

Mayhem

Black Shadow Book Two

By Linda Guyan

Black shadow is the evil that lives in all of us — a black shadow that thrives on murder and mayhem.

Is there a black shadow in you?

* * * *

Prologue

Bear Ridge, California, Saturday, February 26, 1966

“The next female serial killers have already been born.

More are being born as I write this. The older girls have already thought about killing. Some have already committed murder. Perhaps, they are reading this article. Who will be the next female serial killer?”

The twelve-year-old tilted her head, contemplating the question with the utmost seriousness. Her grin became wide, her eyes alight with excitement at the prospect. Her young voice was filled with pride as she stated the one-word answer with complete confidence.

“Me.”

She always read the end of the article first. It was her favorite. Then she skipped around to read her other favorite parts before going back to the beginning and reading it from top to bottom. Then she would repeat the out-of-order process. The young girl ran her slim finger down the page, enjoying the feel of the slick paper. She trailed her finger back to the top, stopping at the title on page eighteen. *Bay Area Today, Crime Log, by Chuck Horton, Staff Reporter, covering the beat on crime—now and then.* She savored every word as she began reading the beginning of the article to herself.

Killers are not only men. Women kill, too. Mayhem is not limited to the male species. America is fascinated with killers, women and men, alike. Make no mistake, killers are not all degenerates—they come in all types, ages, sizes, shapes, and sexes who kill in a variety of ways. This month I’m going to list some infamous women killers with a high body count who went down in history creating

murder and mayhem.

“Oh boy! He’s writing about women killers this time.” The twelve-year-old reader grinned as she soaked up every word of Chuck Horton’s article like a sponge. She had read all of the other *Crime Log* articles since she was nine. Eagerly, the girl scanned the entries.

Elizabeth Báthory, 650 victims in Hungary. Also called the Blood Countess, she was a Hungarian countess at the turn of the 16th century and considered to be the most prolific female serial killer of all time. Amelia Dyer, 400 plus victims in England. Amelia was one of the most prolific serial killers in history, murdering infants that were in her care over a twenty-year period. Delphine Lalaurie, 100-plus victims in New Orleans, Louisiana. Madame Lalaurie was a New Orleans Creole socialite and serial killer of slaves in the early 19th century.

“Those women killed hundreds of people,” she said, her voice filled with awe. “And that was a really long time ago.” The girl ran her finger down the page, searching for killers that caught her attention. She read aloud as she went along.

“Amy Duggan Archer-Gilligan killed sixty nursing home patients in Connecticut in the nineteen hundreds. Belle Sorenson Gunness killed over forty victims in Indiana also in the early nineteen hundreds. Jane Toppan had thirty-one victims in Massachusetts in the early nineteen hundreds, with a personal ambition *to have killed more people—helpless people—than any other man or woman who ever lived...*”

She skimmed about a half-dozen more entries, then stopped. “This one is current. I remember hearing about it even though it was in England. A woman and her boyfriend killed some kids over a two-year period.” She read the

details aloud.

“The Moors Murderer killed five children – ranging from ten to seventeen years old. Myra Hindley and Ian Brady’s murder spree spanned between nineteen sixty-three and nineteen sixty-five in Greater Manchester, England.”

Pausing, she let what she’d read sink in. “I had no idea there were so many girl serial killers!” She ran her small hand gently over the shiny page, reviewing the article again, focusing on each of the killers. “Most of those women used poison. Seems kind of boring to me.”

She let her finger stop once again at the familiar ending paragraph. “I love that all of his articles end almost the same way.”

The girl re-read it with emphasis, the words having meaning for her.

“The next female serial killers have already been born. More are being born as I write this. The older girls have already thought about killing. Some have already committed murder. Perhaps, they are reading this article.”

She took a deep breath, smiled widely, and spoke aloud as she continued to the writer’s final question.

“Who will be the next female serial killer?”

She closed the magazine and shoved it under the bed, hiding it with all of the others.

“It’s me! I’m the next female serial killer!”

Saturday, November 9, 1996

The old woman read the headlines of the old and yellowed articles dating back to the nineteen sixties. She ran her hand over two of them from nineteen seventy-one.

Killer on the Loose, by Harold Carson. The number of murders and missings in Castlebay and surrounding communities has risen—

Blanche Barlow took a deep breath, letting out a lamenting sigh as she glanced at the next headline.

Still Missing, by Harold Carson. A teenage girl remains missing. Initially thought to be a runaway, she has now been officially designated as missing. Castlebay Police Department urges anyone to come forward if you have seen—

So many years had gone by since then, but somehow Blanche believed her granddaughter would turn up someday, safe and well and probably knowing nothing about her past. She didn't continue reading the articles. She knew them all by heart. Blanche replaced the scrapbook on the antique desk, then opened the deep, bottom left drawer and pulled out a pile of magazines, reaching for the one on top. It was old and dog-eared but still in remarkable shape considering it had been read hundreds of times through the years. Long ago memorizing the page, Blanche flipped to it, smiling at the memories it brought back. She settled in her chair as she began reading the article she knew by heart.

Bay Area Today, Crime Log, by Chuck Horton, Staff Reporter, covering the beat on crime—now and then.

Blanche made her way through the list of women serial killers, coming to the familiar ending.

The next female serial killers have already been born. More are being born as I write this. The older girls have already thought about killing. Some have already committed murder. Perhaps, they are reading this article.

The old woman smiled as a memory of her granddaughter returned. “She always loved that all of his articles ended nearly the same way, reading it over and over again. She loved these magazine articles about crime and killers. But this issue about female serial killers was her favorite.”

Wistfully, Blanche trailed a wrinkled, arthritic finger over the slick page, reviewing the words of Chuck Horton.

“It’s interesting that most of those women used poison. That sounds so boring. But I guess that was a woman’s weapon of choice in those days.” As she reached the end of the article, she tapped her finger on the writer’s final question, the one that her granddaughter had always given the utmost attention. Blanche Barlow closed her eyes. She could almost hear her repeating the question aloud as she so often had and with her usual zeal.

“Who will be the next female serial killer?”

Blanche opened her eyes, repeating her twelve-year-old granddaughter’s answer, remembering how her young voice filled with pride at the single word.

“Me.”

Blanche closed the magazine, returned it to the drawer with all the others, then wandered to the bookshelf that took up one entire wall. She ran her age-spotted hands lovingly over a row of books – books that had etched a permanent fondness in her heart. They were mystery novels – the *Castlebay Mysteries* by Bethany Banks. Her memories were interrupted by the sound of the tea kettle screeching.

Blanche made her way back to the kitchen as rain began to thud on the roof. She turned down the heat under the kettle, then stopped for a moment and closed her eyes, listening to the heavy downpour. She took a deep breath, letting the sound soothe her soul. Rain always had that effect on her. Blanche opened her eyes, still listening to the soothing rain as she prepared her morning tea. She walked to the living room, carrying the red mug with the pink rose on it, then took a seat on the old sofa with the antique rose design. She picked up the remote and turned on the TV, clicking to the news channel. Sipping the hot tea, Blanche listened to the news bulletin.

“This is Craig Carson for Channel Thirty-three, with breaking news, reporting live from Castlebay. Behind me is the scene of a tragic double murder that happened just before midnight last night here at Hill House, seven-thirty-two Crestview Road, during a masquerade party. The Castlebay Police Department has confirmed the two victims as Suzanne Hill and Carter Croft. The killer is presumed to be wearing a costume, possibly dressed as a clown. No other details are available at this time. Look for updates about the Masquerade Murders in a special edition of your evening newspaper, the *Castlebay Star*. Again, this is Craig Carson

reporting live at the scene of a double homicide at Hill House.”

The elderly woman sat back, taking in the news as she gazed at the fireplace, watching as the flames jumped and swayed to their crackling tune. Blanche Barlow sipped her tea, thinking. She had waited patiently for twenty-five years in this house in Bear Ridge. She would wait as long as it took.

Outside, the rain continued. It was still a dark haze outside at this early hour. The lampposts were still on, not set to turn off for another half hour. Blanche noticed the eerie shadows they created as the streetlight filtered through the lace curtains. She watched the dark shadows dance on her floor and wall, reminiscent of the flames that were dancing in her fireplace.

With the murders at Hill House, the shadows seemed to be reaching out to her – warning her.

They’re an omen. These are the shadows of a killer—these are the black shadows of an evil soul.

The news of last night’s murders remained dominant, meaning only one thing.

“Her memory is coming back.”

* * * *

Part One

Laura

Evil comes in many disguises.

* * * *

Chapter One

Pacific Heights, California, Wednesday, December 13, 2000

***I**t was Regina who had been sneaking into the house and watching me the whole time!*

Laura Drake's mind was on Regina Tate as her shaking hand attempted to put the key in the lock.

Laura's Siamese cat, Cleo, meowed at her feet, anxious to get inside.

She tried to reassure her cat. "I'm hurrying, Cleo." She

didn't sound convincing.

There were too many ways to get into that damn house! Even my barricades couldn't keep Regina Tate out. She always found a way to get in.

Frustrated, Laura brushed a long strand of wavy, ash-blond hair away from her face and let out a heavy sigh as she finally got the key in the lock and opened the door. Cleo scampered inside and promptly got comfortable on the familiar sofa.

Then she followed me out of town, nearly ran me off the road, then threatened me. Laura's hands were still shaking as she closed, locked, and bolted the door behind her before joining Cleo on the sofa. She stroked her cat's back as she tried to relax, happy to finally be home and away from Regina Tate and Castlebay. But memories of what happened this morning in the mountain community of Castlebay and at Hill House wouldn't let her rest.

Laura had just spent the last three months there writing her latest book, *Black Shadow*, which was based upon the actual murders in the same house four years ago. Now that *Black Shadow* was finished, her agent and publisher, Paul Rogers, wanted a sequel—possibly a series.

"But then there was Regina Tate."

I was so scared! Laura fought to keep her emotions at bay, but she wasn't doing very well. I'm still scared.

"What if she knows where I live?" Laura shivered at the thought. Trying hard to not think about that possibility, she got up and walked to her liquor cabinet. Unsteadily, she

poured herself a brandy and drank half of it. She found her purse, retrieved her cell phone, and speed-dialed the familiar number.

Paul Rogers answered on the second ring. "Laura," he said. "Are you home?"

She sat back down next to her sleeping cat on the living room sofa, attempting to keep her voice even, not letting her emotions show. She knew she wasn't doing a very good job. "Yes, we're home."

"Something's wrong," Paul stated. "I can hear it in your voice. What's happened?"

Laura's agent had always looked out for her. Paul always knew when something was wrong. "I had a little incident on the way out of Castlebay. I'm still a bit shaky."

"Are you and Cleo okay? You didn't have an accident, did you?"

"We're okay and no, we didn't have an accident," Laura explained. "We're fine. There's nothing to worry about."

"Well, that's good, but you sound scared to me, Laura. Something else is wrong."

She held back tears from her hazel eyes. "I'll tell you about it when I see you. I just wanted to call like I promised to let you know I'm home."

"As it happens, I've got a meeting in Pacific Heights," Paul told her. "I'm going to stop by afterward and check up on you and Cleo. You can fill me in on what happened. I should be there about four."

Laura was relieved but didn't tell him that. "That would be nice, Paul. See you then."

She placed the cell phone on the coffee table, then made another trip to the bar and refilled her glass. The brandy was helping, but not enough to make the memories and visions of what had happened let her alone. Back on the sofa next to Cleo, she replayed this morning's events in her head. She had been packing up to leave Hill House and Castlebay, getting ready to come home.

I found cigarette butts outside the sliding glass bedroom doors. The glass door in the master bedroom—the murder room—was open. Worse, the sofa that I had just moved off the trapdoor to the basement had been moved back. My keys kept being moved and I heard wind chimes that weren't there.

Laura sipped more of the brandy. Her hands weren't shaking as badly now.

She petted her cat's soft, white head. "Well, I'd better get us unpacked before Paul gets here. You just keep on sleeping."

Cleo moved to a new position but didn't utter a sound. "I wish I slept that soundly." She made numerous trips from her Jeep in the driveway, carting in three months' worth of luggage, boxes, and her laptop. By the time she did all of that, put it all away, and changed into a comfortable dress and sandals, the doorbell rang.

"Hi, Paul." Seeing his familiar, kind face calmed her. "Come in."

Paul was tall and handsome, about five years older. His rugged face was reminiscent of spending much of his life

outdoors, sailing. His wavy, short dark brown hair and eyes the color of the ocean only accentuated his good looks. Since he had come straight from a meeting, he was wearing his black suit with a dark blue tie.

Paul eyed the glass on the coffee table. "Can I have some of that, too?"

Laura smiled. "Of course."

"Then I want you to tell me everything," he said as he took a seat in the armchair across from the sofa. "Just jump right in. Don't leave anything out."

Laura handed him a glass of brandy, then took her seat next to Cleo on the sofa, curling her legs underneath her.

"Someone was watching me at Hill House," she began shakily, her hands tight around the brandy glass.

"Keep going," Paul encouraged.

"When I was getting ready to leave this morning, I checked everything to make sure the rental house was put back to normal. I checked all the sliding glass doors and made sure the security bars were in place. Then I removed my barricades from the basement trapdoor and in the linen closet."

"Wait," Paul said as he sat forward. "You barricaded yourself in this house?"

"Remember, Hill House was where Suzanne Hill and Carter Croft were murdered during a masquerade party four years ago," Laura explained. "The basement trapdoor up into the master bedroom was how the killer got in. There was also

another secret entrance into the house through the downstairs linen closet, so I barricaded that, too. And I put security bars in the sliding glass door tracks, and padlocks on all of the outside entries. I did what I had to in order to feel safe.”

Paul shook his head, took a long drink of the brandy, and sat back in his chair, stretching his long legs. “I understand your need to write your stories in the location of the murders,” he began, “and your best-selling books show your attention to detail, but this is really frightening. How you stayed in Hill House all alone for three months, I’ll never know.”

Laura shrugged. “Actually, it wasn’t bad, because I was so focused on the book. It wasn’t until this morning when I was getting ready to leave did I notice something was wrong. After a dozen trips back and forth from the house to the Jeep, hauling all of my luggage out, I went back into the house to make sure I hadn’t missed anything.”

Paul was listening intently, sipping his brandy.

“Paul, the sliding glass door in the master bedroom was wide open! It had been locked and a security bar was in the track! I double-checked it! And the sofa had been pushed back over the trapdoor!”

Paul gave her a strange look as he thought about what she had just told him. “But, that would mean — ”

Laura nodded and took another long drink of the alcohol. “In the minutes after I had removed the barricade over the trapdoor in the bedroom, someone had come in, moved the sofa back over the trapdoor, and opened the sliding glass

door! I went out on the balcony and found cigarette butts in front of both bedroom glass doors and I smelled fresh cigarette smoke! Whoever had just done all of this took the time to go out on the balcony for a smoke!"

Paul stated the obvious. "Someone was not only watching you, but trying to scare you."

"It worked!" Laura exclaimed as she finished off the brandy. "There's more."

"Keep going," Paul said as he reached for her glass, then walked to the bar and refilled both glasses. He handed Laura hers, now half full. "I'm listening."

"I grabbed Cleo and got out of there!" Laura continued. "On the way out of town, people stared at me, which was really weird. Finally, I was on the road out of town and was headed home. I even had an idea for the start of the sequel. I thought I was safe." Laura took a drink of the brandy. "Until Regina showed up."

"Regina?" Paul asked. "That was the woman you used as the fictional version of your serial killer, Alice?"

"That's her," Laura told him as the words spilled out. "She was following me, then threatened me, then nearly killed me. First she pulled out to pass me in that red car of hers, pausing long enough to run her hand across her neck in a cutting gesture and smiled. That's when I knew it was Regina that had done all of that in the house. She was the one watching me! Just when I thought she was gone, she pulled right out in front of me. I had to slam on my brakes and barely missed hitting her. All she did was keep smoking

her cigarette, blow smoke in my direction, and grin. Then she finally drove on. I was so terrified, I pulled into the same turnout she had pulled out from and stopped. I was shaking like a leaf. I don't think I've ever been so frightened in my life. I'm still terrified. I'm still shaking."

"Hell, I would be, too," Paul said. "Any idea why she singled you out?"

"Not a clue. I had very little contact with the woman other than interviewing her and telling her I was considering using her and her mother as characters in my book. I interviewed all the people I used as characters."

Paul frowned. "I think the real person is just as crazy as your character."

"That's for sure," Laura agreed. "It's not like I haven't stayed in murder houses before, or supposedly haunted ones, for that matter. And I've encountered innumerable strange people, even possible ghosts. But Regina Tate really frightened me. She really does remind me of my fictional evil serial killer character, Alice Crain."

Paul glanced down at Laura's shaking hands. "I can't believe all the things that happened to you today. I'm just thankful you made it home and you're all right and that woman, Regina, didn't hurt you."

Laura took a deep breath. "And then there were the invisible wind chimes. I don't even know how to explain that one. It definitely wasn't Regina Tate."

"Well, you know I believe in ghosts like you do," Paul said. "So you don't have to convince me that house is haunted."

"The woman who was murdered there, Suzanne Hill, had a set of wind chimes that she loved," Laura told him. "I assume it was her. I even wrote those chimes into my book. Later, it came out that it was presumed that the killer stole the wind chimes, described as having a large sunflower motif."

Paul nodded. "I think I know where this is headed."

Laura frowned and leaned forward. "Paul, there is no way I'm going back to that house to write the sequel. I can't. I just can't. Don't ask me to because I will tell you no. I'm not going back to Castlebay. I don't ever want to see Regina Tate again in my life."

Paul put up his hand and nodded. "I understand completely. I know how you need to be in the right location in order to write your books. That's why you always try to rent the actual murder house. Putting yourself within the walls of the murders helps you soak up all that rich ambiance that creates such a unique credibility and turns your books into bestsellers. That's why you're such a famous writer. But this time it all became a little too real. It also means that, in order to write the sequel, you would have to return to Castlebay and Hill House."

Laura sat back, relieved. "Thank you, Paul. Thank you for understanding."

"But," Paul continued as he ran a hand through his brown hair.

"Oh shit," Laura said. "There's a *but*. I'm definitely not going to like this." "Let me just ask this much of you. I still

eventually want that *Black Shadow* sequel and I know your readers do, too. So, how about you write whatever you want for as long as you want. Then whenever you're ready, only then, you will write the sequel. For now, all I care about is another bestseller and keeping my favorite author happy and out of the loony bin."

"What if I'm never ready?" she asked nervously. "Then we'll deal with that when the time comes." Laura swallowed another sip of the brandy. She was trembling. Paul glanced at his watch. "I'm so sorry, but I've got someplace I've got to be."

She put on a smile. "Thanks for coming by and listening to my story. It helped to talk about it." Paul stood up and walked toward the front door with

Laura following. "I'm glad I could help. Put the sequel out of your mind for now and just write anything you want. Just write something. Your fans can't wait for your next book, whatever that is."

Laura nervously twirled a lock of her blonde hair. "Thanks, Paul."

"By the way, I have some good news," Paul said. "I sent a copy of your manuscript to my director friend, Sal Hern. He loved it and is ready to go forward with optioning *Black Shadow*. Actually, he wants to film the whole *Black Shadow* series, however many that ends up being. This is real, Laura! You know I wouldn't tell you if it weren't."

"That's so exciting." Laura took his hand, picturing *Murder* on a movie marquee. "Oh, I forgot to tell you that I'm

changing the title to *Murder. Black Shadow* will be the subtitle."

"It's a terrific title," Paul told her. "*Murder*, the beginning of the *Black Shadow* series. It's going to make a great book and film!"

"You know I've always wanted one of my books made into a movie."

Paul squeezed her hand. "I know. Now, it's finally going to happen."

"I'm thrilled," she told him. "This is fantastic news."

Paul kissed her lightly on the cheek. "I've got to run. Write anything you want. Put what happened today out of your mind and write me another bestseller."

Laura nodded. "I will. Thanks."

Paul opened the door and stepped outside into the cool, foggy San Francisco day. "Call me if you need anything."

"I will."

He took one step and stopped. "You said you had an idea for beginning the sequel," Paul began. "Humor me and at least tell me you came up with a title for book two of the *Black Shadow* series if and when you decide to write it."

Laura knew he would be pleased as she whispered the word, giving it more impact.

"*Mayhem*."

Paul grinned. "It's perfect! *Murder* and *Mayhem*!" Laura

watched him walk away, then shut and locked the door behind him.

I'm scared. She couldn't get those two words out of her head or the terror that caused them – Regina Tate. She curled up on her living room sofa with Cleo, gazing through the double doors to her patio that was surrounded by a lush garden.

"Meow," her cat said as she nuzzled her way into Laura's lap.

Laura petted her beloved Siamese cat. "Hey, Cleo. I bet you were scared, too."

"Meow," Cleo purred.

"Well, don't you worry," Laura reassured her cat as she caressed her soft fur. "We're not ever going back. I lied to Paul. He'll just have to deal with it."

Laura absently stroked her cat as she shifted her thinking to Christmas. Only a dozen days away and she had no decorations up yet. "Guess it's time to buy a Christmas tree. I'll get us one tomorrow."

Cleo looked at her as if understanding every word. "Meow."

"You're a very smart cat."

Laura gazed at the year-round white lights that were strung throughout the trees. They came on automatically and were always a pleasant sight. Usually, it calmed her. But not tonight.

No way am I going back there! Not to Hill House or to Castlebay!

She thought of her own tri-level condo that was so similar to the multi-level Hill House, thinking about the various ways for an intruder to get in. "I'm moving to a one-story house!"

"Meow."

"You must be starving," Laura told her cat. "We haven't eaten since morning. It's been a crazy day, to say the least. You get Salmon Supreme and I'm microwaving a TV dinner."

"Meow," Cleo replied.

After their meal, Laura went through the house, checking windows and doors, making sure everything was secure and turning out lights. She took one last look at her pretty, white lights on the patio, deciding to leave them on. She picked up her cat, holding Cleo close, then traipsed up the carpeted hallway to her bedroom. "Did I mention we're moving, Cleo?"

"Meow," the cat answered.

"First thing tomorrow, I'm calling a realtor," Laura said. "I want Santa to bring me a new house for Christmas. And a security alarm system."

Cleo jumped up on the bed and curled herself into a comfortable position at the foot while Laura stepped into the bathroom. She popped a small white pill into her mouth, washing it down with water. She turned off the bathroom light, shutting the door behind her. Smiling at the sight of her sleeping cat on the bed, Laura changed into her flannel nightgown and started to climb into her queen-sized bed.

Suddenly, a noise stopped her. She sat rigid on the side of the bed, listening, her mind and ears alert, her heart beating wildly, her hazel eyes furtively looking around the room. She couldn't tell what the noise was or where it came from.

Damn you, Regina. I hate to admit how much you scared me. Now, I'm hearing things.

Laura stood up and hurried back to the bathroom. She opened the door and flipped on the light switch. Leaving the door partially open, she crawled into bed with one thing on her mind.

"I'm never going back to Castlebay or Hill House and I'm never writing that sequel."

Convincing herself of that statement soothed her. Soon, she was sound asleep under the soft sheets and warm comforter, Cleo curled up at her feet.

Laura Drake had no idea there was an intruder in her house.

*** *

Regina Tate enjoyed the small white lights draped through the trees. The scene reminded her of an enchanted fairy tale land. She made herself comfortable on Laura's patio chair, making sure it made a grating noise on the cement.

Just enough of a sound to rattle Laura's already jagged nerves.

"We've got a lot of secrets, you and me, Laura Drake," Regina said as she finished off the granola bar she'd brought

with her. She left the wrapper on the table so Laura would find it.

I want Laura to know I've been here.

"Hmm..." she mused. "Still no Christmas decorations, Laura. Where's your Christmas spirit?" She reached in her bag and pulled out a shiny red ornament dangling from a hook.

"Well, we can't have that, now can we?"

She walked to the closest tree and carefully hung the ornament on a branch where it could easily be seen. Regina stepped back to admire her handiwork, tilting her head one way, then the other. She smiled, pleased with her work.

Regina had known where Laura lived for many years. She'd been here many times and knew all about the lights on the patio and when they came on. She had been coming to Laura's home in Pacific Heights more often over the last few months.

I crept around Laura's house while she was living in Castlebay writing her book. I know everything about Laura's home, especially how to get in.

"A security alarm isn't going to keep me out." She giggled softly. "Laura is so much fun to terrorize. And I'll keep on until she returns to Castlebay."

I'll know everything about her next home, too. And her next and her next. I'll find her wherever she goes.

"I know Laura Drake. She'll come back to Castlebay to write that sequel sooner – or later."

Regina smirked.

“I’m a very patient person. I can wait.”

* * * *

Chapter Two

Castlebay, California, Saturday, March 3, 2012

Twelve years later...

“‘**W**ere there any murders there?”

“Well, that’s a new one,” Jackie Taylor told the woman sitting across from her desk.

Laura Drake’s thoughts were not on what the realtor was saying.

What am I doing back here? Back to Castlebay and Regina Tate. Well, I wouldn’t if I didn’t have to. I’ll get this book done for Paul and that’s where the Black Shadow series will end, whether Paul likes it or not. I hope Regina has moved far away, preferably to another country. That damn woman has terrorized me for a dozen years no matter where I’ve moved. On second thought, I’d be a whole lot happier if someone killed her. No such luck. I already

checked. Regina Tate is alive and well and living on the same street where I'm renting a house. How's that for irony?

"Any history of murder in the house?" Laura Drake forced her attention back to grilling the realtor for details about the rental house.

"No," Jackie Taylor explained as she watched Laura take bottled water and a prescription bottle from her elegant black leather purse with shaking hands. "There have been no murders at Russell House."

"Does it have a basement?" Laura continued. "Or attic?"

"No," Jackie replied patiently.

"What about any secret passageways, trapdoors, or crawlspaces?" Laura asked as she nervously took out a small white pill and washed it down with a gulp of the bottled water. She let out a sigh of relief as she returned both bottles to her purse.

"No, none of those, either," Jackie added.

"Any history of hauntings?" Laura continued her interrogation.

Jackie retained her composure. "I've heard of no ghost sightings or stories of ghosts."

"What about entrances?" Laura asked, her hands shaking slightly as she remembered her experiences at Hill House. "How many ways are there to get into the house?"

Jackie tilted her head and pursed her lips, as if mentally calculating the entrances. "Only one, actually." Jackie

paused. "Unless you count climbing up to the balcony."

"What?" Laura asked, eyes wide, her nerves jolting like electricity.

"Sorry," Jackie said, her hand held up in mock apology, clearly trying hard to stifle the laugh that threatened to escape her thin, red lips. "No, there are no other ways to get into the house."

"Are you sure?" Laura asked, completely serious.

"Yes, of course, Miss Drake. I already explained all of this to your assistant."

"I know," Laura replied. "And I'm sorry to be repeating it, but I have to be sure."

"I understand. I want you to be comfortable with the house, especially since you're going to be here in Castlebay for several months." The woman looked sincere, but Laura suspected Jackie was thinking mostly about the income a three-month rental would bring to Castlebay Realty.

"Exactly my point," Laura said. "I'm going to be living there for several months or so and I have a lot of work to do, which means I can't afford any sort of issues to interfere with getting my book written."

"No need to explain, Ms. Drake. I understand completely. I can tell you that there is only one door that serves as the main entrance. It's smaller than Hill House, the house you were in before, but I think you will find it suitable for your needs. You'll have two upstairs bedrooms. The master bedroom, which has a small, private balcony – "

Laura held up her hand to stop the realtor in mid- sentence, then leaned across the desk. "Mrs. Taylor, let me stop you right there. I have little interest in those mundane things. My concerns are entrances and access points such as crawlspaces, secret panels, basements, attics, trapdoors, secret passageways, as well as any violent history or paranormal occurrences in the house."

Jackie Taylor paused for a moment, assessing the woman sitting across from her, a potential long-term renter. She tilted her head and gave Laura Drake her biggest smile.

"Well then, this is the house for you!"

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Writers, Jackie Taylor sighed to herself. She wondered if they were all this demanding and strange. At least she didn't ask about deaths in the house. Not that I would have admitted to it. I need this rental.

Laura Drake hadn't been like this when she had been here a dozen years ago to rent the Hill House. She wondered what had happened to this woman to make her so skittish this time. Jackie had been doing this job for more years than she cared to remember. Now, at seventy-eight, she thought nothing would surprise her. Yet, Laura Drake's questions did. Laura was still an attractive woman with long, blonde hair. *But she's aged like the rest of us since the last time I saw her. She must be in her early fifties by now, Jackie guessed.*

However, unlike many of the rest of them, Laura had aged gracefully and was as beautiful as she had been when she was there before. Laura looked good for whatever her age and had even shed some pounds, looking quite svelte. She was dressed impeccably in a dark purple cashmere sweater, black tailored slacks, and black leather boots. Over the back of the chair was an equally expensive black wool- and-cashmere jacket. Jackie knew expensive clothing when she saw it. Some expertly applied light makeup and Laura Drake was a beautiful woman, albeit one with some definite anxieties.

“What happened to Hill House?” Laura asked. “My assistant said it was no longer available.” She looked relieved.

“I guess you could say it’s a double-edged sword,” Jackie began. “Your *Black Shadow Murder* book was such a success that everyone came here just to take a look at the Hartley House. On the plus side, I got hundreds of rentals because of them. On the negative side, we got so many lookyloos that it brought not only unwanted and unruly crowds, but it brought in riffraff that caused damage and vandalism, as well as a distinct rise in our crime rate. Ashley Willis bought it when the owner, Joyce Tate, was going to tear it down.”

Laura paled at the mention of Joyce Tate’s name.

Jackie noticed Laura’s skittish reaction. *Joyce is the least of her worries in this town.*

Joyce Tate was the woman Laura had used as the basis for her Claudia Crain character in *Murder, Black Shadow* one. She had used Joyce's daughter, Regina, for fictional Claudia's daughter – the evil murderess, Alice Crain – who killed her own mother, among others. Neither woman was exactly friendly, and both had what Laura would characterize as a sinister, self-absorbed quality to them. Which, in turn, made them perfect characters in her book. Laura had used many of the citizens of Castlebay as composites for characters in *Murder*. She wondered how many of them were still here after all these years. She'd even used Jackie Taylor as the fictional realtor, Vivian Casey, and changed Castlebay Realty into Shadylake Realty, then used the name Hartley for the house.

"Ashley is living in Hill House?" Laura asked, completely taken aback by what Jackie had just told her. It was a shock that the little girl, Ashley, was now old enough to buy a house of her own.

"The Emma Delaney character from your book is all grown up now," Jackie replied. "Ashley is just a few years shy of thirty."

"Hard to believe that so many years have gone by," Laura commented. "It will be odd to see the adult Ashley. The last time I saw her she was a teenager."

"Ashley has fixed up the house quite nicely," Jackie added.

"I had no idea all those bad things happened to the house because of my book," Laura said.

"No, you wouldn't," Jackie added dryly. "I don't mean to

offend you, but I should tell you right up front that many people in Castlebay are not pleased to see you come back here to write another book. They don't want a repeat of what happened in our town with your last *Black Shadow* book."

"I don't blame them. I'm very sorry that happened. But I have no control over my fans."

"I understand that, Miss Drake." Jackie sat back in her chair, casually admiring her perfectly manicured red fingernails. "I just wanted to warn you that you might not get a warm reception from everyone in town. Me, I earned a rather substantial income because of your book and movie, so I have no complaints." The realtor leaned forward, arms resting on the desk, her gray eyes staring at Laura Drake. "Secretly, I am rather hoping your sequel is just as big a bestseller and box office hit so Castlebay Realty can reap some more rewards on the tails of your success."

"Well, I do see the logic in that, Mrs. Taylor," Laura said with a smile. "I'm glad my book brought you some extra revenue."

Jackie grinned. "Me, too."

"In that respect, I hope *Black Shadow* two will do the same," Laura told her.

"We can only hope," Jackie Taylor said, smiling widely. "Now, what other questions do you have for me about the Russell House?"

"Can you tell me who lived there before and why they moved?"

"I don't see why not," Jackie said as she glanced at her gold watch. "Carrie Franks and her husband, Darren, lived there happily for two years without incident."

"Why did they leave?"

"I got them a great deal on a house in the area they had been wanting for so long over in Mountain Ridge," Jackie explained. "Nothing sinister scared them away, I can assure you."

"That's good to hear," Laura said, relieved. "I assume the Russell family lived here at some time before that."

"Yes, they did." Jackie nodded. "They were the second owners of the house and lived in it many years. They both died of natural causes about five years ago."

"I'd like to see the house before I rent it, Mrs. Taylor."

"Of course. You shouldn't have to move in sight unseen. Familiarizing yourself with the house will put your mind at ease. And if for any reason you aren't happy with it, I'm sure I can find you something else. But your assistant did mention you preferred to be in the vicinity of Hill House, so I'm not sure I could find you something in that area that is available for that long."

"I understand."

"Well then," Jackie began as she stood up from behind her desk. "My blue Suburban awaits."

"Blue Suburban?" Laura asked, surprised. "That's just like the car your character drove in my book."

“I’d been wanting to buy a new car for a long time,” Jackie told her as she held the door open for Laura. “Turns out it suited me perfectly.”

Laura smiled as they walked out of the realty office. A charcoal-gray sky hung overhead, threatening rain. As far as Laura was concerned, it was perfect weather – cool and cloudy.

Jackie Taylor flipped the hanging sign from open to closed and locked the door behind them. The small town of Castlebay was busy with its citizens, young and old alike, going about their day. She returned her attention to Jackie as the woman walked to her blue Suburban parked out front. It didn’t take long to notice why the vehicle suited her so well. It matched her dark blue cable-knit sweater and wool slacks to a tee, as well as her equally matched blue sheepskin-lined boots and navy blue purse. It seemed that Jackie had even put a pale blue tint on her short, permed gray hair that matched her eyes. Laura was surprised she didn’t have her nails done to match. At least they were painted blood red, matching her lipstick.

“I have to get Cleo first,” Laura said as she opened the car door next to Jackie’s Suburban, a new dark green Jeep Grand Cherokee. “Hey, Cleo,” Laura crooned to her Siamese cat.

“Ah, you still have Cleo,” Jackie commented. “She was everyone’s favorite character.”

“She’s almost fourteen now,” Laura replied. “A bit slower than when she was young, but still pretty spry for her old age.”

"I think we can say that about all of us," Jackie answered with a smile. "Slower than when we were young, though I'm not so sure about the spry part."

Laura laughed as she took Cleo's traveling carrier from the front seat, Cleo meowing at having her nap interrupted.

"I bet the town has changed a lot in the last twelve years since I've been here," Laura said. "It's hard to imagine Ashley all grown up."

"Believe it or not," Jackie began, "she still rides a bicycle all over town."

"Really?" Laura said as she transferred Cleo to Jackie's back seat. "How interesting."

"All in all I don't think you will find that a lot has changed here. Castlebay doesn't change much. Oh, people come and go, but even so, it's not that many. Most people tend to stay in Castlebay."

"It's a beautiful place to live," Laura said as she satisfied herself that Cleo was secure, then got into the front seat of Jackie's Suburban.

"And to die," Jackie added as she slipped into the driver's seat effortlessly.

"What?" Laura asked, her voice quavering, the words frightening her.

"A quote from your book," Jackie told her as she pulled out of the parking space onto Highway 30 and made her way to Castlebay Boulevard.

"How funny!" Laura exclaimed, both of them laughing.
"I've forgotten what I wrote."

I can't believe I forgot that. Silently, Laura chastised herself for being so forgetful and so jumpy. She definitely had to pull herself together if she was going to get this sequel written. It had been a dozen years since she had written the first *Black Shadow, Murder*, and she had never wanted to come back here, so she had put it off as long as she could. Now her agent was pushing her to write this book and she really needed to be here in the same environment in order to write it properly. It had always been that way with her writing. Her environment made all the difference. Paul Rogers had been her agent, as well as her publisher, since the beginning and he had always stood by her. She remembered how understanding he had been about putting off the sequel. However, that was a long time ago. Now she had three months of living in Castlebay ahead of her. Three months to get the sequel written. She was not looking forward to it.

"Now, let's go see that spooky old house you're thinking of renting at one-thirty-six Blackforest Lane," Jackie said with a straight face as she drove through town.

Laura jerked at the realtor's comment, looking at her nervously, her hazel eyes wide with fright. Jackie Taylor smiled widely, looking like she was thoroughly enjoying the moment.

"Just kidding!"