

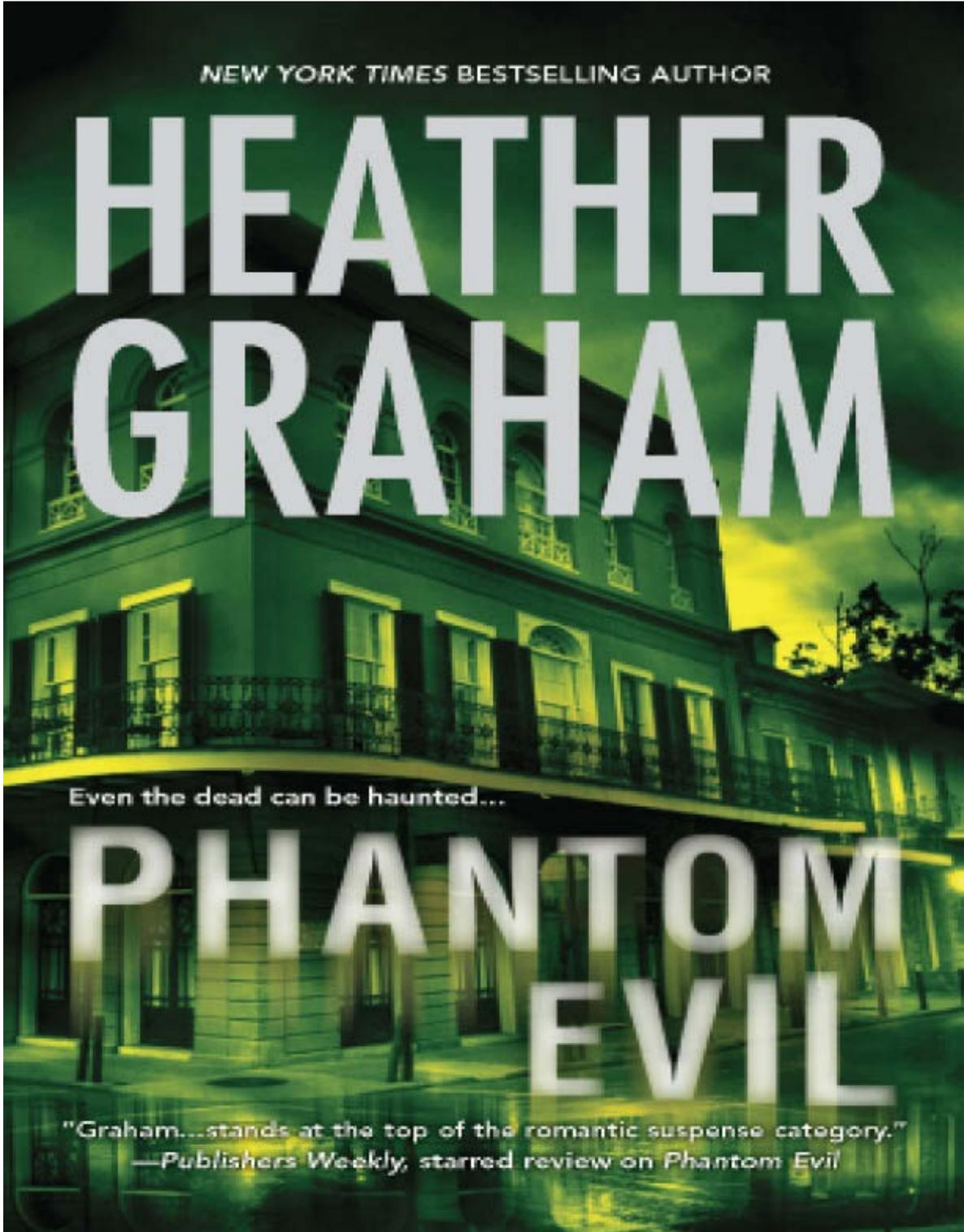
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# HEATHER GRAHAM

Even the dead can be haunted...

# PHANTOM EVIL

"Graham...stands at the top of the romantic suspense category."  
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review on *Phantom Evil*



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# HEATHER GRAHAM

Even the dead can be haunted...

# PHANTOM EVIL

"Graham...stands at the top of the romantic suspense category."  
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review on *Phantom Evil*

***A secret government unit, a group of renegade paranormal investigators...and a murder no one else can crack***

Though haunted by the recent deaths of two teammates, Jackson Crow knows that the living commit the most heinous crimes.

A police officer utilizing her paranormal intuition, Angela Hawkins already has her hands full of mystery and bloodshed.

But one assignment calls to them too strongly to resist. In a historic mansion in New Orleans's French Quarter, a senator's wife falls to her death. Most think she jumped; some say she was pushed. And yet others believe she was beckoned by the ghostly spirits inhabiting the house—once the site of a serial killer's grisly work.

In this seemingly unsolvable case, only one thing is certain: whether supernatural or all too human, crimes of passion will cast Jackson and Angela into danger of losing their lives...and their immortal souls.

## ***Praise for the novels of Heather Graham***

“Graham expertly blends a chilling history of the mansion’s former residents with eerie phenomena, once again demonstrating why she stands at the top of the romantic suspense category.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Phantom Evil*, starred review

“An incredible storyteller.”

—*Los Angeles Daily News*

“Graham wields a deftly sexy and convincing pen.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Graham’s knack for giving readers the shivers isn’t waning...a brilliant tale of suspense.”

—*RT Book Reviews* on *The Evil Inside*

“If you like mixing a bit of the creepy with a dash of sinister and spine-chilling reading with your romance, be sure to read Heather Graham’s latest...Graham does a great job of blending just a bit of paranormal with real, human evil.”

—*Miami Herald* on *Unhallowed Ground*

“Graham’s rich, balanced thriller sizzles with equal parts suspense, romance and the paranormal—all of it nail-biting.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *The Vision*

“Heather Graham will keep you in suspense until the very end.”

—*Literary Times*

“Mystery, sex, paranormal events. What’s not to love?”

—*Kirkus Reviews* on *The Death Dealer*

“The paranormal elements are integral to the unrelentingly suspenseful plot, the characters are likable, the romance convincing, and, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Graham’s atmospheric depiction of a lost city is especially poignant.”

—*Booklist* on *Ghost Walk*

**Also by Heather Graham**

THE LAST NOEL  
THE SÉANCE  
BLOOD RED  
THE DEAD ROOM  
KISS OF DARKNESS  
THE VISION  
THE ISLAND  
GHOST WALK  
KILLING KELLY  
THE PRESENCE  
DEAD ON THE DANCE FLOOR  
PICTURE ME DEAD  
HAUNTED  
HURRICANE BAY  
A SEASON OF MIRACLES  
NIGHT OF THE BLACKBIRD  
NEVER SLEEP WITH STRANGERS  
EYES OF FIRE  
SLOW BURN  
NIGHT HEAT  
THE UNSEEN  
BRIDE OF THE NIGHT  
AN ANGEL FOR CHRISTMAS  
THE EVIL INSIDE  
SACRED EVIL  
HEART OF EVIL  
NIGHT OF THE VAMPIRES  
THE KEEPERS  
GHOST MOON  
GHOST NIGHT  
GHOST SHADOW  
THE KILLING EDGE  
NIGHT OF THE WOLVES  
HOME IN TIME FOR CHRISTMAS  
UNHALLOWED GROUND  
DUST TO DUST  
NIGHTWALKER  
DEADLY GIFT  
DEADLY HARVEST  
DEADLY NIGHT  
THE DEATH DEALER

\* \* \* \* \*

Look for Heather Graham's next novel  
THE UNHOLY  
Available from MIRA Books  
wherever books are sold.

**HEATHER  
GRAHAM**

**PHANTOM  
EVIL**



Dedicated to the Hotel Monteleone, and the wonderful staff there, and to everyone who has helped me all these years to keep Writers for New Orleans up and about—and our writers writing on for the beautiful and historical city of New Orleans!

At the Hotel Monteleone:

Dennis Hewitt, Jorge Cortazar, Irwin Lee, Michael Montgomery, Elsa Trochez, Wayne Crawford, Bertilla Burton, Kathy Bass (Le Café), Lucille Williams (Le Café), Estefania Ramirez, Kelly Morgan, “Albe” Hendrix, Ricky Jones, Al Barras, Burt Robinson, Darren Carey, Joseph Lecour, Ken Dillion, Robert Kotish, Ruosal Vives, Alex Olisevsci, Chef Randy Buck (Executive Chef), Chef Jose Munguia (Sous Chef), Chef Ming Duong (Pastry Chef), Fred Connerly, Jorge Melara, Renee Penny, Hilda Henderson, Thomas Joseph

At Royal AV:

Lawrence Williams, Keith Donatto, Marvin Andrade, Grace Bocklud, Bryan Isbell  
(Royal AV)

At Fifi Mahoney’s—the world’s most amazing wig shop:

Brian Peterson, Marcy Hesseling, Nikki McCoy, Jamie Gandy, Bobby Munroe, Megan Lunz

And at Harrah’s:

Jordan Smith, K. Brandt

And...very especially, Sheila Vincent, who has gone above and beyond for us, so very many times!

[WritersForNewOrleans.com](http://WritersForNewOrleans.com)

# **Contents**

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

## Prologue

*The house on Dauphine*

“*Mommy.*”

She had dozed, Regina Holloway thought. Sheer exhaustion from the work she engaged in at the house on Dauphine Street. Sheer exhaustion had finally allowed her to drift off to sleep. The word, the whisper, was something she had conjured in her mind; she had been so desperate to hear it spoken again.

Waking, not opening her eyes, she listened to what was real. The sound of musicians down the street, and the spattering of applause that followed their jazz numbers. The deep, sad heartbeat of the saxophone. The distant noise of the mule-driven carriages that took tourists around the historic French Quarter. Sometimes, the sound of laughter.

She breathed in the smell of pine cleaner, which they had been using on the house. Beneath it—drifting in from the open French doors that led to the courtyard of the beautiful home—was the sweet scent of the magnolia trees that grew against the rear wall. They’d finally gotten their home in the French Quarter, with its subtle and underlying hint of strange days gone by.

Some said that it was haunted by those days, by that history, certainly not always so pleasant. This house had been, after all, owned by Madden C. Newton, the killer who had terrorized many a victim in the years following the Civil War. The tour group carriages rolled by with tales of ghosts and ghastly visions seen by previous owners. But neither she nor David believed in ghosts, and the house had been a steal. Now, of course, she longed with her whole heart to believe in ghosts. If they existed, she might see her Jacob again.

But ghosts were not real.

The house was a house. Brick, wood, mortar, lath, plaster and paint. She and David had both grown up on the “other” side of town; they had dreamed of owning such a house. They had, however, never dreamed that they would live in it alone.

Yes, she knew what was real, and what wasn’t. She was learning to live without the painkillers that had gotten her through the first months after Jacob had been lost. The painkillers had given her several strange visions, but none of them ghostly.

“*Mommy.*”

But she heard the word, and she heard it clearly. She opened her eyes, and a scream froze in her throat.

A little boy stood there. A little boy just about Jacob’s age, seven. He was dressed in Victorian-era breeches, a little vest and frock coat, knickers and boots.

And an ax blade cut into his skull, the shaft protruding from it. A trail of blood seeped down the sides of his face.

“*Mommy, it hurts. It hurts so badly. Help me, Mommy,*” he said, looking at her with

wide, blue, trusting eyes.

She so desperately wanted to scream. She had seen her son in dreams, but this wasn't her son. She knew the stories about the house, knew about the murders that had taken place here just after the Civil War... .

Yes, she knew, but at the worst of times, she hadn't had such strange and horrible visions.

He wasn't real.

\* \* \*

Sounds emitted from her at last. Not screams. Just sounds. Sounds of terror, like the nonsense chatter of an infant. She wanted to scream.

*"Mommy, please. Mommy, I need you."*

It wasn't Jacob, and it wasn't Jacob's voice. And Jacob had been killed in a car accident six months ago; a drunk driver had nearly killed them all, veering over three lanes on I-10 late at night.

Jacob had died at the hospital, in her arms. He had been buried at Lafayette Cemetery, dressed in his baseball uniform, which he had loved so dearly. She wasn't hearing her son's voice.

Just his words.

*"Mommy, it hurts. It hurts so badly. Help me, Mommy."*

Jacob's words, those he had spoken when she had held him at the hospital, just seconds before the internal bleeding had taken his sweet, young life.

This was not Jacob.

No.

She closed her eyes, unable to scream. She prayed that David would come home, Senator David Holloway. Her husband, handsome, even, lucid, rational, wonderful, ever there for her in their shared grief. David could hold her, and she would find strength. He was due home. Dusk had come. Dusk, and yet, there had still been pink-and-yellow streaks remaining in the sky, casting light upon the dust motes that had danced in the room. Dust motes that became the image of a murdered child.

He would go away. He wasn't real. He was the result of the local lore about the house, that was all.

*"Mommy, please, I need you. Please, just hold my hand."*

She opened her eyes. He hadn't gone away. He was standing there, anguished eyes on her, reproach and confusion in them. The boy was wondering how she could ignore him, stare at him with such horror in her own expression.

*"Mommy?"*

"You're not...not there," she whispered.

*"Mommy, don't leave me! I'm scared. I'm so scared. Take my hand, hold it, please, I'm so scared!"* he said.

\* \* \*

And then, the little boy reached out. She recoiled inwardly, sheets of icy fear sweeping through her with the rage of a storm. And then...

She felt the little hand. That little hand, reaching for hers. It was warm, it was vital, and it seemed so alive.

The fingers squeezed hers. She squeezed back.

*"I need you, Mommy,"* he said.

She didn't scream. She managed words. "It's all right," she said.

Suddenly the twilight became infused with dust motes that sailed on pink-and-yellow ribbons of light, a palette fueled by the dying of the day. Soon, the harsh neon lights of night would take over on Bourbon Street, and the rock bands would reign over the plaintive drumbeat of jazz. Soon, David would come home, and she would hear some psychobabble about her imagining the ghost of a long-dead child to take the place of Jacob.

No one could take her son's place.

But suddenly she wasn't frightened. She needed to reassure a child.

"It's all right," she said again.

*"It's going to be dark. See, outside, in the courtyard, it's going to be dark,"* the little boy said.

"There are lights everywhere. In the courtyard, on the gates," Regina said. "I'll turn on the room light. I won't leave you in darkness."

She sat up, still feeling the cling of that little hand. She walked to the French doors; it was spring, and the air was so fresh and beautiful, as if newly washed, and the scent of flowers was in the air. The inhabitants of the Quarter loved to twine vines and set flowers out on their patios and balconies. For a moment, Regina inhaled deeply.

Yes, she was desperate. In so much pain. They would say that she was seeking a companion to make up for Jacob, not replace him. That sounded insane. She would never make up a little child with an ax sticking out of his head.

*"I love the courtyard, Mommy,"* he said, leading her.

"Yes, it's so pretty," she said. Hysteria started to rise in her again. She was thirty-five years old, and now she had an imaginary friend.

He looked at her again, leaning against the railing. Suddenly, it seemed that the light hit the child's great blue eyes strangely. There was a look of cunning in those eyes.

She thought she heard something behind her. She turned and frowned with confusion.

And then shock.

She was dimly aware of being pushed.

She was fully aware of falling.

Her scream tore from her lips at last, until it was cut off abruptly.

Skull shattered, neck broken, Regina lay dead with her eyes wide open.

## Chapter One

Jackson Crow sat staring at the pile of dossiers before him. This was his first meeting with the man on the other side of the desk: Adam Harrison, white haired, dignified, slim and a taste for designer suits. The office was modest, nicely appointed, but far from opulent. Plate-glass windows looked over row houses in Alexandria, Virginia, and other companies with shared space in the building had names such as Brickell and Sons, Attorneys-at-Law, Chase Real Estate and B. K. Blake, Criminal Investigation.

Adam had just handed him the folders. “Jackson, do you have any idea of why you’re here?”

He’d returned to his old Behavioral Science Unit in D.C. to discover that he was being given a new assignment. His leave of absence, it seemed, was somehow permanent.

His last assignment, despite the excellent work done by him and his colleagues, had ended with three of them being dead. Yet if it hadn’t been for his intuition, two other fellow agents might have died as well. Local police had not responded to the call sent out, and there was no way to blame himself.

Naturally, he did.

Maybe the empathy of his superiors had caused them to give him a new assignment, in a different place—behind a desk.

He’d heard things *about* Adam Harrison. He’d worked solo over the years—and for the government where the government could not act officially. Adam went in where others did not.

It wasn’t because of extreme danger. Rather, it might be considered that he went in because of extreme *weirdness*.

“No,” he said simply.

“First, let me assure you, you are not being let go. You will still be working for Uncle Sam,” Adam told him. “The assignments will come from me, but you’ll be heading up the team. A new team.”

*A cushy job somewhere behind a desk that didn’t involve serial killers, kidnapping or bodies discovered beneath concrete.*

Jackson wasn’t sure how he felt; numb, perhaps.

“Take a look at this.”

He hadn’t had a chance to look at the files yet, but Adam now handed him a month-old New Orleans newspaper bearing the headline *Wife of Senator David Holloway Dies from Fall into Courtyard*.

He looked up at Adam.

“Read the full article,” Adam suggested.

He read silently.

Regina Holloway, the wife of beloved state Senator David Holloway, died yesterday in a fall from a balcony at their recently purchased French Quarter mansion on Dauphine Street. Six months ago, the Holloways lost their only son, Jacob, in an accident on I-10. While there is speculation that Regina cast herself over the balcony, David Holloway has strenuously denied such a possibility; his wife was doing well and coming to terms with their loss; they were planning on building a family again.

The police and the coroner's office have yet to issue an official cause of death. The house, one of the grand old Spanish homes in the Quarter, was once the killing ground of the infamous Madden C. Newton, the "carpetbagger" responsible for the torture slayings of at least twenty people. Less than ten years ago, a teenager who had broken into the then-empty house also perished in a fall; the coroner's office ruled his death accidental. The alleged drug dealer had raced into the vacant house to elude police.

An uneasy feeling swept over Jackson, but he calmly set the newspaper back on the desk and looked at Adam Harrison.

"That's a tragic story," he said. "It sounds likely that the poor woman did commit suicide, and the senator is in denial. I'm afraid I've seen other instances in which a woman could not accept the loss of her child."

"Many people are insistent that the house is haunted," Adam said.

"And that a ghost committed this murder?" Jackson asked. He leaned forward in his chair. "I'm not at all sure I believe in ghosts, Adam. And if they did exist, wouldn't they be things of mist and imagination? Hardly capable of tossing a woman over a balcony."

"The senator has friends in high places, though he's still only a state senator. He absolutely insists that his wife did not commit suicide," Adam said.

"Does he suspect murder?" Jackson asked.

"The house was locked, no lower windows were open, and the gate to the courtyard was locked as well."

"Someone could have crawled over the wall or gotten through the gate," Jackson suggested.

Adam nodded. "That's possible, of course. But no witnesses have come forward in the past month to suggest that such a thing might have happened. The death was determined to be a suicide fairly quickly. Are you familiar with the city of New Orleans, the French Quarter or Vieux Carré, specifically?"

An ironic smile curled Jackson's features. "Land of vampires, ghosts, voodoo and fantasy. But some of the world's best cooking, and some truly great music, too."

"All right then. You work in behavioral science. Don't you agree that people's beliefs can create actions and reactions?"

"Yes, of course. Son of Sam... Berkowitz believed that howling dogs were demons

commanding him to kill. Or, it was a damn good defense.”

“Always a skeptic,” Adam said. “And yet you’re not really, are you?” Now, Adam smiled.

“I am a skeptic, yes. Am I open to possibility? Yes,” Jackson said carefully.

“You know, both of your parents were amazing believers,” Adam reminded him.

Jackson hesitated.

Yes, they had been believers, both of them, always believing in a higher power, and it didn’t matter what path someone took to that power. Jeremiah Crow had been born a member of the Cheyenne Nation, although his ancestry had been so mixed God alone knew exactly what it was. He had loved the spiritualism of his People, and his mother had loved it as well. Nominally Anglican, his mother had once told him that religion wasn’t bad; it was meant to be very good. Men corrupted religion; and a man’s religious choice didn’t matter in the least if it was his path to decency and remembering his fellow man.

But his maternal grandmother had come from the Highlands of Scotland, and her tales of witches and pixies and ghosts had filled his childhood. Maybe that’s why it had been while he was in the Highlands, and not on his Native American dream quest, that he had found himself in a position to question life and death and eternity, and all that fell in between.

“You’re here because you are the perfect man for this team, Jackson,” Adam said. “You’re not going to refuse to investigate what seems like the impossible, but you’re also not going to assume a ghost is the culprit.”

“All right. So you want me to go to New Orleans and find out exactly why this woman died? You do realize there’s a good chance that, no matter what the husband wants to believe, she committed suicide.”

“Here’s the thing, Jackson, most people will believe that she committed suicide. It is the most obvious answer. But I want the truth. Senator Holloway has given his passion to many critical committees in our country. He has made things happen often when the rest of the country sits around twiddling its collective thumbs. He is a man who can weigh the economy and the environment, and come up with solutions. *He* wants the truth. He’s young in politics, barely forty, and if he doesn’t bury himself in grief, he will continue to serve the American people with something our politicians have lacked heavily in the past fifty years—complete integrity. People in Washington need him, and I’m asking that you lead the group.”

“If it’s my assignment, I’ll take it on.” Jackson paused. “But...do I really need a unit?”

“I believe so. I’m giving you a group to dispel or perhaps prove the existence of ghosts in the house. They all have their expertise as investigators as well.”

He was quiet, and Adam continued, “When several members of your last unit were killed, you got to the ranch house quickly enough to save Lawson and Donatello. No one knew where the Pick-Man was killing his victims. No one knew that he had arranged for your agents to be at the ranch house.”

Jackson felt his jaw lock, and despite the time he had taken for leave, he swallowed hard. They’d lost good agents. Among them Sally Jennings, forty-five, experienced, and yet vulnerable no matter how many years of service she had seen.

He’d felt that he’d seen Sally; dreamed that he’d seen her, standing there at the

house.

And it had been that *dream* that had brought him to the ranch house, and there he had discovered that she had been the first to die.

“I shot the Pick-Man,” he said. “He’s dead.”

“That was the only chance Lawson and Donatello had, since, had he seen you before you warned him and fired to kill, he’d have put that pick through Donatello’s chest,” Adam said. “Trust me, I’ve watched you for years, Jackson. I actually knew your parents.”

That was surprising.

Adam might well have known about the event when Jackson had been riding near Stirling, Scotland, and been thrown. His friends had gone on, thinking that he had left them; that he’d won the race and the bet. He’d encountered a stranger after, one who had saved his life. And then...

It had been long ago.

And yet, hell. He’d spent his life debunking ghost stories and dreams like the one he’d had. Finding the truth behind them. Proving that the plantation in Virginia was “haunted” by a cousin of the owner who wanted him out of the estate. Proving that there were no ghosts prowling the Rocky Mountains, that a human being named Andy Sitwell was the Pick-Man, even if he supposedly believed that the ghost of an old gold-seeking mountaineer was causing him to commit murder.

Six months had passed since he had shot and killed the Pick-Man. Six months in which he had tried to mourn the loss of his coworkers. He’d been back to Scotland to visit his mother’s family, and he’d spent a month with his father’s family—helping them organize their new casinos and hotels.

But he was ready to get back into the kind of work for which he knew he had a talent. Digging. Following clues. Whether it meant studying history, people, beliefs or a trail of blood. He was good at it.

He had the mind for it, and the mind for the kind of unit Adam Harrison was putting together.

“I’m open to possibilities,” he said to Adam. “Possibilities—there are a lot of people out there manipulating spiritualism and making a lot of money off the concept of ghosts.”

Adam smiled. “That’s true, and I actually like your skepticism. As far as believing in ghosts, well, I do,” he said. “But that’s not important. I’ve got you scheduled for a flight into Louis Armstrong International Airport at nine tomorrow morning. Is that sufficient time to allow you to get your situation here in order?”

His situation here?

The apartment in Crystal City had little in it. All right, a damn decent entertainment center because he loved music and old movies. A closet of adequate and workable clothing. Pictures of the family and friends he had lost.

He nodded. “Sure. What about these?” He lifted the file folders, the dossiers on his new unit. “When do I meet the crew?”

“They’ll arrive tomorrow and Wednesday,” Adam said. “You’ve got the dossiers; read up on them first. I figured you might want the house all to yourself for a few hours. Angela arrives first—she’ll get in tomorrow evening around six. You’ll know who they all are when they arrive if you’ve done the reading.” Adam stood, a clear

sign that the interview had come to an end. “Thank you for taking this on,” he said.

“Did I actually have a choice?” he asked with a rueful grin.

Adam returned the grin. Jackson was never really going to know.

He started out of the office. Adam called him back.

“You know, you have a gift for this, Jackson. And you can really take on anything you want.”

Jackson wasn’t sure what that meant, either. “I’ll do my best,” he promised.

“I know you will. And I know that we’ll all know what really happened in that house on Dauphine.”

\* \* \*

*X-Files*. The thought came to Jackson’s mind as he finished with Adam Harrison.

He went down to his car, still wondering exactly what it was he was getting into.

Yeah, it was sounding like the *X-Files*. Or Ghost-files.

And he was going to have Ghost-file helpers. Great.

In his car, he glanced through the dossiers, scanning the main, introductory page of each. Angela Hawkins, Whitney Tremont, Jake Mallory, Jenna Duffy and Will Chan. The first woman, at least, was coming from a Virginia police force. Whitney Tremont had started out life in the French Quarter; she had a Creole background and had recently done the camera work for a paranormal cable-television show. Jake Mallory—musician, but a man who had been heavily involved in searches after the summer of storms, and been called in as well during kidnapping cases and disappearances. Then there was Jenna Duffy. A registered nurse from Ireland. Well, they’d be covered in case of any poltergeist attacks. And Will Chan—the man had worked in theater, and as a *magician*.

It was one hell of a strange team.

Whatever, Jackson figured; it was time he went back to work. There was one thing he’d discovered to be correct—the *truth* was always out there, you just had to find it.

\* \* \*

The house seemed to hold court on the corner. It sat on Dauphine, one block in back of Bourbon and three or four blocks in from Esplanade. The location was prime—just distant enough to keep the noise down in the wee hours of the morning when the music on Bourbon Street pulsed like an earthly drum, and still close enough to the wonders of the city.

The actual shape was like a horseshoe; a massive wooden gate gave entry to the courtyard, while the main entrance on Dauphine offered a sweeping curve of stairs to the front downstairs porch and a double-door entry that was historic and fantastic in its carvings.

Jackson turned the key in the lock. As he stepped in, the alarm began to chirp and he quickly keyed in the code he had been given.

“Straight out of *Gone with the Wind*,” Jackson murmured aloud as he surveyed the house. “Tara meets city streets.” The front room here served as an elegant reception area, perhaps even a ballroom at one point in time. He could almost see Southern

belles in their elegant gowns swirling around, led by handsome men in frock coats. A piano sat to the far end near an enormous hearth with tiled backing and a marble mantel. A second, identical fireplace was at the other end of the wall. Midroom was the grand, curving staircase.

What furniture remained was covered in dust sheets.

The hallway on the second floor led to the right and left as he headed up.

He moved on around an ell and came to a long hallway of bedrooms. Here. At the end.

This was the room.

He turned on the light. It seemed to be completely benign, a pretty room, one that had already been prepared for occupancy—or that *had been* occupied. A beautiful four-poster canopy bed sat on a Persian rug, covered in white. Handsome deco dressing tables sat to either side of the room, and large French doors, draped in white chintz and lace, opened out to the balcony that wrapped around the house as it faced the courtyard. Would he feel anything? He did not.

He walked over to the French doors and threw them open, stepping out on the balcony.

The courtyard below explained why a house that came with such a tragic history could still win over buyer after buyer. It was paved with brick, and in the center, typical of New Orleans, was a fountain and sculpture. A beautiful crane spread its metal wings above the bowl and the water splashed melodically below it into a large basin.

There was a car park to the side, and elegant little wrought-iron tables, shaded by colorful umbrellas, sat across from them. He realized that the kitchen and dining room were behind the round tables, and that food could easily be passed out from the kitchen through a pass-over counter area. He wasn't sure that had been part of the original house. He was going to have to study the blueprints again.

The only thing that marred the beauty stretched before him was the chalk mark down on the bricks where Regina Holloway had lain after she had fallen.

And died.

The bloodstain had been cleaned, and yet it seemed to remain.

The courtyard was closed in by the house itself, and by a nine-foot brick wall, and the double wooden gate, large enough to let a car in. But the gate was locked, and it had a key-in pad the same as the main entrances to the house. Senator Holloway had never been a fool; the alarm had gone in the second his signature had been dry on purchase papers. All this Jackson knew because he had read the police reports on the "suicide."

He noted, though, that it would be almost impossible to reach the wall from the end of the house. There was a good four feet between the end of the balcony and the wall; a statue of Poseidon with a trident was positioned there, so it wouldn't be a pleasant fall if one were to attempt a leap—and not make it. But, again—not impossible.

Just so damn improbable.

Maybe it was a good case for his first back in the working world; it was incredibly sad to think about the death of Regina Holloway, but he could hardly begin to imagine the loss she must have felt. He'd seen it before. Parents weren't supposed to outlive their children. Any loss of a child was unbearable.

He heard the doorbell ringing and grimaced, thinking that the house had definitely been built at a time when the third floor housed a number of servants; the main entrance was a good distance from this wing. But he was expecting Detective Andy Devereaux, so he left the balcony and the room, pausing one minute in the doorway. Still, he felt nothing. The room was just a room. He hurried on back to the front door.

Andy Devereaux was a tall man, light mahogany in color, with powder-blue eyes that testified to his mixed heritage, if the attractive shading of his skin did not. He was bald, clean-shaven, fit and trim and tall. He wore a baseball cap to protect his pate, jeans and a tailored shirt beneath a casual, zip-up jacket. He offered Jackson a firm handshake when they met.

“Detective Andrew Devereaux, Andy, to my friends,” he said briefly.

“Jackson—first name, not last—and that’s what I am to my friends,” Jackson told him. “Thanks so much for meeting me here.”

Devereaux nodded grimly. “Hey, I’d do anything I could for the senator and his family. It’s a crying shame about Regina. A sweeter woman never drew breath.”

“Come on in, and just give me the lay of the land, will you? I got as far as Regina’s master bedroom at the end of the horseshoe,” Jackson told him.

Devereaux stepped into the house, removing the Saints cap that had shielded his eyes and sticking it into his jacket pocket after unzipping it. When the jacket front moved, Jackson could see that the man was on duty—and armed.

“You know the history of the house, right?” Andy asked him.

“Basically, the ‘ghost’ stories began back after the Civil War. And, apparently, there have been a number of suicides, or murders made to look like suicides, since then,” Jackson said.

“Yep. You’d never know it, though, standing in this parlor,” Andy said. “Rich folks keep buying the place. It’s usually a good deal. One time, it went higher than a kite—folks were *trying* to buy places like this, chock-full of stories. Though before Senator Holloway bought the house, it had been empty for several years. Before that, it was bought by some hotshot New York banker. The fellow wanted to make a haunted bed-and-breakfast out of it.”

“Yes. And one of his first guests wound up dead—in the courtyard—and he sold out, right?” Jackson asked. He hadn’t read all the material on the house—that would have taken several years. But he’d gotten the gist of what had gone down.

“That one was cut-and-dried, too, I’m pretty damn sure, though I was still a kid in high school when it happened. Apparently, the banker was expecting all the people who oohed and aahed over a good ghost story. What he got was a fellow who had just had his life seized by the IRS. Man’s wife left him, and his kids disowned him. Guess he figured it would be a good place to check in—and check out. There was lots of whispering when it happened,” Andy said. “But, from what I understand, the police work that was done was solid back then, too. That was about fifteen years ago, now. Place was sitting around, mostly all renovated but covered in dust, when Senator Holloway bought it. His son was killed in an accident soon after, which set them back on the renovations, for want of a better way to put it. He and his wife had just started fixing up the place until a couple of weeks ago.”

“The senator is absolutely convinced that she didn’t commit suicide,” Jackson said.

Andy grimaced, angling his head to the side. “And what do you think?” he asked.

“That a ghost pushed her over the balcony?”

Jackson shook his head. “No.”

“Then?”

“We’re just here to explore every possibility. I don’t believe that ghosts push people to their deaths. I do believe that people do.”

“The alarm never went off. No one tampered with the locks. Maybe Mrs. Holloway let someone in, but how did he get out? I suppose it’s possible that someone scaled the wall, but hopping down? He’d have surely broken a few bones,” Andy said.

“Unless he had help from the outside,” Jackson said.

“I don’t say that something of the kind is impossible, but I can tell you that we searched this place up and down and inside out. There was just no evidence, no evidence whatsoever that anyone else was ever in the house.”

“I believe you,” Jackson said.

“But you’re still here.”

Jackson shrugged and grimaced. “I work for the man. I go where I’m told,” he said. And it was pretty much so the truth. The last thing he wanted to do was offend a good officer who had probably made all the right moves. Hell, he wanted the police on his side—and because they wanted to be, not because they had been told they had to be.

“Thing is,” Andy told him, “we all wish to hell there was something that we could tell him. Senator Holloway is a fellow who isn’t all talk, air out the backside, you know what I mean? Not many can keep their souls once they get into politics. He’s rare. He’s one of the few representatives the people have faith in these days.”

“But he must have enemies,” Jackson said. “What about the people around him? Anybody have arguments with his wife? Someone who wanted something from him, and she might have been the naysayer?”

“Not that I know about. David Holloway insisted it wasn’t anybody close to him,” Andy said.

“What about household staff?” Jackson asked.

“There were two maids. They were employed full time, nine to five, but they’re not working anymore. I’ll get you the files on them,” Andy told him. “And those closest to the family. That would include the chauffeur, a fellow named Grable Haines, and...” He was thoughtful for a minute, scratching his chin. “Well, most importantly, the senator’s aide, Martin DuPre. He can help you with other things you might want to know. He’s with the senator all the time. Then there’s Blake Conroy. He’s Senator Holloway’s bodyguard. I’ve got those files all set for you.” He studied Jackson for a minute. “I’ve got two shootings and an apparent drug overdose right now, but I’m here to help you anytime you want. You get top priority. I can even drop the files by.”

Andy Devereaux was telling the truth when he said that he liked the senator; Jackson wasn’t sure that investigating what had already been investigated and ruled a suicide was more important than the other cases in his workload.

“I’ll bother you as little as possible,” he promised.

“You bother me when you need to. I understand there are others coming?” Andy asked.

“Five,” Jackson said. “They’re here to inspect the house, more than anything else. A woman named Angela Hawkins is due tonight. She’s good at talking to people, so she’ll probably have a few conversations with the senator and those around him. I—”