

# **A Ghost of a Chance**

by  
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MADE IN THE USA

# Prologue

*Is there a connective thread in everything that happens in someone's life?*

He checked his watch for about the seventh time since he'd flown out of the door of his fourteenth floor Manhattan apartment. In ten minutes he was due across town for a meeting. He paced in front of the elevator door. Usually it was slow, but today it was interminable when he desperately needed everything to fly – just to fly.

*Those things that you never can anticipate, was it all chance or the product of some grand cosmic design?*

"Where are you Jack? Mr. Braseman has called three times already. You were supposed to prep him before the meeting?"

"I'm just flagging down a cab. Everything's going haywire. My alarm didn't wake me and my cell phone was turned off." He rubbed his eyes. He'd overslept, but he felt like he hadn't slept at all. "Tell him I got caught in a traffic jam."

"Jack, he sounded really upset."

"Look Bev, there's nothing I can do. Stall him. I'll be there."

He hung up — just didn't want to hear anymore. He was out of breath. Down the street, there was already heavy traffic, but he couldn't spot any cabs. The city was usually glutted with them. But not as far as his eyes could see, not when he needed one.

He stopped. He had to — for a minute, to breathe again. He looked up. The skyscrapers over his head stretched into the clouds.

*The questions, the big ones, admittedly he hadn't taken much time to ponder.*

*After all such issues fell into the philosophical arena — again, a place that he hadn't cared to spend much time. There weren't any clear-cut answers on this stuff written down in a book. Well maybe some book, but not his brand of reading material — the stock market, law journals, and Agatha Christie novels (they were his Achilles heel). He'd always felt that Agatha did have her hand on the pulse of human nature.*

"Brennan where are you? Your receptionist gave me this number. I've invested too much in your firm to have you screw this deal up for me." Click

"Jack, hi it's Tessa Knowles. Remember we met last weekend? Um, Bob Walters introduced us at the Peterson reception. Anyway, Bob tells me that you don't slow down for anybody so I decided to call you. My number is 23. . ."

He clicked the phone off. That was all the messages. He loosened his tie. It was hot, unusually hot even for an August day. It was getting to him — the heat, really beginning to get to him.

He peered down the street anxiously. Damn it, again no cabs in sight. People were everywhere even this early, but it wasn't early. He checked his watch again. It was late.

People standing with him near the street, looking, hungry for a cab, hungry to get somewhere.

*He was young, he thought, only thirty-five. One would think that statistically he had a better chance of being knifed by a mugger. But the time of death has little or maybe better said nothing to do with statistics or probability. It was simply the time.*

Finally, a cab coming down the street, but three other people were already starting in that direction. He moved to enter the race but just couldn't. Must stop, just a second, just to breathe.

"The water's always the place I go to recharge son. It makes everything slow down and make sense." He was with his father

again out on the fishing boat, just for a second, one precious second.

But the noise, the loud noises of the city rushed up and dragged him back.

*Shouldn't momentous days be filled with momentous things, instead of little things?*

Across the street, he saw steam rising off the hot cement sidewalk. Someone was murmuring near him about an Italian restaurant they wanted to try for lunch. And on top of it all, the gasoline fumes from the street traffic burned his nose and throat. He couldn't draw the air in; and all he needed was a moment to breathe.

Too quickly came the crushing pain in his chest, his knees buckling, refusing to support him further and the merciful, dizzying blackness.

*It did seem that he was unjustly young. He was only thirty-five, but on that hot August morning, for some odd reason, Jack Brennan wasn't terribly surprised.*

# CHAPTER ONE

Hallie Barkly was a writer of horror stories, or rather horror novels, and had achieved some moderate success in her profession. Of course, only some knew that they were her books at all. The first one she had ever published her own mother refused to believe was hers. "Why on earth darling would a beautiful young woman like you write such convoluted and horrible things? You've always been such a lovely, kind considerate child. Why you even came out of that unfortunate divorce from Edward so, well, benevolent? Where on earth did well all this twisted rage come from?" And Hallie had smiled and said little, not willing to argue this point or any other with her mother.

Where did this rage come from, where indeed?

Edward, however, did figure prominently in the works of Sebastian Winters, Hallie's dark and proactive pseudonym. Her ex-husband made his debut appearance as the manipulative and self-absorbed lawyer who gets butchered in *Vengeance's Angel* and then later the anal accountant who gets his just due in *Requiem for the Midnight Hour*. She had to admit that it did feel good to oft the son of a bitch at least in her mind. Because in the real world, she hadn't said boo to his unfair machinations in their divorce settlement. But then again all that repressed frustration that he had cultivated did give birth to a well-sustained

career as Sebastian Winters. And in some fashion had also led her here, to seclusion.

RRrrrrng. She picked up the cell phone that she'd carelessly tossed on her well-cluttered computer desk. Without hesitation, she answered. There were only a handful of people who actually knew where she was. "Hello?"

"Hallie, it's Monica. I've been trying to reach you for several days."

"Oh I'm sorry. I haven't been checking my voice mail."

"Or email?"

"Yeah, well I got on a roll with the novel so. . ." She strummed her jagged, unmanicured nails on the desk, dubiously reflecting on how untrue that particular statement was.

"I was a little worried about you." Dramatic pause, "You know, being so isolated, moving out by yourself in the country."

"It's just for the summer Monica, so I can do this book."

"Another vampire book?"

She smiled vaguely, distressed by the awkward collection of words on the screen.

"Yes, but this one will be different," the statement perhaps more to herself than Monica.

"Will you promise to drive into the city this weekend to have lunch with me? I haven't been able to get away. Things are popping here."

"A marketing emergency?"

"Well we all can't be successful authors of pulp fiction." Her voice had gotten a little testy; evidently Hallie had unknowingly ticked her off again.

"I see you still hold my work in high regard."

"No, no, in my book success is success, no matter what you do to get it. Anyway, you know I'm just jealous."

She sighed. She wasn't in the proper frame of mind for Monica's backhanded compliments. Her mind was too caught up in struggling with her problematic narrative.

"Well, don't be. You have a life. All I have is what's in my head."

“And from what I gather that’s a rather grisly place to be.”

“Yes, well I can’t deny that. Look, I’ll call you at the end of the week.”

“Will you?”

“Promise.”

“I don’t like the way you sound. Give Sebastian a rest for awhile, like an everlasting one.”

“Oh very good. Bye, hang up now.”

She was odd and for lack of a better word, quirky. A description he wasn’t normally apt to use. That was his first impression of her. In addition, she was really kind of a slob. Her office was a disaster. That was something that drove him crazy, or at least it used to. He needed order around him to think, to plan strategies. But now everything felt disconnected. Priorities had somehow radically shifted all over the place.

Of course it took him awhile to realize that she really couldn’t see him, in fact wasn’t aware of him at all. They occupied the same house, sometimes almost the same place, but Hallie Barkly was completely oblivious to his presence.

He had unearthed this particular truth in the midst of a few embarrassing encounters. Coming to the old house had been like waking up from an extended sleep; he was groggy and disoriented. He was even wearing the same dark navy suit that he’d remembered putting on that morning. And then she’d come in the room and walked right by him.

Understandably startled, he’d stammered out, “Excuse me, can you please tell me where I am?” silence. “Miss, don’t you hear me? I have no idea how I got here.” And then as she crossed through the room again, “What’s your problem? Are you deaf?” He followed her around for a while and then eventually gave up, dubiously accepting that either he was not what he used to be, or she was an imbecile.

He found her name on her driver’s license in her purse. He’d picked up the purse, the size of a saddlebag, and rooted through it until he found the little beige wallet, stuffed to capacity. She had some credit cards, the license, more crumpled

receipts than he cared to count, and what he surmised from the resemblance was a picture of her family – two parents and one sister. The sister, he observed, looked like his unobservant housemate but had eyes that were, frankly, harder. Sizing people up was a component of Jack's success and to him Hallie Barkly exuded a sensitive, sort of vulnerable quality.

Of course rather quickly he concluded that it was probably best that they hadn't met back in New York, because on the whole, Jack hadn't been too nice to women. And, quite honestly most of the women he'd known hadn't been too nice. He swam with sharks. In his old circle, Hallie would have been like a guppy in a tank filled with predators. But he thought these things without certainty or much conviction.

Outside of the superficial changes that he'd undergone in this new realm, like the being invisible part, it was becoming clear that he was subtly and overtly linked to this woman. This became painfully obvious when he tried to leave the house on his own. It was a no go. The front door was like a brick wall. The farthest he could get was a screen porch on the side of the house. It became all too clear to him that he couldn't go anywhere unless she left too. Luckily he'd been able to tag along when she went out to the grocery, and having raging cabin fever, he'd considered even that a treat.

So ultimately instead of letting himself descend into panic, Jack decided to bide his time and collect information until he could act. Perhaps patience was a lesson that he would be learning here, if indeed this strange episode had any purpose at all. But without having any real reason to think so, he felt that somehow in an obscure way Hallie Barkly was his responsibility. What exactly that meant he didn't have a clue. Only that he was stuck in this old country house with her for some definitive reason that he needed to unravel in order to get unstuck or until someone came along to get him out.

It was in an attempt to distract himself from all these disturbing thoughts that he'd first discovered Sebastian Winters.

*His eyes were black, not the color of ebony or obsidian but the absence of color – the void. To look into them was essentially to*

*surrender one's soul, one's very essence to the will of another – and alas to be oh so grateful to do so.*

He glanced across the room at Hallie intensely typing on her computer keyboard. He had settled in a gold, velvet, wing-backed chair that she had positioned in the corner of the room. She'd converted this spare bedroom into an office of sorts. In his hands, he held a paperback, one of the first Sebastian Winters novellas published by *Dark Reflection Intrigue Books*. According to the back cover it had been number fifteen in their summer releases entitled *The Vampire's Grip*. He was scanning through the paperback aware that somehow he could do this without Hallie's knowledge. The two of them existed often in the same space, but somehow, he suspected, not in the same flow of time. It was an awareness that had come to him, almost as though he was slowly being fed pieces of information about this new existence of his.

He continued,

*Jasmine, the young, blonde, cleaning woman, felt a presence within the building, although that in itself was not unusual. It was an office complex usually well populated by young yuppie executives but it was rather late, well after hours. It wasn't impossible that someone was working late. Even as she reassured herself, she trembled with an apprehension flowing forth from an unknown source. She forced herself to continue to empty the waste paper baskets, ignoring the sensation as well as the unduly rapid beating of her heart that she could feel pounding loudly in her chest. Even the pulsing blood in her protrusive jugular vein seemed to swish to a new, unfamiliar rhythm.*

He looked again at the intense, meek figure at the terminal and grimaced, "lovely" he murmured:

*And then, as though through no will of her own her eyes were dragged up to focus on the long corridor ahead of her. There he stood where there was no one moments earlier – a man with Latin-like features, undeniably attractive, and yet with an unusually pale complexion. He was dressed in a well tailored, designer suit, but that in itself*

*wasn't surprising, Jasmine knew that the building held an eclectic, international mix of executives.*

*As startling as was his sudden appearance, he was now holding out his hand toward her, beckoning and speaking her name in deliciously broken English, "Jasmine."*

*The very sound of her name on his lips seemed to reverberate everywhere around her. "Uh," she stammered out with difficulty, "do you need your trash cans emptied?"*

*He spoke again, in his deep rich foreign accent, "Jasmine, come to me."*

*She felt herself pulled toward him, compelled, magnetized, as though nothing on earth could prevent her going to him.*

"Yes, yes we get the idea." The intense melodrama felt acutely uncomfortable to his pragmatic mind.

*And she did.*

And the page ended. It was the end of a chapter. He looked up confused. What strange drivel? He flipped to the beginning of the next chapter and glanced down the first page.

Whoah, it was jolting, disturbing, even for him. Apparently quite a blood bath ensues after the mysterious stranger takes a chunk out of Jasmine's protruding jugular. He laughed to himself to dispel a little of the shock. How very odd for such pent up intensity to be locked in that nearly fragile, gentile creature across the room.

She stopped typing at the computer and slumped with a deep sigh over onto the desk. The sudden movement had surprised him. Drawn by curiosity, he put *The Vampire's Grip* aside and went to her. He looked down at the back of her head resting on the desk. She did have pretty hair. It was a light brown – thick and wavy, generously highlighted with streaks of golden blonde. He'd known women who had their hair colored this way in a beauty salon, but somehow he felt that with Hallie it was just natural. Their shared occupancy had taught him that she didn't seem to worry about externals a lot. He reached out his hand to softly touch her hair, but she didn't move. She didn't know he was there. And he still didn't know why he was.

Jack didn't trust Monica Quimby. She was a tall, slender, brown-eyed blonde whose features were too sharply defined by dieting, hard living, and probably working out quite often. But it was the sternness and determination set in her face that he didn't like. He'd seen it often enough. In fact, he'd dated it often enough.

"I don't know, Hallie. This place just seems kind of isolated. Aren't you worried about someone breaking in?"

Hallie smiled indulgently and sipped her cup of ridiculously hot peppermint tea.

"This isn't the big city you know. Not much happens out here, except hunting. I do hear gunshots outside sometimes."

"Oh well, that's comforting." Monica sat on the beige overstuffed sofa that Hallie had brought from her apartment in Richmond and crossed her exceptionally long, shapely legs. She was dressed in one of her more tightly fitted business suits with a slit in the skirt long enough to facilitate movement and tantalize at the same time. There was a time when Hallie had envied her old college roommate, her looks, and her confidence.

But a dose of life and experience had let her glean that Monica was a terribly restless and unhappy person. She was aggressive in going after what she wanted, but once she got it was never satisfied very long.

"Honestly Hal, moving all your stuff here for just the summer."

"Probably more like six months."

"Now it's six months. Are you ever coming back to the real world?"

"This feels pretty real to me." Jack moved to sit in a large wooden rocking chair that was beside the light blue lazy boy that Hallie was in. Her taste certainly was a mishmash of styles. But that didn't bother him much, she got what she liked. To him it showed a sort of independence. She certainly did seem very calm and serene in dealing with the blonde piranha. What strange contrasts she seemed to be composed of.

Monica sighed in dramatic exasperation. "You know what I mean. When was the last time you had a date?"

"Umm, let's see. Probably when Edward asked me to marry him."

Her small green eyes got a little bigger. "Are you serious? It's been four years since your divorce. You're a successful author. You're a great catch."

"Oh good, let me get a man for those reasons. No thank you, I don't need another fouled up relationship."

"Come on Hallie. A bad relationship is better than none at all."

She frowned, rubbing her forehead casually. It was the odd sensation again, a pressure just above her eyes that she felt from time to time in the house. "Do you have any idea how truly screwed up that sounds?"

"Yes I do, but I don't want you to be alone."

"I'm not. I have Sebastian Winters with me."

"Do you have any idea how screwed up that sounds?"

She sighed with a touch of exaggeration. "Yes, strangely enough I do. Finish your tea then we can go take a drive in the mountains."

Monica grimaced, looking dissatisfied with the fact that her point was lost on her friend. "As long as you don't drive off a mountain."

"You are cranky. Are you having your period?"

Jack rolled his eyes. This is stuff he really needed to hear.

*"I don't believe you're a lost soul Samory."*

*"Gabriella, you should leave now. You don't know how many I have killed over the course of my centuries of life. Your innocence cannot save me."*

*"No, that's not true. Love can change anyone."*

Jack looked quizzically at the woman typing intently on the keyboard beside him. The large brown eyes were glazed. She seemed very tired. Of course fatigue didn't seem to bother him anymore. The round nautical-looking clock that she'd hung on the wall read two 'o'clock. Time had ceased to be very significant for him, but Hallie should be asleep. Then again, he had gathered that she was a bit nocturnal by nature.

These late hours did seem to be a very productive time for her.

*"I do love you Samory. Our lives can begin now."*

"How naive you seem Gabriella," Jack murmured under his breath. And then in the next moment Hallie had typed:

*"How naive you seem Gabriella."*

*"Why do you say hurtful things to me, Samory?"*

He smiled, intrigued by the phenomena. Now what campy thing would a woman want to hear? Jack whispered deliberately to her, "Because it is the truth. You cannot know what a horror my existence is. I am death, living death." And in the next moment to his delight, it was typed on the screen.

*"But you can change."*

Jack continued with mounting interest, "You ask me to change my essence Gabriella. That is not possible," he paused. "I wish I had known you in my other life. Then it wouldn't have been too late for you to breathe your innocence into my jaded existence."

*"What do you mean Samory by jaded? It couldn't have always been that way."*

Jack frowned, now what would the vampire say? "If it wasn't, it was too long ago for me to remember."

Hallie stared at the screen looking a little confused. *"But Samory what about the time before, before you were changed?"*

Jack let out a deep sigh, "Well, perhaps when I was younger. Maybe there would have been a chance for me to live differently then, to stop and see the beauty in life instead of just the toil," oddly he was thinking about his old law firm. "The endless toil at the office," he murmured. Oops, he stopped, noticing his slip, but she'd typed it.

She paused, rereading what she'd written, and spoke out loud. "The toil at the office?"

"Uh, well I mean the long hours toiling at the castle." She'd typed it but looked very confused.

She spoke out loud, "I must be losing it."

Jack leaned closer and closed his eyes for a moment and then whispered in her ear. "The truth is that I filled my life with things that I told myself were important, surrounded myself

with people who I thought felt the same way as me. But I was always lost, filled with a wanting of more, of something I could never find.”

She was very still as though she were hearing him somehow. He knelt down and sat on the floor beside her chair. “Life is so strange. You go on day to day pushing yourself to achieve things, material things that we all prize, but then when you have them their pleasure is so brief. It just slips through your fingers and you’re left trying, always trying to fill in the holes . . . And it never really works.” He stopped. He was rambling, pouring out truths about himself for no reason except that there wasn’t a reason not to now. He hadn’t really ever acknowledged how profoundly dissatisfied he was before.

But why now, did it really matter now?

And then he remembered Hallie. She was still beside him, so very still, breathing quietly as though waiting for something.

He whispered to her again, “Is it possible? Can you feel me here Hallie?”

For a split second her hands drifted to the keyboard again, hovering over it, almost trembling he thought, but then she withdrew them.

Whatever had been between them was gone. He could feel it. The delicate thread of connection had snapped. He’d broken it, although he truly didn’t know how he’d achieved it in the first place.

“How am I going to use this stuff?” she spoke out loud. “It’s good, but it doesn’t really fit.” Her hand brushed her forehead, that sensation again. And then she rubbed her temples. Her head hurt. He knew it. Being in close proximity he was somehow keyed in to some physical sensations that she experienced. He hadn’t begun to fathom the perimeters of this odd new existence of his. In fact, he suspected, he hadn’t even scratched the surface.

Standing up behind her, he lightly touched each side of her head with his hands and began to softly massage. He felt her skin, felt the warmth radiating out from it. Even though she was oblivious to the contact, he could feel her relaxing. Again he spoke to her, “Why can’t you feel me here Hallie? I’m as real

as you, I'm sure of it." But other than the unconscious response of her body to his touch, there was nothing.

And then he stopped. It was sudden, coming out of nowhere. A freezing chill quickly swept aggressively through the room. He dropped his hands from her and turned around slowly.

Although it had not been moments before, the opposite corner of the room was visibly darkened. He felt a shiver pass through him. There was a definite iciness coming from that direction.

"What is it? Who are you?" he spoke out instinctively. It seemed like endless minutes that he stood there waiting, and then just as abruptly as it had manifested, he felt it withdraw. He turned back to Hallie and what he saw surprised him almost as much as the presence that had just vanished. For there she was staring into the exact corner of the room, where whatever it was had been seconds before. She knew somehow. She felt it too. For the first time since he had arrived in the old house, he felt a tangible danger – a worry, not for himself but for her.