

# Chapter 1



**I**sabel Lindley surreptitiously pressed the backlight button on her watch. Its digital display gleamed like a mini beacon in the dimness of her candlelit bedroom. Seventeen minutes and fifteen seconds past nine o'clock at night. Precisely two minutes and seven seconds since the last time she'd checked.

"Isabel!" Her best friend, Tripp Macauley, paused in the midst of an incomprehensible chant. The hood of her royal-blue wizard's robe obscured her face, but her tone made it clear she was frowning. "You're not focusing."

The two of them were seated tailor fashion at opposite edges of a six-foot-diameter circle Tripp had created by pouring a thick trail of table salt—which was going to be a major hassle to vacuum up. Isabel tipped forward a notch to give her aching backside a moment's relief from the hardness of the uncarpeted floor.

"Yes, I am." Sort of.

"No, you're not," Tripp said. "Whenever your attention wanders, it breaks the energetic field binding us together."

"I don't understand how I can make or break anything when I know nothing about casting spells." And in spite of Tripp's elaborate pretensions to witchy wisdom, Isabel didn't think her friend was much better.

"You don't need to know anything," Tripp said. "All you have to do is be my amplifier."

A fancy job title for waving the candle Tripp had given her every time Tripp waved hers. “All right. Sorry.”

Isabel sighed. Normally, nothing her quirky friend dragged her into bothered her. On the contrary, over the past seven years of their friendship, Isabel had found quite a few of Tripp’s endless string of hobbies a lot of fun. So much so that Isabel had kept on with more than a few of them long after Tripp had moved on.

That definitely wasn’t going to happen this time, though. Something occurred when she helped Tripp perform witchcraft that Isabel couldn’t explain and couldn’t shake—an eerie impression of being watched that was seriously creeping her out.

On Thursday, during the first of three repetitions of Tripp’s spell on consecutive nights—which Tripp had proclaimed was crucial to insure the spell’s success—Isabel had written off the experience as the result of too much caffeine. And when Isabel had kept uneasily glancing over her shoulder throughout the Friday-night spell session, she’d decided she was stressed out from a pop quiz in Advanced Placement Biology on what was barely the fourth day of the new school year.

But there was nothing she could blame her jitters on tonight. It was Saturday, so she hadn’t had classes, and she’d had plenty of rest with no need for caffeine. Even so, the spooky sensation was so relentless, it was shredding her nerves.

Isabel scanned her bedroom as she continued to absently follow Tripp’s lead in their candle dance. She could easily see under the twin-sized, platform bed to her left. Its coverlet was a hand-made quilt—a relic of Tripp’s patchwork phase in the seventh grade—that

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came no farther than the upper edge of the birch frame. Nothing could hide under there.

Isabel's gaze skipped over laminated posters of classic horror movies and various systems of the human anatomy that hung on her walls and settled on the doors in her room. All three, the one to the living room, her en-suite bathroom, and her closet, were shut. The blinds over the double windows facing her were closed, too, but it wouldn't have mattered if they were open. The condo where she and her divorced mother lived was on the tenth floor of a high-rise building in Alexandria, Virginia, and there were no other tall buildings nearby. There was no possibility anyone could be spying on her. None.

But the crawling on her skin refused to stop.



For the third night in a row, he hung like a spider from the ceiling of the shadowy bedroom of two teenage girls. They'd perched themselves on either side of a circle outlined on a hardwood floor with what appeared to be white sand, and the one shrouded like the Grim Reaper recited gibberish from a three-ring binder haloed by black mist.

Each time her friend, a blonde in jeans and a black T-shirt with the slogan, "I ♥ zombies," swirled her candle in tandem with the Reaper's, a weird light-show began. Wisps of back-lit purple smoke trickled from the blonde's belly; a thick, red smoke-light surged from the Reaper's midsection, and a churning, black cloud billowed from the binder. The black light wrapped itself around the

other two colors and merged them at the center of the circle into a dark-red fountain—whose spray was aimed directly at him.

Fortunately, when the murky red light hit him, he felt nothing more than a slight tingling sensation, so he didn't feel threatened by it.

Until the third round.

The Reaper suddenly yowled like an angry cat; the red fountain exploded into an orange geyser, and he catapulted toward the floor.

His shout echoed the Reaper's as he splatted inside the circle, and a shriek from the blonde completed their ear-busting chorus.

"What the...? How did *you* get in here?" the blonde demanded.

He lifted his spinning head to respond, and his accuser scrambled to her feet.

"Stay back!" She yanked her arms chest high in a fighter's defensive stance, and he wasn't sure if she planned to take off running or use his skull for a soccer ball.

He was in no shape for a brawl, but even if he had been, the thought of hitting a girl horrified him. He shifted carefully onto his back while raising his hands in surrender to reassure her that he was harmless.

"What's wrong, Isabel?" her friend asked from the depths of her hood.

"How can you ask that with a strange guy practically lying in your lap?"

"What guy? Where?"

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“Are you blind? Him, Tripp, *him!*” Keeping her fists up, Isabel jabbed an elbow toward the intruder to indicate where he sprawled. What was the *matter* with Tripp?

This was one of the worst of the worst-case scenarios they’d trained for at the full-contact, self-defense class Tripp had talked Isabel into taking with her last year.

Tripp twisted toward the floor lamp behind her and reached up to pull its chain. “Uh, Isabel?” Tripp shoved back her hood with a hand weighed down by gaudy rings.

“*What?*” Isabel spared a split-second glance from her vigilant monitoring of the stranger, whom she could see even more clearly in the blaze of light Tripp had introduced into the gloomy room.

Tripp’s makeup-laden face, framed by spiky, green-streaked, black hair, revealed no emotion but confusion. “I don’t see anyone.”

“Of course you do,” Isabel said as she asked herself what she should do next to keep herself safe. And Tripp, too, if she insisted on acting like an easy target.

Tripp was silent a moment, then said thoughtfully, “I actually did a summoning spell, but I *said* we were doing a spell to open ourselves to spirit world.”

Isabel held her focus on the intruder. “What are you talking about?”

“That’s it,” Tripp said with a huge smile. “That *has* to be what happened. I inadvertently changed the spell’s intent by how I presented it.”

“Tripp! Stop babbling, get up, and start backing toward the door.”

Fortunately, so far, instead of leaping to attack them, the intruder remained in a passive slump, tracking the verbal volleys between her and Tripp with the lethargic head rolls of a drunk at a tennis match. But it would be terminally stupid to count on his staying in that convenient state indefinitely.

“Isabel, calm down. This guy may be a home invader, but he’s not the kind you think.”

“Tripp!”

“Isabel, listen,” she said in the manner of a teacher imparting vital information to a backward student. “There are two kinds of home invaders. The kind who are alive, and the kind who are dead.”

Tripp’s response was so far outside what Isabel had expected to hear, she briefly relaxed her arms, caught herself, and jerked them back up. “What do you mean, dead?”

“I mean, dead, as in a spirit who doesn’t have a physical body, commonly known as a ghost.”

“A *ghost*?” Isabel exchanged a startled glance with the guy in the circle. “Why would you say that? He looks like a regular person to me.”

Isabel examined the intruder more closely. He appeared to be near her age, with clear, bronze skin and a lean, athletic physique encased in an outfit identical to hers, jeans and a black T-shirt, except his shirt had no slogan on it. His thick, brown hair lay in shaggy waves above a square-jawed face, and dark, heavy-lidded eyes studied Isabel with an intensity that rivaled her own. “There’s nothing remotely wispy about him.”

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“He may look normal to you,” Tripp said, “but here’s the kicker. You’re the only one who can see him. He’s invisible to me.”

Isabel wrenched toward her. “Are you serious?”

“Totally.”

*My God.* “You truly can’t see him?”

“Nope. But don’t worry. I’m completely willing to accept that *you* can.”

“Gee, thanks. I can’t tell you how comforting that is.”

“It’s not nice to be sarcastic with a friend who’s *trying* to be supportive.” Tripp grinned, but Isabel didn’t share an ounce of her good cheer.

“What’s supportive about telling me that the Invisible Man has taken up residence in my bedroom?”

“He’s not a comic-book character, Isabel,” Tripp said with exaggerated patience as she reached behind her and thrust something inside her purse and set her binder on top of it. “He’s a ghost.”

Before Isabel could protest further, Tripp rushed into more quote-unquote support. “It’s plain to me that you’ve opened up to spirit world. Which makes sense because of our spell.”

Spirit world. Ghosts. Isabel shook her head. She didn’t believe in any of that.

But then again....

Her memory of the maybe-ghost’s entrance played out like a movie in her mind. When he’d crash-landed, she hadn’t heard anything from him but his scream. Not only that, if he’d arrived from somewhere in her room, he would have vaulted into the circle horizontally. But he’d *fallen* into it.



She peered upward at the white expanse of the ceiling. No jagged hole. No trap door of any kind.

“It’s true, Isabel, and I can prove it.” Tripp walk-slid on her stockinged feet to Isabel’s desk and grabbed a nine-part model of the human brain and its arteries from its stand. Then she spun around and assumed a bowler’s crouch as she glided toward the circle with the brain clutched in her hands like a lopsided ball.

Before Isabel could object, Tripp lobbed the brain toward the circle’s center. It burst apart when it connected with the floor.

Isabel gasped. But it wasn’t anger at Tripp’s cavalier treatment of her treasured science-fair prize that rooted Isabel in place. It was the sight of the stranger lying, goggle eyed, staring as hard as Isabel was at his flat stomach—where all but the brain stem and the occipital lobe had disappeared from sight.

Isabel’s knees trembled, and she collapsed to the ground.

Tripp grinned widely as she plopped down beside Isabel and enfolded her in a one-armed hug. “I take it I’ve made my case?”

Isabel nodded feebly and offered a description of the surreal vision before her through lips that felt numb. “But how can you be so positive it’s a ghost and not the insane hallucination of a deranged mind?” Isabel honestly didn’t know which she dreaded more.

Either she was a nutcase ghost whisperer or a nutcase-nutcase. It sounded like lose-lose to her.

“You’re not insane, Isabel. You’re a Late-Mature Soul with a significant psychic gift.”

“Oh, Tripp.” Isabel groaned.

“Oh, Isabel.” Tripp playfully rocked her from side to side.

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“You know, you shouldn’t automatically assume it’s a bad thing to have a ghost show up that only you can see.”

“What *good* can you conceivably find in this mess?”

“For one thing, there must be a reason our spell summoned this particular ghost to you. One that’s important not just for him, but for you, too.”

The maybe-ghost’s expression implied he was as dubious as Isabel about Tripp’s latest assertion.

“We need to get to know him so we can figure out what that reason is.” Tripp released Isabel and scanned the room. “Where is he now, by the way?”

Isabel pointed at the maybe-ghost. “Right where you threw the brain. He hasn’t moved.”

“Oh, okay,” Tripp said. “Isabel, since we’re through spell casting, would you mind blowing out the candles while I try and communicate with the ghost?”

“Uh, sure.” Isabel and the maybe-ghost traded a wary glance as Isabel scooted away from Tripp to pick up the still-burning candle she’d abandoned when the ghost had shown up.

Tripp squinted at the center of the circle like a sharpshooter taking aim, then megaphoned her hands and hollered, “Helllllooooo there.”

The maybe-ghost flinched backward, and Isabel jerked so hard, the candle in her hand blew out from the breeze.

“Just because you can’t see him doesn’t mean he’s deaf,” Isabel said dryly as she set down the candle and scraped off the melted wax that had sloshed onto her hand.

Tripp laughed with unruffled good humor and said at a much

lower volume, “I’m sorry, Mr. Ghost. Here, let me make you more comfortable.”

The stranger flinched and Isabel shuddered as Tripp reached through his body and swept up brain parts. Then she pitched the pieces under Isabel’s desk.

“There, that’s better.” Tripp brushed her palms together and resumed her chatty monologue as if nothing remotely gross had happened. “I’m Tripp and my friend is Isabel. We’re very glad to meet you.”

“Speak for yourself,” Isabel said as she rose, crossed to her bed and flopped onto it.

“I apologize for my friend’s unfortunate lack of manners.” Tripp tossed a frown at Isabel, then switched to a syrupy smile as she returned her focus to the intruder. “But I, for one, very much want to get to know you better, Mr. Ghost.”

“Why do you keep calling me a ghost?” he said.

Isabel sat up straight. “You can talk?”

“Of course I can talk,” he said, his ramrod spine mirroring hers. “And I’m also *not* a ghost.”

“You’re not?” She snapped her head toward her friend. “Tripp, he says he’s not a ghost.”

“Really?” Tripp didn’t seem concerned that he was contradicting her theory about him. “I suppose he *could* be an angel, or, worst case,” she said matter-of-factly, “a demon.”

“A *demon*?” A ghost was bad enough, but a *demon*?

“Don’t freak out, Isabel. I said he *could* be a demon, not that he *was* one.”

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“I’m not a *demon* either,” the subject of their debate butted in again to announce.

“What *are* you, then, if you’re not a ghost or a demon?”

Surely he wasn’t an angel?

“I’m a human being,” he said, “a *live* one.”

“No way,” she said. “You can’t be.”

“Can’t be *what*?” Tripp said.

“I don’t care if you believe me or not,” he said, “because you’re not real.”

“Not *real*?” Isabel’s mouth fell open. “*Me*?”

“Isabel,” Tripp said. “Tell me what he’s saying.”

“I’m *saying* this is all just a crazy dream, and you people are nothing but figments of my imagination.”

He jumped to his feet, and Isabel strode to the circle to confront him. Black athletic shoes amplified his natural height advantage to around four inches above her own shoeless five-foot-six, forcing Isabel to tilt her head in order to return his glare.

“We’re *not* figments,” she said.

“Yes, you are.”

“Are not!”

“Are, too!”

“Isabel, don’t make me shake what he’s saying out of you.”

Tripp sounded as if she was only partly kidding.

“He says he’s a living human being.” Isabel maintained her visual duel with the stranger. “And you and I are nothing but *figments* of a dream he’s having.”

“Wow. That’s a twist.”

“*Twisted* is more like it.” His ridiculous contention ripped the

veil of confusion from Isabel's mind, and she suddenly knew precisely which side she came down on in this dispute.

Directly opposed to *him*.

"Tripp is right. You're a ghost. You have to be. She can't hear or see you. And what about the brain parts? They would have bounced off a *live* human being."

"Weird things happen all the time in dreams, and this one is about as weird as they get." He clenched his hands and stuck out his chin. "I've had about all of it I'm going to take."

"Are you leaving?" Unexpected hope blunted Isabel's anger. If only he would. It would solve everything.

"Oh, no," Tripp said. "He isn't *leaving* is he?"

"Maybe." Please, please, please.

"But I haven't finished talking to him."

"*I'm* not the one who's leaving," he said with a grim smile.

"You two are."

"*What?*"

He nodded. "All I have to do is pinch myself. I'll wake up, and you'll disappear."

*That* was his big plan for ending this fiasco? He wasn't just an intrusive jerk. He was an idiot.

"Has he left, Isabel?"

"Not yet." She repeated what the ghost had said, making no attempt to hide her scorn, but he didn't react.

He was too busy reaching for a fold of skin on his arm. She watched with unwilling fascination as he squeezed it. Evidently quite hard, because he winced. Then he glanced down, straight into her eyes.

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His look of dismay was so comical, if she'd been less upset with him, she would have laughed.

"*Infierno*," he said. "You're still here."



The chattering of the two girls faded to background noise. He hadn't woken up. Which meant he wasn't dreaming. And if he wasn't dreaming, what else could he be but what Isabel and Tripp insisted he was—a *ghost*?

*Dios*. This sucked.

He dropped down again in the circle, but Isabel remained standing. Probably for the pleasure of looming over him.

She told Tripp what had happened, and Tripp leaned toward him, resting her elbows on her thighs. "Mr. Ghost?" she said with a sympathetic smile.

He hated being called that, but it was obvious Tripp meant no offense. "Yes?" He mimicked her cross-legged posture and faced her from the other side of the circle.

"She can't hear you," Isabel said with more of her unnecessary snideness.

Before he could snap back at her, Tripp spoke with throbbing excitement. "Did he talk to me?"

"Yes," Isabel said. "He's sitting right in front of you, hanging on your every syllable."

"That's great." Tripp didn't seem to notice Isabel's mocking tone.

No doubt because it wasn't directed at *her*. If her kind friend

wasn't trying to speak to him, he'd be more than happy to give Isabel the fight she was spoiling for.

"Mr. Ghost," Tripp said, "could you tell us who you are, where you're from, and what made you dead?"

*Dead.* It wasn't the first time she'd used that word to describe him. This time, though, in the aftermath of his failed experiment, it sliced through him.

Of course, if he was a ghost, he *had* to be dead. That's what made you a ghost. But, damn it, he didn't *feel* dead.

He swung his gaze around the room. Everything in it was vivid. Three-dimensional. Solid. He peered at his abdomen where the plastic brain had pierced him and vanished.

Except, apparently, him.

He craned his neck to intercept Isabel's hostile stare. "If I'm dead," he said, "I have no idea how or why.

"And tell your friend," he added starkly, "I don't know where I came from. Or who I am."