

*3<sup>rd</sup> place winner*

## Haunted Home by Caitlyn Isle

# Haunted Home

## Chapter 1

It's said that a black cat crossing your path brings a bad omen. If that's true, I've received at least sixty from the last seven minutes alone. Which is *super* comforting, let me tell you, especially considering my circumstances.

"Could we speed this up, please? I've got to make it to this house before dark." I tell the creature, sticking my head out of my green jeep's window. The cat looks up at me, then races across the road, like it's been doing over and over for the past seven minutes. I honk my horn, hoping to scare it. Ever so surprisingly, that doesn't work. The feline simply crosses the deserted, heavily forested road again. I've been idling here so long because I didn't want to kill the speedy, unpredictable thing. Now I'm reconsidering.

"Just pick a side already!" The cat stops in the middle of the road, and I swear it rolls its golden eyes at me. Then it's just gone. Not in the way you'd think, though. The long, slender creature didn't speed off into the deep, dark forest surrounding the path. It didn't saunter down the road to go bother someone else. The cat just... disappeared into thin air.

Which is weird, right? But the way is clear now, so I keep driving. I have to stop a couple of times to check I'm going the right way, but I arrive at the rooming house just as the sun is setting. I park the jeep and sigh, leaning back into my seat.

The glove box buzzes, and I take my phone out. When I open it, I see a text from my friend Florin.

*Tell me when you get there. Stay safe <3*

I smile slightly, and reply. Then I sigh, unbuckle my seatbelt, and yelp. There is a grinning face outside my window that was not there a second ago. The face says something, but it's muffled by the glass.

"What?" I ask.

I just barely hear, "Welcome!"

Oh. This must be Tara. That's one way to meet your roommate.

I step out of the jeep, and am immediately engulfed in a hug. My breath is squeezed out of my lungs, and I think I might pass out, until Tara lets go.

"Wainani! Welcome," Tara says again. She holds me out, and I get a good look at her. Tara is Black, tall, and, as my lungs can testify, *powerful*. The setting sun illuminates her large, dark puff of hair— a stark contrast to the bright red and gold dress she's wearing. But the most noticeable thing about Tara is her gigantic smile.

"Um, Tara," I say. "Can I get my bags?"

"Oh! Right, sorry." She lets go of me. I push up my thick, round glasses, and open the trunk of the jeep. I grab two duffel bags and reach for one of the boxes, but Tara says, "I can get those, you go ahead."

My tawny-colored brow scrunches in confusion. “You can get... all of those boxes? With no help at all?”

Tara gestures to the twenty-something boxes full of everything I hold near and dear. I’m a bit of a hoarder. “Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“Uh huh.” Tara may be strong (maybe a little too strong), but no one’s *that* strong. “Go ahead,” I say, because she looks determined, and I’m not about to get on my roommate’s bad side the first day we meet.

So I walk down the driveway towards the large, welcoming, completely black for some reason, house. I adjust my bags to open the midnight colored door, and Tara shouts up to me, “You can just put those in the parlor, and I’ll show you your room when I get up there.”

“Got it,” I yell back. She still hasn’t grabbed any boxes. I walk through the door. Thankfully, the inside of the house is much more colorful, with lush lavender carpets and shiny cedar walls. A dusty chandelier hangs overhead, illuminating the parlor in a soft, warm glow. I breathe in the homey air and smile. “Not too shabby.”

I set the bags down, then turn around to help grab my boxes, because there’s no way Tara is going to be able to carry all of them. As I walk out the door, I hear chanting in another language. It’s coming from my car.

I run down the driveway to Tara, who’s now floating a foot off the ground? “Tara,” I say, “You good?” She turns around, and I see that her eyes are glowing purple, almost the same color as the carpets inside. Something old and impressive flashes amidst the violet glow. Her wine red skirt swirls around her legs due to an unseen wind.

“Tara?” I ask again, my voice raising a pitch. She continues chanting. I reach for her arm, but she raises both to the sky. I follow her dark hands with my bay colored eyes, and they widen. The sky has darkened, not with clouds, but with ravens. I hear a shriek, and the birds dive bomb my car.

“What the-” I shout, covering my head. But the birds aren’t attacking. They’re... grabbing boxes? And carrying them to the house’s top left window. I guess that’s where my room is.

The birds work fast, leaving behind feathers as they zoom in and out of the house window and my car’s trunk. Soon, the jeep is emptied. The ravens chirp at Tara, then leave as quickly as they came. I blink. What just happened?

Tara gasps, and her feet land on the ground. She looks at me, eyes no longer glowing and purple. “Oh, Wainani,” she says breathlessly, “I got those boxes for you.”

“Uh, yeah, I saw,” I reply.

We stand there a moment longer, neither of us daring to ask how much the other knows.

“This is awkward,” I whisper.

Finally, Tara turns towards the house and says, “Come on, I’ll show you your room.”

I don’t tell her I already know where it is, and follow her inside. I am confused, to say the least. I don’t even know where to start, because I don’t even know what I saw.

We enter the house, and the bags I brought in are gone. Probably brought to my room by the magic birds. Tara heads straight for the stairs, and I follow quietly, assessing the situation. I mean, what is there to assess? It’s not like she was trying to hurt me. In fact, Tara was being really helpful. That can’t be bad, right? Right. Just... different.

“Wainani?” We’re at the top of the stairs, facing a hallway.

I shake off my doubts and continue to follow her. “Your room is this way,” she says, walking down the hall. I follow for a pace, until I hear a mew from behind me. Nooo. I turn

around, disbelieving. Because right there on the top step, is a cat. Not just any cat. *The* cat. The long, slender, golden-eyed, black cat that vanished an hour's drive away from here.

“No, it can't be.”

The cat grins, and replies, “Oh, but it can.”