

AMITYVILLE
Horrible



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• One

“You know how you said you’d never do another reality ghost show?” Mike’s voice bounced off my dressing room walls.

“Yep, I did.” I turned the speaker sound down on my cell phone and pulled a tendril of loose hair from my twist. “And it still stands. Never, ever, ever—”

“It’s for charity.”

“Doesn’t matter. Not after the last time.”

“*Charity*, Jaime. Using your good fortune to raise the fortunes of others. I know that’s important to you.”

I tried to force out another “no,” but it stuck in my throat. Damn it. I took a deep breath. “What’s the cause?”

“Cotard’s syndrome.”

“Never heard of it.” I picked up the phone, switched to the browser and typed in a search.

“It’s a neurological disorder,” he said. “That means it affects the brain.”

I bit back a retort. That’s the price I pay for playing “ditzzy minor celebrity” for thirty years. Not that I’m a brain surgeon, but I do know the word for it is neurosurgeon.

“Cotard’s is very debilitating,” Mike continued. “It’s a rare but terrible—”

“Walking corpse syndrome?” I read from the screen. “Hell, no.”

“It’s a real condition, Jaime,” Mike hurried on. “Sure, there’s a promotional tie-in. Ghosts, zombies, walking corpses. But that’s just the hook. We’ll be raising real money for real victims. Think of the children.”

“It says here Cotard’s only affects adults.”

“Think of the children *of* those adults. Can you imagine what that’s like, having your parents believe they’ve been zombified? Absolutely tragic. But you can help. See, the idea is—”

I hung up. As I was turning off the phone, a knock came at my door.

“Ms. Vegas? Ten minutes.”

I shoved the phone in a drawer, checked my hair one last time and headed out.



Live shows are hell on performers. At the end, you feel like you’ve run a marathon, shouting at the top of your lungs the whole way. It’s not just the physical toll. There’s a mental one and an emotional one. A live show means your audience is right there, waiting to be entertained, and you sure as hell better deliver, because if you don’t, you won’t need to wait for the reviews to trickle in. They’ll tell you, then and there. It’s not just heckling. I’ve learned to deal with that. I think I actually prefer heckling to that most insidious critique—boredom. I swear, I can be on my catwalk in front of five hundred people, talking a mile a minute, half blinded by the lights, and still hear every yawn, notice every pair of closed eyes.

So why do it? With my reputation, I could probably make more giving private sessions. I could certainly make more with a TV show. There was a time when I dreamed of that. Then, after that last reality show, *Death of Innocence*, I got my offer, and I realized I didn't want it. Yes, it was the next step up my career ladder. But I was happy where I was, and sometimes, that's more important.

So what gets me out on that stage? The audience. Yes, there are jeers and there are eye rolls. I'm a spiritualist. There's always part of the audience that comes to mock the crazy lady who thinks she talks to the dead—or the con artist who fakes it. There are also yawns and even snores on a really bad night. But that's five people out of five hundred. For the rest, I deliver what I promise. Not just entertainment. Happiness. Peace. Closure. Even if it's not real, it does something. Something magical.

Tonight's show was in an old theater. With this kind of performance, the older the venue the better. It was a traditional setup with a stage at the front, but my crew had added a portable catwalk to allow me to walk down the middle aisle, elevated so everyone could see me. As I walked, I talked.

"There's a spirit trying to come through. It's a woman. The name..." I lifted my hand for quiet as I strained to listen. "Margaret? Marg? Meg? Megan? Do we have anyone hoping to contact a loved one—"

I didn't even need to finish. Two dozen hands shot up.

"Wait..." I said. "I can see her now. Marg? Meg? I know this isn't easy, but if you can just come a little..." I smiled. "Yes, that's better. Thank you. Take a moment now. Rest." I turned back to the audience. "She's come partially through the veil. I'm still not hearing her clearly, but we're going to give her a moment before I ask her to complete the journey. We had a few people who'd lost someone named Margaret or Megan..."

The hands shot up again. Another dozen joined them, those who had, in the last few minutes, sifted through their memories and remembered great-aunt Marguerite, who died when they were five.

“I can see enough to give a partial description,” I said, my gaze fixed on the stage. “She’s dark-haired.”

Several hands lowered. A few more wavered.

“She’s not tall,” I said. “Five-two? Five-three?”

More lowering. More wavering.

“Average weight? Maybe slightly more?”

We were back to a dozen hands now. I climbed off the catwalk and headed down the aisle to one that had been firmly up since the first question.

“I feel a pull in this direction,” I said. “Can you tell me your name?”

The woman—gray haired, mid-sixties—stood.

“Nancy. Nancy Masters.”

“And who are you looking for today, Nancy?”

“My sister Margie. She passed last winter. Stroke.”

I looked toward the stage. “The woman I’m seeing is young, but spirits often choose their materialized form from a time when they were happiest. Margie was a brunette? Petite?”

Nancy nodded.

I backed up to where I could see both Nancy and the stage. “She’s coming through a little better now. She’s wearing her hair. . .”

I squinted at the stage, while watching Nancy’s reaction out of the corner of my eye.

“Down?” I said.

No reaction.

“Short?”

A slight dropping of her jaw. Disappointment.

“To her shoulders?”

Her gaze shifted from mine, but her jaw reset. Getting warmer. . .

“No, it appears to be up.”

Her gaze returned. Hotter. . .

“Yes, that’s why it looked short. It seems to be pinned up. In a bun?”

A faint droop to her eyelids. Cooler. . .

“No, a twist.”

Her eyes gleamed, crow’s feet wrinkling as she struggled not to smile.

“Yes, definitely a twist. Like mine tonight. She has excellent taste.”

A laugh tittered through the audience. Relief and approval. The whole rapid-fire exchange had taken a matter of seconds as I peered at the distant figure, as if trying to get a better look.

There was no figure. No ghost. In fact, there was vervain burning backstage and in the lobby. If anyone asks, my staff will explain that it’s to soothe troubled spirits. That’s what they believe, because everyone on my staff believes I can speak to the dead. It’s a job requirement.

They’re right, too. I can. I’m a necromancer, which is an old word for those who can speak to and raise the dead. Like most, I tried to stick to the “speaking” part and do as little even of that as possible. I just don’t actually do it in a show, because if I snuff out that vervain, the room will fill with the dearly departed of audience members, local residents, state residents. . . Hell, if I’m within two hundred miles of someone a spirit wants to speak to, he’ll show up.

Wouldn’t that make me more credible? No. Because if Nancy’s sister Margie really did appear, she’d have a message. She might ask Nancy to get Margie’s favorite necklace back from her divorced daughter-in-law. Or to tell Margie’s husband not to flirt with that

fifty-year-old hussy down the road. Or to make sure Margie's grandson didn't buy that motorcycle he was eyeing.

Nancy doesn't want—or need—to hear such petty concerns. She needs to hear that her sister is happy. She's in a good place and looking forward to the day when they will be reunited. Unless Margie loathed Nancy or was a closet axe murderer, she really is happy and missing her sister. That's just not the message she'd impart first. So I do it for her.

Is that wrong? Probably. I've long since stopped worrying. I make people happy. I give them closure. It's as close to a money-back guarantee as you can get in this world, or the next.



After the show ended, I had a press conference. Normally, that would be a waste of time. You want the media coverage while folks can still buy tickets. But this had been my first show in Oklahoma City in a decade, so advance media hadn't been necessary. With proper outreach from my team, tonight's show had sold out a month ago.

However, as long as I was in Oklahoma, I might as well do a few stops. That's where this press conference came in handy, letting people know that if they missed tonight's show, they could catch the ones in Tulsa and Lawson later this week, but they'd better move, because seats were filling fast. Doing the press conference post-show meant the cameras could catch the happy audience members as they departed. It wasn't so much about letting people know where to find me as convincing them—if they thought it sounded intriguing—that I was the real deal.

While my audience members sold the show for me, I rested backstage. Then I swanned out, apologizing profusely for my

disheveled appearance, explaining the mental and physical toll a summoning had on me, joking about aging ten years in two hours. I looked fine. Or as fine as I can look at forty-eight without the help of needles or scalpels. Of course, I'd spent the last twenty minutes touching up backstage—I'd rather dive into a pit of putrefying zombies than appear on camera without at least a mirror-check. It's not about vanity. It's about image. Okay, maybe a little vanity, too.

When I came out, cameras clicked and mikes turned my way. I mingled with the crowd asking after everyone's health as if we were at a cocktail party. There were even cocktails. Bloody Marys and Zombies. When you do this shtick, you either embrace it or try to dignify it. I've learned long ago that I'll get a lot more laughs—and a lot less ridicule—if I play it up.

I was making my way through the crowd when a pert blonde rattled off a TV station call sign so fast I didn't quite catch it. I focused on her name instead, which I've always found to be more important. It was Brittany. I'm guessing at the spelling, though I'm quite sure there was really an extra I or silent H in there somewhere. There always is.

"Ms. Vegas!" she squeaked. "Is it true you've signed on for the Amityville show?"

"Amityville?"

She raised her voice. After you reach a certain age, everyone mistakes confusion for hearing loss. Or dementia. In show biz, that age starts at about thirty.

"The charity event?" she said. "For Cotard's syndrome?"

I opened my mouth to give a gracious response, something about my schedule. But she kept going.

"I heard you signed on. That is so amazing. It's a great cause. My father has Cotard's. It's such a tragic disease that no one ever

hears of, but that's going to change." She put out her hand. "Thank you. Really. On behalf of the families of Cotard's sufferers everywhere." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "Thank you."

All around us, camera bulbs flashed and I knew, without a doubt, that I was screwed.