

The Visitor

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Book Four of The Graveyard Queen Series



ONE



The blind ghost returned in the spring and with her my nightmares. The days warmed, the magnolias opened and foreboding settled in like an unwelcome caller.

Night after night I lay in a half-awake state, worn out from the physical labor of my restorations and the mental anguish of my dark gift, but too frightened to succumb to a deeper sleep because she would come to me then. The specter I'd brought back from the other side. The one who called herself Amelia Gray.

I wanted to believe she was merely my namesake, the ghost of some long-dead ancestor, but I very much feared she was a vision of my future self. A projection of the tortured woman I would one day become.

Discomforted by my thoughts, I glanced over at John Devlin, the Charleston police detective who lay sleeping beside me. His ghosts were gone now. His daughter, Shani, had finally been able to move on, thus breaking the tie that had kept her mother—Devlin's dead wife—bound to him. In the ensuing months since their departure, I'd allowed myself a

glimmer of hope that Devlin and I might finally be together. We'd forged a strong bond since that fateful day. An unbreakable connection that neither ghost nor human could sever. Or so I wanted to believe.

But as the temperature climbed and the days lengthened, my blood ran colder. A shift in the wind brought a whiff of something disturbing. On still nights, distorted shadows crept across my bedroom ceiling. The pull from the other side grew stronger every day and I couldn't help but wonder if my netherworld visitor had brought with her warning or prophesy.

On this night, her presence seemed overwhelming. I couldn't tune her out no matter how hard I tried. She'd only ever come to me in my dreams, but I was awake now and still I could hear her calling to me, a frantic ghost whisper that stole into my thoughts and lingered.

Not wanting to rouse Devlin with my insomnia, I rose and tiptoed from the room, slipping down the hallway, through the kitchen and out to my office, which was located at the very back of the house. The long windows afforded a view of the garden where moonlight dappled the freesia. I stood there probing the shadows, the flutter of every leaf, the quiver of every limb spiking my pulse.

Where are you? I wondered. *I know you're here.*

A sudden draft seeped in through the windows as the smell of dust and dried lavender permeated my office. With quilling hair, I peered through the layers of moonlight and darkness until I saw her. I didn't outwardly react to her gossamer form, but everything inside of me stilled as a terrible

acceptance stole over me. She *was* here. Not just in my dreams, not just in my thoughts, but *here*. And now I could no longer deny that I was being haunted.

Translucent arms thrust in front of her, she grasped wildly at air as she floated toward me. I became mesmerized by her grotesque thrashing, unable to wrench my gaze away even as terror stabbed through my chest with each painful stroke of my heart.

She wore a white lace frock suitable for a wedding or burial. Moonlight shone upon and through her pale face so that I had no trouble distinguishing her all-too familiar features—the straight nose, the high cheekbones, the slightly parted lips. The same quiet pretty that stared back at me from the mirror with one notable exception—her eyes were missing. I could see dark stains on her cheeks as if an endless stream of tears had flowed from those empty sockets.

Drifting across the yard to the windows, she placed a pale hand against the glass and a wintry chill shot through me, a bone frost that came only from beyond. The windows rimed and a crust of ice formed in the corners of the panes. Miniscule fissions fanned out from her splayed fingers as the glass crackled beneath the pressure of her brittle cold.

Why are you here? I wanted to cry out. *What do you want from me?*

But I already knew the answer. She wanted my essence, my life force, my humanness. She wanted what every ghost craved—to be alive. That's what made them so dangerous. That's what made them so voracious.

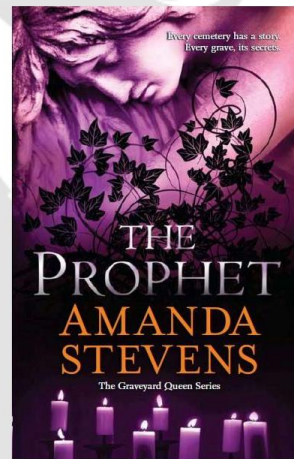
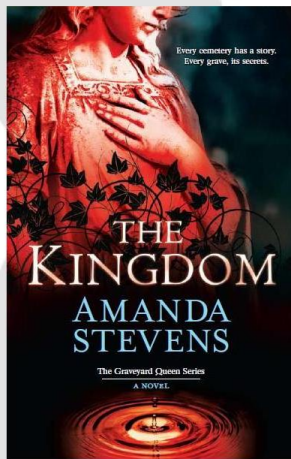
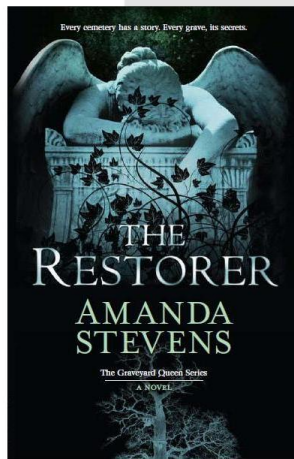
Her lips moved in a ghastly mime. Without eyes, her expression was inscrutable and yet I sensed clearly her distress. She drew even closer, turning those tear-stained sockets upon me as she pressed her dead lips to the pane. Given her state of frenzy, I braced myself for a banshee wail or a glass-shattering scream, but instead I felt the scratch of that ghostly whisper in my brain: *Find it.*

I shrank back, trying to break free of her spell, but the ashen hand upon the glass somehow held me fast.

I knew fear. I'd lived with a gnawing terror since the ghosts first came into my life. What I felt now was hopelessness. Despair. That same chilling acceptance. Without Papa's rules, there was nothing I could do to rid myself of her parasitic clutches.

Her whisper clawed its way into my head yet again: *The key. It's your only protection. Find it!*

The
**Graveyard
Queen**



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