

# Jaime Vegas, Center Stage

One drawback to being on stage for most of your life is that eventually you forget how to act when you're off it. Not that it matters. In such a life, you're never really offstage. Even walking through a house you can't lower your guard . . . at least not if it's home to a production crew gearing up to film one of the most anticipated TV specials of the season--one costarring you.

I was walking from my bedroom—where I'd been unpacking—to the dining room. I had my stage face on: eyes alert and interested, walk purposeful yet feminine, faint smile ready to explode into a camera-ready grin. I could say I resented the ruse, hated it even, but I'd be lying. I'd been on stage since toddler-hood beauty pageants, and had never found a game quite so challenging, rewarding or, yes, fun.

My heels clicked along the hardwood floor. The hall was wide and dark, the only lights coming from spots highlighting twin rows of art. From the other rooms came the sounds of shouted orders and laughter as the crews set up.

A saw buzzed. As I caught a whiff of sawdust and oil, I shuddered to imagine what alterations the crew were making to the Brentwood house. From what I'd heard, the homeowners weren't likely to complain—they desperately needed the money. The "official" rumor was a

failed film project, but the one I'd heard involved an unplanned baby project with the nanny. Tabloid stories to be suppressed, a young woman to be paid off, a wife to placate—it could all get very expensive.

As I passed a young man measuring the hall, I nodded his way, and his gaze flew to me, jaw dropping slightly.

"M—Ms Vegas? Jaime Vegas?"

I swung around, hair sliding over my shoulder, and fixed him with a megawatt smile that I didn't need to fake. Shallow of me, I know, but there's no ego boost like the slack-jawed gape of man half your age.

He blinked. "Geez, it is you."

He hurried over to shake my hand.

"Is there any chance—?" he began, then swallowed. "I know it's unprofessional to ask, but is there any chance of getting an autograph?"

"Of course. I'm just heading to a meeting right now, but you can grab an autograph from me any time. Just bring me something to sign. Or if you prefer a photo . . ."

"A photo would be great."

My smile brightened. "A photo it is, then. I have some in my room."

"Thanks. Grandpa will love it. He's such a fan of yours. He has a thing for redheads, but you're his favorite. All his buddies in the nursing home think you're hot."

Grandpa? Great. Just what I needed on the first day of a big job—the reminder that, in Hollywood, I was already a decade past my best-before date.

I kept smiling, though. Smile and wave. Smile and wave. Another minute of conversation, and the promise of a handful of signed photos for Gramps and the boys, then I was off again.

As I neared the dining room, a crisp British voice within snapped, "Because it's ridiculous, that's why. Mr. Grady is a professional, and he will not be subjected to mockery."

Before I pushed open the door, I pictured the speaker: a stylish woman, roughly my age, dressed in a suit and oozing no-nonsense efficiency. I walked in, and there she was—small and wiry, as if extra flesh would be a sign of softness she could ill afford. She had short dark blond hair and thin lips. Icy blue-green eyes glared from behind her tiny glasses. The personal assistant model A: the bulldog, designed to raise hell on her client's behalf while letting him play the gracious, good-natured star.

Facing her was a younger woman, maybe thirty, dumpy, with a shoulder-length bob and worried eyes. The director model C: the overwhelmed first-timer.

The dining room, like most of the house, had been "redecorated" to accommodate the shoot. Step one had been taken by the homeowners: clearing out anything they wouldn't want damaged. So the dining room table was gone, replaced by a cheaper one, now covered in papers and diagrams. The chairs, too, had been replaced, with sturdier models more suited to an office.

As for the dead guy hanging from the chandelier, I suspected he came with the house, and was probably tough to remove without an exorcism or two.

I eyed him from the doorway, getting a good eyeful, so I wouldn't be tempted to stare once I was in the room. Thirty years of seeing ghosts and you learn all the tricks. This one wasn't a ghost, but a residual--an afterimage.

The man was maybe fifty, average size but with the heavy jowls of a much bigger man, as if he'd lost a lot of weight, fast. He swayed from an old crystal chandelier superimposed over the modern one. His face was mottled and swollen, eyes thankfully closed.

Who was he? What tragedy had brought him to an end so emotionally powerful that the image was seared forever in this room? The question barely flitted through my mind. Cold, yes, but a matter of self-preservation. When you see scenes like this every day, you can't stop to wonder, to even think too much about them, or you'll go mad. With us, there's enough danger of that already.

I looked my fill, then walked into the room. The two women were standing. Facing off. Both turned as I entered. The older woman's gaze slid over me, lips tightening as if someone had shoved a lemon wedge in her mouth. I flashed a smile and her lips pursed more. If you can't turn the heads of twenty-year-old boys, winning the catty disapproval of women your own age is a good consolation prize.

I stopped a hairsbreadth from the hanged man and tried not to recoil as his swaying body circled my way.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," I said to the younger woman. "I was sent to speak to the director. Would that be you?"

The woman smiled and extended a hand. "It is. Becky Cheung. And you must be Jaime Vegas. This is Claudia Wilson, Mr. Bradford Grady's assistant."

Two for two.

I shook Cheung's hand, then said, "Should I step outside and let you two finish?"

"No, no," Becky said, a touch of desperation in her voice. "This concerns you, too. We're discussing a promo shot. Mr. Simon has decided he wants each of the three stars to say a line."

Claudia shot a hard look at Becky. "A very specific line."

"Which is . . .?" I prompted.

"I see dead people."

The hanged man's stockinged foot swung past my arm as I managed a laugh. "You know, I think I've heard that one before."

Becky's gaze went to mine, searching for some sign that I was offended. "We—Mr. Simon—thought it would be fun. Kind of, you know, campy—"

"Campy?" Claudia said. "Mr. Grady does not do campy."

"A little self-mockery never hurt anyone," I said. "Let's face it. This is entertainment. Most people watching this don't really expect us to contact ghosts. It's all about the fun of seeing us try."

"So you'll do it?" Becky asked.

"Sure. It sounds like a cute gimmick."

"Mr. Grady does not do gimmicks," Claudia said, then strode from the room.

"Thank you," Becky whispered once Claudia was gone. "This isn't nearly as easy as I thought it would be. Everyone's taking it very . . ."

"Seriously?" I said with a laugh. "Don't worry about it. We're trying to raise the ghost of Marilyn Monroe. If that doesn't scream cheap thrills, what does? I'm in it for the fun." I grinned. "And the chance to spend a week living in a neighborhood I could only dream of."

"Not everyone is so thrilled with that part. I think we're going to lose Starr Phillips."

"I heard she wasn't happy about the new setup."

"I know it's unusual, but Mr. Simon likes to try fresh angles. He thought this would be fun, all three spiritualists staying in one house in Brentwood, even if it isn't the Monroe estate. It'll make it super easy to do interviews and the pre-taped joint segments. Plus it will give you time to get to know one another, bond, get some synergy going . . ."

"Maybe a little professional rivalry? Sounds like spiritualist Big Brother. So what's the prize? Last medium standing is the one who gets to contact Marilyn Monroe?"

An eye roll and a shudder. "Oh God, but please don't mention that to the executive producers or they might go for it. I'm definitely not a fan of humiliation as entertainment."

"Good. I brought a week's worth of new clothes and would hate to be voted out before I get a chance to wear them all."

She laughed. "No one is being voted out of this house, though we might have to replace Starr. We could hold her to the contract, but Mr. Simon already has a potential replacement. A newcomer who's been driving him nuts begging for a spot—any spot—on the show."

A crew member walked in, and Becky pulled a sheet from her clipboard. "Now, I'm sure you want to unpack and get settled, Jaime, so here's your schedule for the afternoon, just media interviews and—"

My cell phone rang. I could tell who it was by the ring tone, and I'm sure I broke into a grin more becoming of a four-year-old than a woman of forty-four.

"Just a sec," I said to Becky as I answered and promised to call right back.

When I hung up, she gave me a ten second rundown on my afternoon obligations, and passed me the schedule. Then I was sprinting for the door as fast as my Christian Louboutin platform sandals could take me. Four plus inch heels aren't made for anything speedier than a runway stroll, but I pushed them to a jog, inspiring a look of alarm from two passing workmen. I told myself the haste was necessary. Jeremy had a plane to catch. I was surprised he hadn't left already. And if there hadn't been any urgency . . . I'd probably still have hurried.

I know there is something wrong with a woman racing to take a man's call. I should have more self-respect. More dignity. The way I see it, though, it's karmic payback. I've always been

the one leading the chase--inspiring the bad love poetry, setting the hoops ever higher . . . then waltzing away when I grew bored. Now, I guess some cosmic force had decided it was time for me to make a fool of myself.

I still couldn't believe I'd worked up the nerve to ask Jeremy to join me for the week. We were—despite my hopes—just friends. But it was a friendship rooted in mutual acquaintances and shared business, not the sort of thing where you say "hey, let's take a vacation together." When I'd seen him two months ago, I'd been talking about the show and, having had a few drinks, the segue came easily. I was allowed to have a personal assistant or guest on the set, and I hadn't invited anyone and would he be interested? When he'd said it sounded like fun, I'd thought he'd been brushing me off. But now he was coming. And would be here in eight hours.

I tried to squash any flame of hope and play it cool, but I couldn't. Jeremy was flying two thousand miles, not on council business, but just to see me. That had to mean something.

I slipped out the rear door. The patio opened to a terraced yard stuffed with gardens, gazebos, ornamental trees and statuary. As I trotted along the flagstone path, winding around one fountain, one pond and two oversized statues, I wondered whether a trail of bread crumbs would have been wise.

Finally I was far enough from the house. I sat down on a wooden bench, took a deep breath and I called.

Jeremy answered after the first ring, as if he'd been waiting.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" he asked.

"No, I was just getting my schedule for the day. Mainly interviews plus some meet-and-greets, culminating, of course, in the welcome bash tonight--which, lucky man, you'll be just in time for, so I hope you're ready to play party escort."

I stopped for breath. Silence filled the pause. I winced and mentally smacked myself. Jeremy at a Hollywood party? Sure, he'd do it for me, but root canal would be more comfortable. At this moment, he was probably picturing a week of social events, smiling and making small talk with strangers, and wondering whether it was too late to refund his ticket.

"Oh, I'm kidding," I said with a light laugh. "I know you'll be jet-lagged. Plus the whole black tie thing. I'm sure you don't have a tux—"

"I do. And it's packed. The party isn't a problem, Jaime . . ."

When he let the line trail off my heart started thumping and I knew what was coming next.

"I'm afraid something came up and—"

"You can't make it."

"No, I'll be there. But I'll be delayed a day or two. The babies are sick—"

"Are they okay?" The "babies" were his fourteen month old grandchildren.

"It's just a cold, but it's their first—"

A scream drowned him out—less like the wail of a sick baby than the roar of a wounded and enraged lion.

"Jesus, poor Kate," I said. "She sounds miserable."

Jeremy chuckled. "Yes, that's Kate. She's not that ill actually. It's Logan who's bearing the brunt of it. Of course, he's not complaining, but he's quite willing to let her express her outrage on his behalf."

I laughed and leaned back onto the bench, getting comfortable now. "So is Clay going nuts?"

"He's . . . not making it easier."

"I'll bet. And Elena?"

"She's fine. To her, this is what one expects with little ones. But Clay's not used to being sick or having anyone around him sick . . ."

"So you're going to stay there for a few more days?"

"Two at most. I know it sounds like I'm overreacting—"

"If they get worse, they can't go to a hospital. They need you. I understand that."

"I do want to come, Jaime, and I'll be there soon as I can."

I smiled as my heart gave a little flip. "Good. Then look after those babies, tell everyone I said hi and I'll get an update from you tomorrow."

When I signed off, I closed my eyes. A decent performance. Suitably supportive and understanding, disappointment well concealed.

As I listened to the birds chirp and rustle in the hedges, feeling the heat of the midday sun on my face, I let the wisps of disappointment float away. And they were, to my surprise, only wisps.

I'd been pushed aside by sick grandchildren. Ten years ago I'd have been furious. No, not furious; shocked. Unable to believe a man would delay a vacation with me to nurse sick children. And yet, if Jeremy had made any other choice, he wouldn't be the man I'd raced at breakneck speed to talk to. Family—and family responsibilities—came first, and I loved him for that. Even when I knew that priority would never change, no matter what form our relationship might take.

The birds had gone silent, their song replaced by the soft whisper of the wind and the tinkle of distant chimes. I instinctively tensed.

"Hello?" I said, rising.

I listened for footsteps, but didn't expect to hear them. The birds were too quiet to be reacting to any normal intruder.

Someone touched my arm. I turned sharp, but no one was there. I rubbed the spot on my arm, as if I could erase the sensation. Probably a butterfly brushing past or a flying beetle bumping into me. It wouldn't be a ghost--with them I only got sight and sound.

I checked the schedule Becky had given me. Three interviews, all print media, plus a meeting with the—

Fingers clasped my free hand. I resisted the instinct to yank away and looked. No one was there. Yet I could still feel the unmistakable sensation of someone holding my hand.

Maybe this was how it started with Nan. A lifetime of seeing what shouldn't be there and eventually you start imagining what you know can't be there. Reality and imagination and merge into one. That's what happens to necromancers.

The fingers slid from my hand. I shuddered and squeezed my eyes shut.

Once before I'd had a ghost who'd been able to touch me. A special case from a very special form of ghost. So it wasn't impossible. Unlikely to happen again in my lifetime, but not impossible.

As I opened my eyes, I let my mind shift, emptying to the semi-trance state that would let me see ghosts too weak or inexperienced to pass over. Around me, everything seemed to go still, the wind chimes faint and distant, the gardens blurring as if I was sliding from this dimension to another.

"Hello?" I said. "Is anyone here?"

Not the most creative of greetings, but it was usually enough. If a ghost was here, that meant he or she wanted to talk to me and didn't need elaborate entreaties.

I kept turning and calling out, but no one answered. A sharp shake of my head and I was back to planet Earth. I looked around again, offering a few more tentative "hellos" to any spirits who might be lurking behind bushes.

"Look, if someone is here—"

"Ms. Vegas?"

I spun as a security guard peeked around a hedge.

"Didn't mean to startle you," he said. "Were you calling for someone?"

"Actually, yes," I said with a rueful smile. "I came out for a walk and I'm hopelessly lost."

He laughed. "I don't doubt it. This place is a maze. Come on then, and I'll walk you back."