PJ AND THE PARANORMAL PURSUERS & THE MACKENZIE POLTERGEIST

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CHAPTER 1

"Look, see, like, I don't wanna be here! I want to go back to Manhattan to the Rosenbaums. If you really want to help me, then p-please book me a flight h-home." I try to sound confident and assertive, working hard to keep my voice steady but unable to keep the tremor under control. It's my first meeting with Aunt Katie as we face off in arrivals at Edinburgh Airport. It's all I've been thinking about. If she cares, surely she won't keep me from my *real* family and my beloved Buddy. I hold my breath, waiting for her to answer. Despite my best efforts to look resolute, I feel my face collapse, my mouth pulling downwards, my eyes brimming with burning tears.

Aunt Katie draws her hands apart, uncertain how to respond. She shakes her head slowly, the pained look deepening as she releases a sob and tears course down her pale cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, PJ," she says weakly. She looks like she's been crying for days. Her eyes have black circles underneath and where they should be white, they're red.

I want her to know that I don't want to stay with her, that I am angry with her for not coming to Mom when she needed her most. But I don't feel any better by making her cry too. I will never be her friend, so what's the point in me staying here and making us both miserable? Surely she'll see that?

Pulling a pack of Kleenex from her pocket, Aunt Katie wipes away her tears and hands the pack to me. I take out a tissue and blow my nose loudly, unwilling to acknowledge the tears in my own eyes while she's still looking at me. She thrusts her hands deep in her pockets and her shoulders stoop. She bends her head, deep in thought before she answers.

"Look, PJ, this is so hard for both of us right now. This isn't the time or the place for us to think things through. You must be exhausted. I know I am. I've been so sad about your mom, and nervous about meeting you and wondering how to help that I've barely slept myself the last couple of weeks. How about we go home, sleep on it and we'll try to figure out what to do between us?" She waits to see how her words have landed with me. Does that mean there's hope? She hasn't outright refused, I guess. I shuffle uncomfortably from foot to foot as I think about it. She's right about one thing. I *am* exhausted. Being this sad, for so long, is like carrying heavy bags and never being able to put them down. If she really means we'll talk about letting me go back to New York, well, it wouldn't be so bad to visit with Aunt Katie for a short while, would it?

"OK, I'll stay for a little while, but you promise we'll talk about this?" Aunt Katie smiles, a full wide grin this time,

and OMG, it's as though Mom is standing right here in front of me. I gulp back the torrent of sadness, determined not to show weakness.

"I promise, PJ. One step at a time, OK?"

I nod. "OK."

Aunt Katie grabs the handle of one of my cases and I take the other, and we head off into the wet and windy October night. I shiver miserably as I am soaked in a matter of seconds. I've seen rain in New York, but jeez, this is something else.

We ride in silence all the way back to Aunt Katie's, neither of us even trying to make conversation. I guess we both know that for now at least, there isn't much to say. I am confused. I want to hate her, but something about her (*her likeness to Mom, maybe*), makes it hard to stay totally hostile towards her. And besides, she has the power to give me what I want. A return ticket to Manhattan.

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It isn't long before we arrive at Aunt Katie's home. We grab my bags from the trunk and she says, "This is it, then! Welcome to Edinburgh New Town, PJ."

We draw up outside an awesome building, a bit like the brownstones (but not as brown) of New York. It has huge windows, divided into squares from which a cosy glow radiates as the lights shine out from high ceilings onto the wet street.

"You own this whole building?" I gasp, wonderstruck.

Aunt Katie laughs. "No, PJ. It's divided into four apartments. One of them is mine. C'mon. Let's get inside.

It's cold out here. We can put the kettle on and I'll make us some tea. Or maybe you prefer coffee?"

I've never tried tea and I sure don't like coffee.

"D'you have any OJ?" Aunt Katie facepalms just like Mom did when she realised she'd done something crazy.

"Doh! Stupid of me! Sorry, PJ, I'm not used to having kids around and I've adopted the British ways in my twenty years here. In the UK, a nice cuppa tea solves everything! I'll go to the filling station and get some if you'd like?"

I shake my head. "Nah, it's cool. I'll try your tea for now. This is some place you have here. You could fit our whole apartment in New York into just this one room." I gaze in awe around the den with the high ceiling into which Aunt Katie guides me. I check myself. I am sounding too friendly. A bit like Mr Rosenbaum exchanging man-type pleasantries with Mom when he came up to fix something in the apartment.

A twinge of anger stirs inside me. Aunt Katie has so much, when Mom had nothing. Why did she not help us? Why did she not ask her, me and Buddy to come to Edinburgh before it was too late? Maybe she could have stopped Mom from dying. She hadn't even bothered to come to Mom's funeral, sending a huge 'Sister' wreath in her place.

I had wanted to stay with the Rosenbaums. They're my *real* family. They've been around Mom and me for as long as I can remember, and they cared for me and Buddy during those dark, lost days after Mom died.

"C'mon." Katie beckons me through the den into the kitchen. "Have a seat." She gestures towards the pine table and chairs in the corner as she turns on the teakettle. She

loads a plate with some plain-looking biscuits and some dome-shaped things covered in red and silver striped foil. 'Tunnock's Teacakes', they proclaim on the yellow box she's taken them from. Aunt Katie places a mug of hot, steaming tea with milk (British style, she explains), on the table and tells me to help myself to Scottish shortbread and the teacakes that look altogether more interesting. At first, I don't want to take anything from her; it might give her the impression I'm settling down and being friendly. But then, I gotta eat sometime. I haven't been able to get much past the boa constrictor in my belly in the last few weeks. Whenever I get sad, I feel him twisting, tightening and curling around in my stomach. Curiosity and hunger get the better of me in the end, as I watch Aunt Katie unwrap a chocolatey dome and bite into it with a *craackk*, revealing white, goopy mallow and a cakey, biscuity base. I point at my top lip to tell her she has a sticky white moustache of mallow on hers.

She giggles. "Always happens, PJ. Aren't you going to try one? They're something of a Scottish delicacy, you know."

My willpower gives out and I sink my teeth into the teacake, relishing the crackling chocolate, the sweet, creamy mallow and the texture of the slightly soft, slightly hard base. I'm not so keen on the tea and pull a face as I take a sip of the brown, milky liquid. Aunt Katie suggests some sugar might help, and sure enough, it is a little better.

We sit in awkward silence. I am too darn tired to talk anyway and my eyes droop lazily as the warmth of the room envelops me like a blanket.

"Looks like you could do with some shuteye, PJ. Let me take you to your room. I lit the fire so it should be toasty for you."

The room is awesome. Aunt Katie said she'd re-decorated it for me and that I am to do whatever I want with it. I'm not falling for that trick. I am leaving soon, remember? It's just fine as it is. Nevertheless, I'm grateful for the soft mattress, plump pillows and overawed by the quilt that lays on top, which Aunt Katie tells me she and Mom had worked on for years together.

We say our goodnights and I unpack a few things. Not many. Just what I need to get by for a day or two. Not much point in taking everything out, then having to re-pack.

I run my hand over the quilt and hold it close to my face, happy to feel something that Mom's hands had worked on so lovingly. It would make her happy to know that I will be cocooned inside it, finding safety and comfort in this strange new reality.

I pull out some photos I've brought of Mom, Buddy and me, together in Central Park. The boa constrictor curls in my stomach, waiting for release. I oblige with hot, fat tears and I long for Buddy to lick them away, as he had done every day since Mom had gone. My arms feel empty without his furry body wrapped inside them. I know he is crying too, five thousand miles away. We had shared pain and sorrow, night after night, both of us missing Mom and now, missing each other. The boa constrictor releases his grip and I close my eyes.