

Child of Clay

Those Who Are Awake Book One

Chapter One

I had never been in prison before. And after spending the past six hours there, I was positive I would never do anything that landed me behind bars for real. I wouldn't last more than a few days before I used a sharpened plastic spoon shiv to slit my wrists, despite the knowledge that I would be incurring God's wrath and the specter of an eternity in Hell. Prison was a lot like the Catholic orphanage where I'd been raised. There were strict rules and harsh punishments, and the inmates banded together out of a desperate need for protection against both the administration and other inmates.

The Illinois State Prison Cell Block F, where I was currently standing, was a depressing place, made of bricks and steel bars and bullet-proof glass, painted stomach-turning shades of institution green and an off-white that reminded me of curdled buttermilk. Feelings of desperation and despair were thick in the air around me, and very little of it had to do with the presence of the ghost standing in front of me.

That was another thing prison and the orphanage had in common: they were both haunted.

Howard Wayne, Illinois State's ghost, was a convicted rapist and murderer. His victim of choice was young children, boys mostly, aged anywhere from nine to twelve years. He'd admitted during his trial twenty-five years ago that he'd taken the lives of at least eleven boys, but hinted that the true number of his victims was in the thirties. He'd served twenty-three years of a life sentence before taking his own life.

In the weeks leading up to his death, he complained of the constant feeling of unseen eyes on him, even while in solitary confinement. He said he heard voices that urged him to kill his fellow inmates. He even saw a "shadow man" who appeared to him after lights out and who talked to him all night, telling him awful stories about the tortures that would be visited upon him after he died. In a fit of desperation, he'd chewed his own wrists almost to the bone and had quietly bled to death in his locked cell. The guard who had found him said he'd been wearing a look of sheer terror on his bloodless face.

"Wayne," I said patiently, holding my hands out in front of me, showing him my empty palms. "Do you see the light?" I nodded vaguely towards him; unable to see the light myself, I had no idea of its actual location.

The spirit glanced over its shoulder and then looked back at me. As it stared at me, a terrifying change overtook its face. Any semblance to a human being faded, replaced by a visage straight out of a horror film. The ghost's eyes were bottomless craters in its face, and its mouth drew back in a rictus of rage, displaying a blackened, bifurcated tongue like a serpent's and sharpened shark's teeth. It howled at me, and a gust of icy-cold wind whipped my hair away from my face and flattened my clothes against me.

The ghost skittered forward, moving like a film missing a few frames. A clawed hand rose from its side and swiped at me. The fingers sunk into my forearm, through the layers of my heavy woolen

peacoat, sweater, and long-sleeved t-shirt, leaving behind a bone-deep chill that ached with cold. I knew I'd have bruises in the morning.

Wayne's ghost raised its other hand, aiming for my face, but I ducked out of the way and dug in the pocket of my jeans as I began mumbling a prayer to Saint Michael the Archangel. Before the ghost could strike me again, I pulled out a silver-and-jet rosary and thrust it in the thing's face, screaming the last words to the prayer now: "Cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who wander through the world seeking the ruin of souls! Amen!"

Wayne drew up fast, practically windmilling its arms in its haste to scuttle away from me. Had I been watching this on TV, I'd have laughed at his reaction to both the rosary and the prayer. As it was, I took a deep, bracing breath, and squared my shoulders, knowing that I'd only earned myself a brief reprieve. The ghost would only need a moment to gather its strength so it could attack me again.

"Wayne!" I snapped, projecting my will into my voice, demanding the spirit's attention. "Listen to me! This is not your place anymore." The ghost stopped its retreat and fixed me with its monstrous eyes. "You're dead, Wayne," I said more carefully, feeling a prick of pity. "You died two years ago. It's time to move on."

The ghost was silent for a moment, but then its mouth opened impossibly wide and shrieked at me again. Then it lunged, both taloned hands raised to strike me. I stumbled backward, fingering my rosary as I recited the Ave. I had run out of things to say and do. I'd never encountered a ghost so violent, so terrifying, in the sixteen years I'd been a professional ghost hunter. I wondered if this was my last hunt.

My back struck the cold iron door that separated the cell block from the hallway that led to the outside, and I closed my eyes, still praying, still holding the rosary in my hand like a shield. I braced for the ghost's attack, already feeling the icy chill of the grave in its touch and the pain of its claws shredding my flesh.

And it *was* painful. One of the ghost's claws laid open my cheek, sending a stream of blood down it, its warmth a stark contrast to the chill of the grave that surrounded me. I opened my eyes and screamed at the sight of Wayne's hellish face just inches from my own. There was a gleeful light in those awful eyes as they watched the blood drip down my face.

"Holy Mary," I whispered, slowly reaching into my pocket again. "Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." I pulled out a small, round plastic container, and while staring into those inhuman eyes, unscrewed the lid. "Amen," I said and tossed the contents of the container at the ghost.

Wayne shrieked again, this time in pain, and shrunk away from me. The kosher salt and iron filings in the container worked like a charm, disrupting the ghost and draining it of most of its energy and power. It looked almost human again; its expression was no longer something out of a horror movie. I took a deep breath and raised my hand to my cheek. The cut felt shallow, but it stung badly and still bled.

"Wayne?" It darted a look at my face as I spoke to it. "Do you see the light now?" Again, I nodded vaguely to a spot behind it. It turned and looked, and I saw a shiver move through its body. I peered into the air past the ghost's shoulder, and I thought I saw black, shadowy forms moving there. I blinked, clearing my sight, and stared again, seeing nothing this time.

But had there really been something there? Was it the shadow men Wayne claimed to have seen prior to his death, or was it simply stress and fright making me think I'd seen something?

It faced me again, and I saw abject terror on his face. What could frighten a ghost like this? Maybe I *had* seen something after all. “Go to the light,” I said, trying to be encouraging and calming. I did not want him to attack me again. “It’s alright. You’ll find rest there. Go on.”

The ghost stared at me for a moment and then slowly backed away. I sighed with relief and straightened my shoulders. “It will be alright,” I said with more confidence than I felt.

“It will never be alright,” he said, his voice cracked and broken. A wind I saw but did not feel whipped at the ragged clothing that hung from Wayne's lanky body, stirring it into a frenzy that was mirrored by his desperate movements. A hazy glare illuminated him from behind, limning him with flame-colored light. *Things* flew out of the brightness, things with wings and claws and gaping maws, things that had fiery holes for eyes, things that were as insubstantial as shadows. Wayne shrieked, again in pain, though from the sound of it, it was a thousand times more excruciating than when I'd thrown the salt at him. The shapes rushed at the ghost, tearing chunks from its flesh, sending ectoplasm splashing all over the floor of the cell block. Two of the shadows grabbed at the ghost's shoulders, their claws sinking in, and dragged him backward. His eyes locked with mine and his expression beseeched me to save him.

There was nothing I could do, however. No words, no prayers, nothing I could say or do would save him from the afterlife that awaited him. He'd made his bed, and now, he must lie in it. I felt a small sliver of pity as I stood and watched him dragged off. Then I turned and left the cell block, stumbling down the hallway towards the administration area.

“It’s gone?” a guard asked as he came to stand next to me in the prison warden’s reception area. He glanced at my cheek and reached into his pocket to withdraw a white handkerchief. “It do that to you?”

I accepted the handkerchief and pressed it against my cheek. “Yes,” I answered. “Do you have a bandage or something?”

“I can take you to the clinic after you settle up with the sheriff.”

“I'd appreciate that. Thank you.”

The guard nodded and knocked on the door to the warden’s office. A few moments later, the warden opened the door and beckoned me inside his office. He was an ancient, wizened old man who had to be decades past retirement age, but through some combination of skill and well-placed political donations, had kept his job. His office smelled like alcohol and cigars, making me want to sneeze.

“So you’ve completed the... er... the job?” the warden asked as he ushered me to a chair and took the one across the desk from me. “The ghost is gone?”

“Yes, sir. You shouldn’t have any more problems.”

He nodded thoughtfully, his rheumy eyes distant. “Well,” he said at length, “I do have to admit to a certain amount of skepticism with regard to this whole affair. I mean, ghosts? Preposterous. But then all those accidents and injuries the inmates sustained, the complaints of nightmares...” He trailed off, eyes far away for a moment. Then he shook his head, returning to the here and now, and picked up an envelope from the top of his desk and handed it across to me. “The rest of your fee, Miss Seton. I’ll have the guard show you out.”

He stood and made his slow, shuffling way toward the door. I followed, nodded my thanks to him as I left his office, and followed the guard down yet another corridor, through more iron doors, and into the clinic. A female nurse dressed in yellow scrubs cleaned the gash on my cheek and used a couple of

butterfly strips to hold it closed. “It shouldn't need stitches,” she assured me. “Just try to keep it clean and it'll heal nicely.”

“Thanks,” I said and followed the guard back towards the administration area of the prison. Once we went through the main entrance, another uniformed guard handed me my purse and cell phone, and the original guard showed me out into the sunshine-filled parking lot. The doors clanged closed behind me without another word, and I tried really hard not to take it personally.

In this modern age of science and skepticism, ghosts had been relegated to the stuff of fantasy—films, TV shows, comic books, and novels. No one actually believed in the spirit world, not when there were a hundred thousand explanations for ghostly happenings. And yet, I did a thriving business. People from all over the country called me and begged me to help their ghosts pass on. But when my job was done and they'd paid the remainder of my bill, they wanted nothing further to do with me. I wondered if this was how abortion doctors felt; necessary but evil, shouldering the burden of societal hatred and distaste.

As I moved through the parking lot where gray drifts of ice-covered snow piled up in the corners where the sun never touched, I felt eyes on my back. Surreptitiously, I darted a glance over my shoulder, thinking it was the trustees clearing walkways of ice staring at me. I was shocked to see that it wasn't. Two men, dressed identically in white shirts and blue jeans, were loitering just outside the prison's main entrance. They stood shoulder to shoulder on the other side of the chain-link fence that surrounded the lot, heads moving as though they were searching for something or someone. One of them raised his right hand to shade his face, and a spark of light caught my eye. The man wore a huge, gaudy ring with a faceted blue stone on his middle finger. His head slowly turned towards me, and our eyes caught and held. The other man turned to stare at me, too.

We stared at each other for maybe five seconds before some distant part of me pointed out that all the sound and most of the color had been sucked out of the world around me. I blinked and ducked behind a car. I remained there, gasping for breath and trying to slow my racing heart, until sound and color bled back into the world. I dared a peek over the trunk of the car I was crouched behind.

The men were gone.

I blew out a breath and stood up before jogging across the parking lot to my Jeep. I slid behind the wheel, slammed the door closed, locked it, and pulled my cell phone out of my bag. A quick glance showed that I'd received four missed calls and a text message while I'd been dealing with Wayne's ghost. They were all from my best friend and business partner, Keisha. *Call me immediately*, the text said. I rolled my eyes and slotted my key into the ignition. Keisha was so very dramatic. Her call could wait until I'd figured out where I was having dinner.

Using my GPS, I keyed in a search for a soul food restaurant in Chicago. It recommended a place on West Division Street in Wicker Park, so I set the computer to direct me there from the jail. Once I was on the road, I dialed Keisha's number and routed the call through the Jeep's hand-free system.

“Jerri. It's you. Finally.” Keisha's voice boomed out of my stereo speakers. “Where have you been? I've been calling you forever.”

“Working.” Keisha was silent. I explained, “On the Illinois State Prison case. Remember?” She was still silent, so I said, “Chicago? Murderer's ghost?”

“Oh, that's right. How'd it go? Did you help it?”

“Yes. It was harder than I thought it might be.”

She made a sympathetic noise, forced so I wouldn't call her heartless and inhuman. Again. "Did you get paid?" she asked, getting to her real concern.

"Yes, Keisha. I got paid. I'll deposit the check in the morning."

"That's a relief," she said. "Your mortgage payment is coming up soon, your car payment's due in a week, and well, there's my salary to cover, too."

"What did you need?" I was anxious to get off the phone before I started insulting her. If she wasn't such a damned good organizer and an even better friend, I'd have fired her years ago.

"A new client phoned today. Sounds like an easy one. Want me to email the details?"

"Yeah. I'm headed for dinner. I'll look it over while I'm eating and get back to you."

"Sounds good. Bye, Jerri," she said and hung up.

I exhaled sharply with relief and concentrated on the road. I'd hired Keisha seven years ago, after sifting through at least fifty answers to an employment ad I'd placed on Craig's List in New Orleans, my home town. Most of the resumes I'd received were from illiterate high school drop-outs, and of course there were more than a few people telling me that I was going to go straight to Hell because I had dealings with what they assumed were demons. Keisha's had been the only response that didn't make me laugh or cry. She was efficient, organized, believed in what I did, and handled frightened clients with kid gloves. Shortly after I hired her, she moved into the other half of my double-shotgun house in New Orleans' Marigny neighborhood. We'd see each other countless times on the street, in near-by restaurants and bars, but never really spoke outside of work. Our relationship had slowly bloomed into a close friendship and now, despite all my grouching, I couldn't imagine my life without her.

Twenty minutes later, I arrived in Wicker Park, the epitome of urban gentrification. Maple trees lined side streets, their bare branches reaching up into the late February sky like skeletal fingers grabbing at the thin cloud layer. Remodeled warehouses with million-dollar loft apartments stood next to run-down brick homes with sagging porches and over-grown gardens. Yuppie moms pushing \$400 baby strollers, hipsters dressed in impossibly skinny jeans, and elderly women dressed in threadbare London Fog car coats carefully picked their way along icy sidewalks. I circled the block on which the restaurant was located and finally found a spot, shocked that I hadn't encountered parking restrictions or a meter. When I slid out of the Jeep, there was a definite nip in the air, the first sign that snow would soon be falling. I snugged my peacoat tighter around my shoulders and walked to the restaurant.

The interior of the place wasn't what I expected. It was ultra-modern, austere, and packed with white folk. At least my blonde hair and blue eyes wouldn't stand out as much as I'd assumed they would. Down south, in my native Louisiana, I would have been the only white face in the place. The scents that greeted me were exactly what I was looking for, however—fried chicken, pecan pie, bar-becued pork, and spicy, smokey greens. My stomach rumbled in anticipation. The hostess took my name and informed me that it was an hour wait. I told her that was no problem and settled down with my tablet so I could read over the new client information Keisha had emailed to me.

The job was in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It was a family—mom, dad, four kids. The youngest, a seven-year-old boy, claimed his grandmother was visiting him every night, sitting on the edge of his bed and singing until he fell asleep, but all family members had seen or heard or even smelled the ghost. The grandmother had died unexpectedly six months prior and had been the kids' primary caregiver. It sounded as though it would be an easy job without much research required. I wrote back to Keisha, telling the family to expect me in two day's time. Then I asked the hostess if she could

recommend a cheap, safe hotel in the area. She directed me to a hostel that was five minutes away. I went online and made a reservation for that night.

Finally, I was seated and ordered chicken and dumplings, sweet tea, and a slice of pecan pie. The food was wonderful and very definitely reminiscent of my childhood. After I'd enjoyed a single glass of the restaurant's wonderful bourbon, I headed for the hostel and went up to my private room. After thoroughly scanning the building, I decided that it was empty of spirits and let my guards down. It was a relief to be truly relaxed and alone in my head.

I took a quick shower, changed into flannel pajamas, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and settled down in my rented bed. Closing my eyes and letting my body relax, I said my nightly prayers, asking God to watch out for Wayne's soul and to help him be at peace, even if he was headed for Hell. I also asked that He keep an eye out on Keisha, and that he keep my mother safe, wherever, *whoever*, she was.

Sleep was far off, visiting someone else. My thoughts turned to the job I'd done earlier that day and I felt a familiar despair creeping in. Howard Wayne was the first soul of a murderer that I had helped move on, but I'd helped plenty of people who could have been his victims. Lives cut tragically short for the greedy, the frightened, or the just plain crazy. Why did God allow such evil?

"God needs evil, Jerrilyn. Without the Eternal Struggle, God is irrelevant."

I sat bolt upright in bed, my heart pounding in my chest.

The hostel had been empty of spirits before I went to bed. How could there be one now? Was a recently-arrived guest haunted? Had he or she brought the ghost with them in some haunted item? The voice was an almost-soundless whisper in the dark of my room, something I'd felt more than heard. I reached for the bedside table and turned on the lamp. The soft light chased the shadows away from my bed and into the deeper corners of the room. "H-hello?" I said, forcing my voice through a throat clogged with fear. "Who's there? Is someone there?"

I held my breath, willing the thunder of the blood in my veins to calm, and strained to listen to the world outside my head. I heard nothing but the distant traffic on the streets surrounding the hostel. Muffled laughter and chatter came from the rooms around me. But in my room, there was silence. Had I nodded off and simply dreamt the voice?

Closing my eyes, I reached out with my other senses, searching the corners of the room for signs of spirits. There was a lingering *something* near the door to the hallway. I opened my eyes, wrapped my hand around the silver crucifix that hung from my neck, and sent a quick prayer to the Holy Mother to protect me. Then I slid out of bed and went to the door.

I flipped the overhead lights on and the room was flooded with light, exorcising the shadows. Since I was away from my home for months at a time, I mostly lived out of my car and carried with me everything I needed to work and live in three large suitcases. They were sitting next to each other, lined up against the wall opposite my bed like soldiers. On the floor at their feet was my messenger bag, which contained my ghost hunting kit and all the stuff normal women carried in their purses—wallet, checkbook, compact, comb, tissues. But nothing was out of place.

I stepped into the bathroom, and glanced behind the shower curtain. Nothing. Shaking my head, I went back into the main room and looked around once more, opening and closing the closet door, ducking to look beneath the bed and the small table. Absolutely nothing.

“You’re ridiculous,” I said to myself, certain now that I’d dreamt the voice. Double checking that the door to my room was locked, I shambled back to bed and shut off all the lights before laying down once more. Sleep was probably in the next state over by now and had no intentions of coming back to me, but I had to rest. I had an eighteen-hour drive ahead of me in the morning and the last thing I needed was to fall asleep at the wheel.