

Haunted by a Broken Oath

By Dee Armstrong

Chapter One

The first rule on my “JD Wolfe’s Survival List” was: Don’t trust the ghost, because she couldn’t leave anything alone. Not when you were awake, not when you were asleep, not when she was haunting you. Not when the only surprise you received for your eighth birthday, other than the death of your mom in a fire, was for the ghost who had tormented her to transfer that torment to you.

And torment you forever.

During the thirteen years since the fire, I went from homeless to orphan to private eye. I reinvented myself. I became stronger. When life comes at you, and you have no one to protect you, and flight isn’t an option, you either fight or surrender.

I chose fight.

I took my adopted family’s surname and changed my name from Diamond, the girl with no last name, to Justyne Diamond Wolfe, or JD for short. I haven’t forgotten my survival rules.

I’ve added more to the list.

Past midnight, I sat hunched at the counter, scrolling through my phone in one of those diners you see in the movies with wide windows, cushy booths, a long counter, and pictures of All American Little League baseball teams lining the walls. You’d expect to see couples snuggled in the booths and a clean-cut, milkshake melt-in-your-mouth kind of guy in a starched button-down shirt. Instead, I was alone with Creepy Diner Guy working the counter. His hair

slicked back, his shirt a stain-spattered rendering of a Jackson Pollock painting, his buttons playing hopscotch, missing every other hole.

He wiped a dirty rag around a glass jar with a MISSING flier taped to the front. A pretty, fresh-faced, school-age girl smiled for the camera wearing decades-old clothes and a Hello Kitty backpack. The change and dollar bills stuffed into the jar suggested hope was still alive.

I wasn't so sure. In my experience, hope was for suckers.

“Get you another coffee, Red?” His nasty meth-smile busted and blackened.

“Still struggling with this one.” I swirled the sludge he called coffee in the bottom of my cup. It had created a tar pit inside my gut. I decided to check in with the office before the coffee killed me.

On the stool at my nine, a ball of light appeared. Flickered. Sparked in shades between blue, violet and eye-piercing white. The air snapped. The skin on my arms tingled and puckered like a plucked goose's butt.

The light shifted from a pixelated pattern into a semi-transparent woman, all monochromatic shades of gray. Stringy hair stuck to her face, hiding her features. Only her silver eyes and charcoal lips showed through. A dingy nightgown hung from her shoulders and fluttered in shreds around her bare feet.

Home, home, home, the ghost whispered in *my* brain, where the thoughts were supposed to be mine, not hers. One of many things about the Woman that ticked me off.

Most people would call the ghost a spirit or specter, but I preferred “the Woman.”

Or “Bitch.”

Instead of playing patty-cake and singing nursery rhymes, I learned how to survive living with a not-so-dearly departed. I didn't care how she died, only that she stuck to my mom like a

nasty rash.

The second rule I learned? Never tell anyone about the ghost. Otherwise, they'll think you're crazy and lock you up.

Creepy Diner Guy didn't react to his supernatural guest. He walked past and wiped down tables. That didn't shock me. My mom had been the only other living person I'd known who could see or hear or smell the Woman.

Even when the Woman didn't appear, she watched. Listened. Waited for a way to interfere. It was inevitable. I lived with the dead.

An overwhelming smell of lavender clung to the Woman. I gagged on the disgusting sweetness. My hand tugged at the collar of my leather jacket and the t-shirt beneath. "Why can't you give me one day?" I whispered. "One day without your lavender scent up my nose, your annoying voice blabbing in my head, your bony butt blocking my way?"

S-s-sorry, s-s-sorry, sorry, she repeated.

"Yeah, right. If you were sorry, you'd go back to hell."

La-la-late. The staccato beat of her words pounded against my temples. As if the ghost cared if she didn't get forty winks.

"I'm on a job. Go away." I worked in the family's business, White Wolfe Investigations. Today's job was more of a payback than a paycheck. My adopted father, Milt Wolfe—whom I liked to call Fixer Geezer in my head—owed a lifelong favor to his old Navy buddy, Master Chief Ben Palmer. I didn't know why Master Chief had bought a 24-hour diner right off I-95. Senile? Maybe.

This kind of debt could never be paid off. How could you put a price on someone saving your life?

I understood Milt's orders: Sit tight. Observe and report. Master Chief thought Creepy Diner Guy volunteered for the night shift to make money on the shady side of life—the side where things slip from white-lie gray to back-alley black; the side where cops close your restaurant and cart you off to jail.

My phone buzzed. No doubt it was one of the Geezers. Two brothers I considered my real fathers, and my bosses. “Sweet cheeks, I’ll be home soon.”

“Sweet cheeks?” Their voices blended into one. They’d put me on speakerphone. Great. Two opinionated, life-controlling Geezers for the price of one.

I couldn’t bring myself to call Milt anything like Dad or Daddy or Pop. Some things took time and a barge load of counseling. “Is everything okay, *Sweet Cheeks?*”

“Has he passed any packages? Drugs? Money?” Cliff Wolfe, a.k.a. Smarty Pants Geezer and my adopted uncle, was super stinkin’ smart. The type of smart that could send a rocket to the moon but not close the refrigerator door.

“Nope. Only coffee.” I ignored the ghost and monitored Creepy Diner Guy. He picked at a stain on his shirt and popped something into his mouth.

My stomach revolted.

“Stolen anything?” Street smart and straight to the point, Milt didn’t waste words.

“Nope. Nada. Not cash from the till or a quarter from the floor.”

“Be smart.” Uncle Cliff’s voice geared into lecture mode.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll be smart.”

“Don’t approach anyone. Don’t draw attention to yourself. Get the intel. Get home. You’re more important than a favor.” Milt, the man who fixed everything with what he had on hand, even if it was only his brute strength or a rubber band, sounded as strong and sure as the

day he saved me from St. Francis' Group Home for Lost Souls. A fancy name for an orphanage. People rebrand and rename. It's all the same. Group home or orphanage. I preferred orphanage. Or St. Francis' Hell Hole.

The name didn't catch on.

"Pleeease." Unwanted emotions compressed my chest. I struggled to remain in character. "I know better than to talk to strangers."

"She can handle this." The rise in Cliff's voice vetoed any worry.

Creepy Diner Guy inched closer with each swipe of his rag.

Unsure what he could hear, I kept my words soft. "Don't worry. I'm a big girl."

The Woman leaned in.

I leaned away, checking the diner's clock. "It's past midnight. Do you need me home?"

"A few more hours. Nothing good happens between midnight and three," said Cliff.

"I don't like her on her own." Concern lined the deep timbre of Milt's voice. "We'll meet you there. Follow orders and stay safe."

My face burned solar-flare hot. He didn't trust me. How could I prove myself if he didn't give me a chance? "Sheesh. You don't need to pick me up. I can drive home. I'm not eleven anymore."

Back ramrod-straight, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, the Woman disapproved of my tone. You'd think after decades of death, she'd have pulled the sequoia-sized stick out of her spectral butt.

"It's been a long time since you lived on the streets." Milt shouted into the speakerphone. Technology wasn't one of his strengths.

"Sweet cheeks, don't yell." A sick part of me enjoyed the charade. "I can hear you." My

gaze flickered to Creepy Diner Guy, and I clicked down the volume on my phone. “It’s a cellphone, not a handheld radio.”

“Milt’s right. We shouldn’t have sent you in alone.” Cliff’s words rose decibels higher than his brother’s.

They’d joined forces and wanted to pull the plug on my mission. I couldn’t let that happen.

“I’m okay.” I kept my voice light and confident. To ease their angst, I added a hint of humor. “Worrying is only going to make you grayer.” By age seven, I’d mastered controlling my voice to manipulate adults. That was how you survived when you were the proxy adult because your mom had surrendered to another drug-enhanced dream.

Bored with our conversation, the Woman hummed a song—not a pop or a rap or a country song, but that lullaby. I rubbed my temples, biting my tongue to prevent myself from begging her to stop.

“Keep us posted.” Milt barked out the order as if I was a newbie boot on his ship.

I suppressed an *aye, aye, Sir*, and replied, “Be home soon.” I hung up and glared at the Woman. “Don’t you start.”

The Woman switched to a jazzy tune.

I passed the time naming the stains on Creepy Diner Guy’s shirt. Red—ketchup. Yellow—mustard. There was a slick of brown across his midriff. Grease? Gravy?

The coffee pit in my belly bubbled. I didn’t want to know.

He shuffled into the back and returned with a plate stacked high with raw hamburger patties and a bag of frozen fries. He tossed the meat on the grill, dumped the fries into a basket, lowered them into grease, and wiped the grill’s metal front with his rag.

In the mirror above the grills, I scanned the parking lot behind me through the diner's gigantic windows. Empty except for my Jeep.

Through the same mirror, Creepy Diner Guy gave me a hey-baby-I'm-the-answer-to-your-prayers look.

I shot back a don't-make-me-shove-that-rag-down-your-throat glare. The ghost's laughter rang in my head. A girly giggle slipped from my throat before I could kill it.

Creepy Diner Guy flipped the hamburgers. He turned, wiping his hands down his shirt. "Waiting for a boyfriend?"

"Expecting a midnight rush?" I countered. The meat smelled a little off, or maybe the nauseous odor came from him.

"Nonya."

Was that code for something? "Nonya?"

"None ya business." His shrill laugh shredded my eardrums. He planted his elbows on the counter and leaned in. "Lived in Rubyville long?" His lunch haunted his breath. Hamburger with extra onions.

Home, home, home.

"Kinda," I replied with my own one-word cryptic answer and snubbed the ghost.

Home, Home, HOME. The Woman didn't like to be left out or ignored. The longer it went, the more insistent she'd become. At least her humming stopped.

Creepy Diner Guy turned back to the grill, removed the hamburgers, and lifted the basket of fries from the grease. He came around the counter. Sat on a ripped vinyl stool, sandwiched me between his onion breath and the Woman's putrid potpourri. He leaned close. "I like green eyes and red hair. You look real good in black."

As if I cared what he thought. Shades from onyx to ebony filled ninety percent of my wardrobe. My leather jacket and knee-high boots fell comfortably in the range. Black was easy to accessorize. It went with more black. “Uh-huh. Thanks.”

Truck pipes rumbled. I checked the parking lot in the mirror. A baby-blue, nineteen-eighty-two Ford parked out front. I’d love to have a truck like that. All shiny and clean.

Home, Home, Home.

I raised my phone as a shield between his breath and me. I texted the Geezers: *Got movement*, adding the truck’s description and license plate number. In a low voice, I told the Woman, “Hit the bricks.”

“No need to be like that. I’m not going to hurt you,” Creepy Diner Guy replied, his tone operator-smooth. He rubbed a piece of *my* hair between his fingers. *My hair*. “Red’s my favorite color.”

My muscles tensed. One swift back fist. That’s all it would take. He could add fresh blood to the stains on his shirt. Bright red would enhance his color palette. Besides, red was his favorite.

But I was on a job. A job I couldn’t mess up by spilling his blood. “Don’t you have more burgers to flip? Potatoes to peel?”

“You wanna peel my potato?”

The coffee tar backed up into my throat. Leaning into my third rule—keep everything important safe in your boots and everything important will keep you safe—I palmed the knife from my boot and showed him the blade. “I can peel more than that. Wanna play?”

Bad, bad, bad, bad, bad, the Woman chanted. The lights in the diner flashed.

I slid the blade of my knife against his jaw, giving him a free shave. “You’re not really

bad, are you?”

The diner’s door opened. I shifted, keeping my back between the door and the knife. No need to frighten a customer or warn off the pick-up guy.

Creepy Diner Guy’s face turned morgue gray. Scared stiff worked for him. He scrambled backward, helter-skelter, and side slipped from the stool.

“That’s what I thought.” I lowered my knife.

Like a buck caught in the crosshairs, he froze. A tsunami of fear flowed over his face. He gazed over my head. Neither my blade nor the Woman caused his locked stare.

Someone scarier than a knife to his throat stood behind me.

Dread dripped down my backbone like bacon grease from a hot pan, setting my nerves on fire. I tucked my chin and snuck a peek over my shoulder.

Scary didn’t do the guy justice. He was a mashup of Godzilla and King Kong—butt ugly and horribly wrong. A massive neck—a monster mama would be proud of—steel-studded earlobes, his hair spiky and nuclear green. He’d claimed this cement jungle and declared himself king.

And I?

I was the bug in his way. But I wasn’t Diamond, the girl with no last name, anymore. I was JD Wolfe, Private Eye.