of arguments like this, do you?"

"Most of them," he replied as he tucked his checkbook back into his pocket.

"I'm amazed you're not a lawyer," she said, eyeing him with consideration. "You'd be a formidable opponent in court."

"As would you," he replied. He leaned back in his chair and gave her the same sort of scrutiny she was giving him. "You told Detective Mangan you needed him to be a credible witness for the case against Sinclair." He twirled his hat slowly around his finger before he continued, "You're smart. You're tough. You don't need any police detective covering for you."

She shrugged a little, trying to hide her pleasure in the compliment. "Cops have their uses."

"Hmmm" was his only reply.

Silence reigned between them for several moments. On Trixie's part, it was because she really had no idea what to say to the handsome man who'd concluded his business with her but seemed in no hurry to leave her office. On his part...well, she couldn't even guess what was going on in his mind.

Finally, he spoke, giving her an inquiring look. "Are you really from Iowa?"

The question was so unexpected that it made her laugh a little. "No," she admitted. "Born and bred Angel, right here."

"Isn't that the truth," he said, his voice low and husky.

Trixie inhaled, trying not to let his words affect her. He was, after all, a *client*! "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Frayne." She stood, then, forcing Jim Frayne to also rise to his feet. She held out her hand to him.

He took it, shook it and then he asked, "So we're done, then? Client and hired paranormal investigator?"

"Yes," she replied. "Unless you have something else you want me to investigate for you?"

He shook his head. "No." Jim hesitated and then gave her a brief smile. "Thank you again, Miss Belden, for all your help. I really am grateful."

With those words, he slipped his hat back on his head, turned on his heel and exited her office.

Trixie stared after him for a moment before she sank back into her chair, stunned by the level of disappointment she felt. Out of her life, then, a client returning to his real world of movie stars, society life and money.

But before she could dwell on this disappointment, a rap on the door startled her, and she was surprised to see Jim Frayne stick his head around it a moment later.

"Forget something?" she asked.

He shook his head and entered, closing the door again behind him. "Now that we've got the pleasure of business out of the way," he began.

"Yes?" she asked, her blue eyes growing wider as she watched him progress through her office, past the two desk chairs and around her desk to loom directly over her.

"We can get on to the business of pleasure," he said. "How about dinner?"

"Dinner?" She stared at him.

"Yes. Complete with food, utensils and even..." His face was even with hers then, his green-gold gaze staring into hers. "...napkins."

The word napkin had never sounded sexier.

"I don't know," she stuttered out. "You're a client..."

"No." He shook his head. "Your client walked out that door, a happy man, satisfied with your work just a few moments ago." Jim placed a hand on either side of her chair, his lips just a hair's breadth away from hers. "Make the man seeking your company for a meal a happy one, too."

Her blue eyed gaze locked with his, their breath mingling together as they stared at each other. "Eight-thirty," she said.

His lips curved up into a smile. "I'll pick you up. Wear something fancy."

"Only if you do," she said, her eyes narrowing.

"Done," he said, his smile turning into a grin. "You've made this man very happy."

Jim was about to straighten when she leaned forward, took his face in her hands and murmured, "Not yet, I haven't." just before she kissed him.

**A few minutes later...**

A tall, copper-haired man exited the shabby little office, whistling a merry tune. The beat cop passing him nodded at him. "Good day, sir," he said.

It was then that the cop noticed the disheveled look to the man, from mussed hair to a shirt collar that looked as if it had been gripped pretty firmly to what appeared to be lipstick on the corners of the man's mouth. His eyes began to twinkle.

"You have no idea," the young man replied with a grin. He straightened his tie and tilted his fedora, the grin growing ever wider. "Absolutely *no* idea."

## *The End*

**Susan's notes:** We managed to squeak another one in under the wire. Whew! I didn't think we were going to make it! Heaven knows, it's all my fault. Dana finished her parts ages ago. Between school and vacation and the holidays, it's a wonder I even remember my name!

As always, it's a pleasure writing with Dana. She so rocks in so many ways. It's even better to be her friend. Love you, sweetie, and I love our annual trip into the paranormal!

Lots of websites we visited during our travels. I think researching these things is half the fun. ;) Any dissimilarities between what we wrote and how people acted or thought or spoke in the 1940s is our fault. We just tried to have fun with it.

This trip is a one-off, having nothing to do with our normal gang of Bob-Whites in the present day. We just thought a trip to a 1940s' L.A. noir type of story would be fun, and it's a tip of the hat to one of our very most favorite television shows, *Veronica Mars*. If you're a fan of that show, you'll find a few nods to it in our story. Enjoy them. I know we did. \*grin\*

As always, the nods to canon characters are made with love. No money's being made from pretty much anything we do here in this story. Trust us.

The Red Car was part of the mass transit system owned by the Pacific Electric Company. These sites helped me in determining the path Trixie would take to get to Honey Kane's house:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific\\_Electric](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific_Electric)  
[http://sharemap.org/public/Los\\_Angeles\\_Pacific\\_Electric\\_Railways\\_%28Red\\_Cars%29#!flash](http://sharemap.org/public/Los_Angeles_Pacific_Electric_Railways_%28Red_Cars%29#!flash)  
<http://www.awalkerinla.com/2012/05/11/las-original-subway/>

The Forthmann house is the one we modeled the Kane house on. You can see what it looks like here: <http://bigorangelandmarks.blogspot.com/2008/01/no-103-forthmann-house-and-forthmann.html> The Lincoln Continental Jim drives can be seen here: <http://www.conceptcarz.com/vehicle/z9060/Lincoln-Continental.aspx>



## *So Evil My Love*

“So Evil My Love”, our title, is a gaslight noir movie from 1948. We thought it a good, fitting title for our own story. :)

This story is set in pre-World War II California. Real silk stockings were expensive. Many women would draw lines on the back of their legs in order to make it look as if they were wearing stockings, as Trixie attempts here.

Harry Houdini was a famous magician and escape artist who died of complications from a ruptured appendix. He gave his wife a secret code that was to be theirs and a way to indicate that it was “really him” when she made attempts to reach him beyond the grave. A séance is performed every year on Halloween, the night that Houdini died, to try to reach the famous magician. He has, however, remained elusive to attempts to reach him. Fitting for an escape artist, no?

[http://www.slate.com/blogs/atlas\\_obscura/2014/10/31/harry\\_houdini\\_s\\_ances\\_happen\\_every\\_halloween.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/atlas_obscura/2014/10/31/harry_houdini_s_ances_happen_every_halloween.html)

Corona 3 is a brand of typewriter heavily used from the early part of the 20th century until around the time of the Second World War. This site was helpful:

<http://www.typewritermuseum.org/collection/index.php3?machine=corona3&cat=kf>

There are many 1940s slang words tucked in and about in the story. Likely, you can surmise their meaning by context. If not, check out our link to get some of the meanings of them. :)

<https://www.miskatonic.org/slang.html> and <http://mollsanddolls.blogspot.com/2007/10/1920s-slang-dictionary.html>

William Desmond Taylor was a silent film director whose 1922 murder is, officially, still unsolved. You can read more about it here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Desmond\\_Taylor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Desmond_Taylor)

Consumption’s modern name is tuberculosis. Still a deadly disease today, but a lot more untreatable back in the 1920s. <http://askville.amazon.com/stop-calling-consumption-start-tuberculosis/AnswerViewer.do?requestId=10002883> (no longer available)

The Oxford shoe was a very popular brand of more casual ladies’ shoes in the 1940s.

<http://1940s.org/fashion/women/womens-shoes/>

This site was helpful in determining where Trixie would go to find the police for the area in which the Kanes lived.

[http://lapdonline.org/inside\\_the\\_lapd/content\\_basic\\_view/41960/Central+Bureau/Central/1A61/191/1419793925](http://lapdonline.org/inside_the_lapd/content_basic_view/41960/Central+Bureau/Central/1A61/191/1419793925)

This site helped with time/inflation conversions: <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/>

A bit about Harry Price and what Trixie had been working on in the 1930s can be found here:

<http://specterweb.tripod.com/guelphghost/id2.html>

<http://www.examiner.com/article/harry-price-one-of-histories-first-ghost-hunters-and-paranormal-investigators> (no longer available)

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2280818/pdf/canfamphys00158-0229.pdf>

<http://www.prairieghosts.com/harryprice.html> (no longer available)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borley\\_Rectory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borley_Rectory)

In our minds, Sinclair was punished by being convicted of his crime, stripped of his law license and sent to jail. Honey divorced him and eventually fell in love with and married a good-looking, caring doctor. And the rest of the group lived happily ever after. ‘Cause that’s how we roll. :)

Thanks again to all of you who enjoy these stories. Again, my apologies for this one being so late. It’s all on me. We shall hopefully see you again for another one next year!

\*\*~\*\*~\*\*~\*\*~\*\*

**Dana’s notes:** Usually, Susan and I write our notes simultaneously, but I read hers before writing mine this year. I will say that—it is most certainly *not* all on her!!! We’ve both had hellacious schedules, and I dawdled on sending my last part to her, too! We really wanted to get this out by Halloween, but when we realized that that wasn’t going to happen, we set a goal of posting it by the end of 2014. And we’re *just* making it under the wire. Heh.

*So Evil My Love*

Susan said a lot of what I was going to (*Veronica Mars*-inspired, as true to the 1940s as we could be being born in the 1970s, all that kind of jazz), so I won't repeat her.

I will say that it was awesome to be holed up in a hotel room with her near O'Hare one weekend in October while we researched, and plotted, and wrote the first quarter or so of the story. It's always fun to spend time with Susan giggling and gabbing, but when you add in research and plotting and writing, it's even better! Writing with Susan is a dream, and being her friend is beyond special. I mutual you, sweetie!

We're very sorry that the eldest Belden son doesn't make more of an appearance. We were going to have him married to Honey, but we just couldn't make him be the villain, and we were pretty set on that plot, so we made him the staid and respectable doctor that he is meant to be. And he and Honey do get a happy ending—even if we didn't write about it in the actual story. :) We'll try to make sure he has a bigger role next year! (And we'll even try to get it out at Halloween!!)

Thanks for reading and being so supportive of this "little" universe of ours. We truly appreciate it!

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