

## Ghostwalker – The Trail of the Cat

By Michelle Raven



*The Foothills. Mariposa County, California.*

Marisa looked up from her book. Angus had left his place at her feet, heading straight towards the door. With the head held alert and the nostrils wide open he stared at the wooden panel, growling deeply in his throat.

Her eyes followed him. This was strange. Usually, there was hardly anything that the old bloodhound would let come between him and his sleep. Besides, moving let alone exercise in any shape or form had never been high on his priority list. Whatever it was, it must have been quite something to make him give up cherished old habits.

The growling grew louder, his blunt claws started scratching at the bottom rail.

"Angus, stop it!"

She didn't really care about the woodwork. It was just that, not too long ago, Angus had somehow managed to rip out one of his claws and she had to take him to the vet clinic in town. As far as she was concerned there wasn't a more sobering sight on this planet than a deeply suffering bloodhound. Apart from a rather hefty vet bill, that is.

Bleary dog eyes gave her the briefest of looks. After which the concerto went on. Barking. Whining. Yelping. Whatever canine cords could produce. Marisa put her book aside and pressed both hands on her ears.

"Shut up!" she ordered sharply. For Christ's sake, what was wrong with this dog?

With a deep sigh Marisa hauled herself out of her chair, planted herself in front of the dog in what she hoped was at least somewhat resembling a posture of authority. Looking straight back at her, Angus produced another blood-curdling howl reverberating through the house.

Marisa started to feel nervous. She had never seen him acting like this during the three months she'd been taking care of the dog. Sure, no one should speak ill of the dead. But once more she was asking herself what the heck Juan Pérèz had been thinking by assuming that she of all people was the appropriate person to look after Angus. She'd never owned a pet in her life, not even a Goldfish. And with good reason.

And to be entirely honest, as soon as she'd received the letter from the administrators of the estate of her late great uncle she'd considered giving him to an animal shelter. The only thing that had kept her from doing so was because she knew that Angus would have been put down within a couple of weeks. And she certainly didn't want to have this on her conscience.

Great. Why didn't dogs come with a user manual? Or a main switch?

She put her hand on his massive head. "Calm down, old boy. There's nothing to get excited about!" It was like talking to one of the stuffed animals they sold in Jack's Superstore in town. And the response was pretty much the same.

"Angus! Food!" Resorting to bribery might just do the trick. Under normal circumstances she would have found herself on the ground, run over by Angus on his way into the kitchen.

Not this time. His eyes stayed firmly fixed on the door, the hair in his neck bristled.

Very well. If he wanted to play hardball, fine with her. She could play that way, too. Marisa slid her hand under his collar, trying to pull him away from the door. In vain. 110 pounds of canine stubbornness didn't move an inch. Angus gave her a look, his eyes almost mocking her. Don't even try it, old girl, they seemed to say, you won't stand a chance.

She sighed. Time to put a stop to these shenanigans and get a good night's sleep.

"For heaven's sake, Angus!" she snapped. "If you don't..."

She was cut short by a loud rumbling noise on the porch. Her gaze riveted on the door panel as if she had some sort of X-ray vision, enabling her to pinpoint the source through three fingers of solid wood. Angus was at her side, his body tense, his long ears tilted, his head up in alert. Something was out there on the porch.

Fear took hold of her, running like ice-water through her veins. She listened intensely. Instead of scolding Angus for his behavior she should have been asking herself all along why her dog was making such a fuss in the first place. She startled when Angus started barking again. One hand pressed on her pounding heart, she tried to calm him down. How was she supposed to keep an ear out if he was making such a racket?

Furthermore, and considering that Angus had been in full flow for quite a while, shouldn't any intruder have legged it by now? So, why didn't Angus stop? Every fiber of his powerful body was still tense, his flanks trembling in agitation as if he was ready to strike.

Once more, all this made her aware of the fact that she was living in a rather remote rural location despite it was only a couple of miles to the outskirts of Mariposa. There were only a few and far between settlements in this part of the district. If something should happen to her, no one would notice.

Marisa straightened. No time for regrets. She had made her bed and now had to lay in it. It was her who, in an attempt to put as much distance between her and everything that had taken place in New York, had chosen to move to the middle of nowhere, to find privacy, tranquility and peace. And she had succeeded, didn't she? After all, California was as far away from New York as it gets.

Memories of her life in the metropolis flashed through her mind - the buzz in the newsroom, the excitement after seeing her byline below yet another 40 point header on the front page - and, of course, Ben. She shook off the thought, frowning. Ben. That lousy, cheating son of a b...

Another deafening howl of her canine companion brought her back to the present. She had to take action. Ringing 911, for example. However, calling the cops and subsequently everything turning out to be a false alarm would make her look like a city slicker. She would be the laughing stock of the entire district. Besides, when it came to law enforcement as a whole she'd pretty much made up her mind. Especially after the circumstances surrounding Ben.

No. The cops weren't an option. She would try to be a big girl now. And big girls took care of themselves. After all, she'd spent her whole life in New York City.

Marisa stepped to the window. Slowly pulling the curtain aside, she peeked out, giving her eyes time to adjust to the pallid light. As far as she was aware, nobody was there. Just when she was about to turn away from the window, she noticed that something had moved in one of the darkest corners of the porch. She looked again. Yes, there was definitely something hiding there. Judging from the size of what she could see it must be an animal. A rather large animal, almost the size of a child. She paused and considered for a moment. Then, and with rather unsteady hands, she opened the drawer of a pinewood chest and took out the stun gun - a remnant of her days in the Big Apple.

Back at the door, she grabbed Angus tightly by the collar. If somebody out there should indeed be up to no good, she would set him free. What she didn't want though was letting him get into any kind of dog fight, or worse, allowing him to go after an innocent human.

Taking a deep breath, she quickly opened the door whilst desperately trying to hold back Angus who was pulling frantically towards the part of the porch where she had noticed the movement. In an attempt to regain control, Marisa planted her feet firmly on the polished floor panels. As she was wearing her slippers, she didn't stand a chance. Angus who'd caught the scent of, well, whatever it was, was simply dragging her with him. She nearly dropped the gun. Against the dark wooden background of the floor, her eyes were able to make out something lighter - the silhouette she had observed through the window.

After a couple of steps, Angus stopped and started growling warningly. His reaction frightened her deeply and she had to try hard to steady her nerves.

Angus kept his nose close to the ground but then turned his head, looking at her almost bewilderedly, as if the scent he'd been tracking just a second ago had suddenly vanished. Marisa used the opportunity to step in front of him. Slowly, and step by step, she moved toward the shape in the shadow.

She noticed small puddles of dark fluid on the floor. Something told her not to step into them.

What the heck was going on?

She narrowed her eyes and stepped closer. Whatever it was, it didn't move. Keeping a safe distance between

her and this thing, she crouched to have a closer look.

She gasped. The contorted silhouette was human - the light coming through the window from inside revealed the bare skin of an arm.

Putting all caution aside, Marisa approached the body, went down on her knees, stretching out her hand. And stopped abruptly.

What if this was a corpse? A cold shiver went down her spine. She had a vivid recollection of how a dead body felt. Something she would never forget. The skin still warm but already turned pale, the twisted limbs...

"For goodness' sake, Pérèz, don't be such a pathetic wimp!" she mumbled to herself. After all, this wasn't New York. Out here, homicides were an exception, not the rule. So, a dead body turning up on her porch wasn't very likely, was it?

Nevertheless, she felt the urge to simply hurry back inside and bolt the door firmly behind her. However, she knew perfectly well that this wasn't an option.

The chilly night breeze made her shiver.

Hesitantly, she put her hand on the arm. To her relief, she felt a tiny movement. She straightened, sitting on her heels. Now what? Wrap whoever it was in blankets and call an ambulance? Or even the cops? Marisa grimaced. Certainly not the cops. Not if she could help it. Which inevitably meant that she had to somehow revive the corp...well, him. Or her.

Marisa grabbed the shoulder and shook it lightly. "Are you okay?"

The response was a deep groan, muscles twitching under her hand. Alright. Definitely male - although all she could see at the moment was an arm, the rest was still hidden in the shadows.

Something was touching her from behind, giving her almost a heart attack. She jumped.

Angus! She should have guessed. Marisa pushed his head away.

"Back inside. I'll be with you in a sec."

As usual, the bloodhound took his time to consider her order, eventually deciding to retreat a couple of steps and lay down beside the door step. For once, his disobedience didn't bother her at all. It was reassuring that he was close by. Just in case.

Her attention turned back to the human body on the porch. Her lips one tight line, she stretched out her hand again, her fingers felt their way along his shoulder until they reached something that felt like stubble.

"Wake up!" she urged him, patting his cheek, although less gently than during her previous attempt.

The stranger turned over at lightning speed. Frightened to the core, Marisa backed off, lost her balance and landed on her rear side, staring at him incredulously. He was stark naked. And even worse, he was bleeding from several gaping wounds all over his body. She looked at her hand, the one she'd touched him with. It was covered with something red and sticky. She tried to wipe her hand on her pants which didn't improve things much.

What to do next? Quite obviously, the stranger needed urgent medical care, no doubt about that. She picked herself up and put her hand on his cheek.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" she asked softly.

He moaned, his eyelids twitching.

"Just look at me, okay? You are safe now." This was mostly wishful thinking on her behalf as there was the possibility that whoever did this to him was still lurking somewhere out there in the dark.

"Listen, you have to help me out here. I can't carry you inside on my own."

He didn't respond.

"C'mon, stay with me, okay?" she urged him again, patting his cheek.

This time, he managed to open his eyes slowly, turning his gaze toward her.

Her heart skipped a beat. Looking into his eyes was like looking straight into the soul of an animal. A wild and unrestrained animal. An animal that was ready to kill. Marisa shuddered, but only for a moment. Don't be childish, she told herself off. His eyes might look somewhat strange, maybe because they were unusually slanting, with the outer corners much higher than the inner, and surrounded by luxuriant black lashes. As it was

dark, she couldn't determine their precise color. She guessed they were fair, but she might be wrong. The pupils were small spots centered in an abnormally large iris, with hardly any sclera visible at all.

Frightening eyes. Hypnotic eyes.

Clearly, all this was nothing but an illusion caused by the dim light conditions out here on the porch. It had to be. And in broad daylight, his eyes would probably look totally normal - like everyone else's. Besides, she had other things to think about. Getting him inside without both of them falling flat on their face, for example. There wasn't any more time to lose - unless she wanted him frozen to death. Or hemorrhaged.

"Any chance you can get up?"

"Guess so." His response was a growl, originating from deep inside his throat rather than from his lips.

Marisa realized that she was staring at him, her mouth wide open. She called herself to order.

"Ehm...alright then."

Her eyes wandered along his body. He was lean - although muscular in all the right places - and about a couple of inches taller than her. Hopefully, he would be able to walk, otherwise, there was no way of getting him inside.

"Listen, here's what we do. I'll put my arm around you and help you get on your feet. You simply lean on my shoulder. And we'll take it from there. Agreed?"

He gave her a short nod.

Well, he certainly wasn't much of a talker.

Which was fine with her. Right now, her top priority was to get him up and running again as fast as possible - and then good bye and good riddance to him! Marisa slid her arm behind his back and helped him hauling himself into a sitting position. He gritted his teeth, taking in a sharp breath, the movement causing him pain. He inhaled again, his chest expanded, and she felt his pectorals tightening as he put an arm around her shoulders. Heavily leaning on her he slowly got to his feet.

Angus had risen as well, watching them curiously, his head slightly inclined. Clearly, all this was a first for him, too. Taking one step at a time they moved slowly towards the front door. The stranger seemed to grow heavier by the second. Suddenly, he faltered. She managed to keep him upright, her cheek on his sweaty and blood-stained chest, her free arm around his waist. Great. What a pathetic sight - almost like a bunch of drunks after a late night out. On the other hand, she couldn't let go of him. He would simply collapse on the spot.

"Are you alright?" She frowned. Stupid question. Judging from his heavy breathing let alone the fact that he was using her as a coat-tree to support himself, he was anything but alright.

Finding herself in such close physical contact to someone she didn't even know felt way too intimate for her comfort. Besides, with his blood drenching her clothes - fortunately, she was wearing her casual rags - and with her back probably about to break any moment due to his weight, what was needed was some sort of a strategy.

Her hand slid down. She pinched his bare bottom firmly.

His body twitched, his head shot up and he made a weird hissing noise. Terrified, Marisa tried to get away from him, but his arm tightened around her neck. She realized how tall and strong he was - it would be easy for him to overpower her if he chose to. Angus started barking madly which reminded her of his presence. Fortunately, she wasn't entirely unprotected.

"Let go. Now. Or my dog's gonna take you apart!" she threatened.

His body tensed, nevertheless he loosened his grip. Well, at least he was with her to an extent that should be sufficient to get him into the house. She moved away from him until his weight rested solely on her shoulder.

"Hang on, okay? Just a couple of feet left and everything's gonna be fine."

Something furry was touching her knee.

"Angus - get inside!"

There was an odd moment of silence but then she heard his paws heading across the wooden porch towards the door. She sighed. One thing less to worry about.

The chilly breeze made her shiver, despite she was covered in sweat due to the considerable - and rather unaccustomed - physical activity over the past minutes. Strangely enough, and although his whole body was fully exposed to the cool air, her unexpected visitor didn't seem to be in the least affected by the cold. On the contrary, he seemed to have a sort of intrinsic heat source, radiating an almost unnatural body warmth that she

could feel right through her clothes.

Marisa bit her lower lip. Hopefully, he wasn't running a fever. Naturally, this would make it impossible for her to show him the door the very moment he'd recovered sufficiently. She didn't like strangers. In fact, not just strangers. She hardly liked anybody. Somewhat ironic that she was dragging somebody whom she not only had never met before but who, on top of it, was also stark-naked across the threshold of her front door. On the other hand, what options did she have? He was in pretty bad shape, to say at least. Besides, corpses on your résumé didn't really cut it. She'd learned that lesson the hard way. Back then. In New York.

Marisa grimaced when she realized that she would have to give up her bed. Her current abode hadn't any guest room to offer. She didn't own a folding bed. Not even as much as an air mattress. With one last effort she maneuvered him into the bedroom. Her plan to lower him gently and carefully onto the bed didn't work out. During the last step, he simply keeled over, bringing both of them down and ending up on top of her. The weight of his body was nearly choking her. It took Marisa quite an effort to wriggle herself free, only to lose her balance and hit the floor hard.

"Ouch!" Leaning against the bed frame for a couple of seconds, she tried to catch her breath.

Back on her feet, she looked at him. The stranger was laying there motionless, spread-eagled across the bed, his legs sticking out. This didn't look too comfortable. Marisa closed her eyes for a moment before hauling him into a position that she hoped was more convenient for him. Alright, job done. Stepping back, she scrutinized his face anxiously, waiting for his eyes to open. They stayed closed. Her glance fell on a deep wound right under his shoulder.

She quickly went into the kitchen, filled a bowl with warm water, rummaged through a couple of cupboards until she'd found the First Aid kit and returned to the bedroom.

He hadn't moved. For a split second she thought he was dead. But then she noticed the tiny movements of his chest. Still breathing, thank God. Marisa put the bowl on the bedside table, not really sure where to begin. She slipped a pair of latex gloves over her hands, dipped the washcloth into the water and started cleansing the blood-stained skin around the shoulder blade. The wound looked nasty, the tissue torn and rough-edged, and she felt nausea creeping in.

What kind of weapon would cause an injury like this? It didn't look like a shot gun wound. And it wasn't a clean cut either which ruled out a knife attack. Had he been mauled by an animal? Very unlikely...after all, he was naked. Did he fall off something, hurting himself in the process? Maybe, but this, too, didn't really explain why he wasn't wearing any clothes and how he had managed to drag himself to her porch.

However, this wasn't the time for inquiries. What he needed right now was help.

Marisa tackled his wounds one by one, cleaning the affected areas, dabbing the deep cuts with antiseptic and dressing them provisionally. Naturally, finding a stranger on her porch who was bleeding like a pig did stretch her rather modest First Aid kit to the limit. Eventually, all injuries she could access in his current position were attended. She straightened herself in an attempt to relieve the pain in her back that had been induced by the prolonged crouched posture.

She looked at him thoughtfully. Somehow she had to roll him on his back, to check whether he had received any cuts or abrasions on the front of his body. And this without causing him further pain, or worse, restarting the bleeding all over again. Leaving him on the bed as he was and simply hoping for the best was certainly tempting but wouldn't do. He had lost enough blood already.

Marisa went to the other side of the bed, grabbed his shoulder with one hand and slung her other arm around his hip. She put one foot firmly against the bed frame and pulled. Nothing happened at first. Then, his body turned rather suddenly, she lost her grip and found herself once again on the floor.

She cursed and got back to her feet. And stopped breathing.

She had seen her fair share of bare-skinned men but this one was amongst the most perfect specimens she'd ever encountered. His broad shoulders nearly stretched from one side of the bed to the other. The hairy chest with its well-articulated abs tapered to a narrow waist. Slender hips. Long, muscular legs. Although she managed to restrain herself from taking a closer look at what was located between his legs. Just.

After a quick peek at the patch of dark blonde hair in his groin area she took a deep breath, refocusing on the task at hand. The only injuries she noticed were a cut on the upper arm and a small chest wound. Quite fortunate, actually, as she was already running low on dressing material.

She gave him a worried look. Why didn't he regain conscience? Was it severe blood loss that had led to his comatose condition?

However, and as far as she could tell, none of his injuries appeared to be life-threatening. And quite on the contrary to her initial assumption he didn't seem to be intoxicated either. There was no odor of alcohol on his breath. Could be a concussion. Or worse, a fractured skull.

She hesitated for a moment before running her hands through his hair, her fingertips probing for bruises or cuts. The dark blonde strands felt strangely soft, almost like touching animal fur. Marisa frowned at herself. Get a grip, girl, you are overtired. She examined his head carefully but wasn't able to find anything obvious.

She stepped back, somewhat relieved. Whatever had caused the unconsciousness, any kind of cranial trauma could most certainly be ruled out. He must be on drugs then. Which meant that it was probably best to wait until he'd slept it off. She would dress his wounds and give him the rest of the night to recover. If his condition hadn't improved by morning, she would have no choice but to call 911. Besides, there was a good chance that his wife - or maybe his girlfriend - had already reported him missing by now.

Marisa shook off the thought. This wasn't her problem. She'd leave it to him to explain to them why he'd been roaming the countryside not wearing a stitch and what had happened. Thanks to the practice gained during the last half an hour, she cleansed the wound on his arm skillfully, applying some antiseptic ointment to what again resembled a laceration rather than a clean cut. Like all his other injuries. Anyway, he would have to clarify a few things tomorrow, no doubt about that.

Come to think of it - maybe it was best if he would simply disappear into thin air. The less she knew about him, the better. Albeit it went against the grain of all her instincts as an investigative reporter.

No. Not this time. For once she would curb her professional curiosity and keep herself out of trouble. And deep inside she was almost convinced that she didn't really want to know what exactly the stranger had been up to. Live and let live - it was as easy as that. As if life wasn't already difficult enough for her, she didn't want any further complications. Especially none of those involving members of the opposite sex with athletic bodies and good looks. Like this one. An image of Ben flashed through her mind, immediately cooling her off. Her new life was based on two principles. No headlines. No men. Period. And it had been surprisingly easy to stick to these rules.

At least until tonight.

Marisa wrapped the antiseptic dressing tightly around the upper arm of the stranger, using strips of medical tape to keep the gauze in place. The small rib wound was easily dealt with. Marisa straightened her body, pulled off the gloves and took a step back. Something snapped inside her back. Suppressing a groan, she pressed her fists against her lumbar spine. She should have known better. All this heavy lifting and standing in a bent-over position was simply supposed to bring that darn sciatica back. But then, she hadn't really had a choice, had she?

Carefully avoiding any sudden movement she went to the wardrobe and took out a sheet and a blanket, spread them over him and tucked the seams into the gap between mattress and bed frame. Afterwards, she bent down slowly to pick up her own bed sheets off the floor. One of Angus's favorite pastimes was to regularly strip her bed of its covers and throw them about, something she had told him off for repeatedly - with no obvious success so far. For once, however, she was grateful as this had prevented the stranger from bleeding all over them.

Dead on her feet, she dragged herself into the living room where she stood undecidedly for a moment. Right then. A drink. Followed by a hot shower, after which she'd try to spend the rest of the night in the armchair as comfortably as possible. Although this didn't look too promising considering the fact that her back was giving her a hard time already.

Her hands shaking, she poured herself a whiskey, the neck of the bottle chattering against the rim of the glass. Marisa grimaced. Not unlike an alcoholic, needing a drink first thing in the morning. She downed the glass in one gulp. The amber liquid burned the back of her throat all the way down into her stomach. She suppressed a cough. Great. A wannabe-addict who couldn't even cope with one mouthful.

During the first time after what had happened in New York she'd been trying hard to drink herself into a stupor night after night, in a desperate attempt to forget. However, back then, and just like now, her body had been rebelling. And it hadn't taken her too long to realize that high-proof booze wasn't the cure to shut out the memories swirling around in her head, those images that were driving her crazy to the point where she simply wanted to scream.

Even moving here, leaving her previous life behind, hadn't helped. The past had moved with her, now forming an integral part of her that would stay with her for the rest of her days.

Marisa snorted. Wasn't it enough that she'd already been saddled with a drooling old mongrel? Did it also have to be a naked guy bleeding all over her place? Hell, didn't life just suck?

Marisa slammed the empty glass on the table. No more wallowing in boozy self-pity. Besides, being covered in

blood and in a state of physical and mental exhaustion, it was definitely time for her shower. Angus lifted an eyelid, watching her passing him.

"You're gonna keep an eye on things, okay? I'm not too keen on any more gatecrashers tonight."

One of his ear flaps twitched in response, and she decided to take this as an affirmative. She picked up her nightgown and went into the bathroom. And for the very first time since she had moved into her current premises, she firmly locked the bathroom door from inside. She stripped hastily, stuffing the dirty and bloodstained clothes into a plastic bag. Somehow a rather sad way to dispose of one's favorite pieces of wardrobe but as they were ruined once and for good, she wouldn't be able to wear them any more. Besides, she had absolutely no intention whatsoever to wear them again. Back then, in New York City, NYPD Homicide had seized all her clothes for examination. At the time, there had been nothing she could have done about it. Overall, an experience most definitely not to be repeated.

Marisa realized that she was lingering in the past yet again and forced her attention back to the present. First things first. Taking a shower. Then getting some sleep. She swiftly entered the cubicle and turned on the hot water.

She scrubbed herself down as quickly as possible. This wasn't really the time for extensive body care. She was way too wound up for that.

After slipping into her night gown and reaching for the hair dryer, she caught a glimpse of herself in the small mirror above the sink.

She froze.

The shower might have been enough to wash the blood off her skin and her long black hair, but the shock of her encounter with the stranger was still written all over her face. Her dark eyes were staring back at her from an unnaturally pale complexion, her mouth tightened with hard lines around her lips.

Marisa lowered the dryer again. Suddenly, she felt way too exhausted to blow-dry her hair. Moreover, this thing was terribly noisy, and the thought that this might actually prevent her from hearing what was going on in her house sent a cold shiver down her spine.

She listened, trying to make out whether there were any sounds coming from one of the other rooms. Not a stir. Which was very encouraging indeed, since, and right now, she hadn't any energy left to concern herself with even the smallest of problems.

Marisa turned the key in the lock and opened the bathroom door. However, as she put her hand on the light switch, she paused. Something didn't feel right. She cautiously stuck her head out, peeking around the corner.

Nothing. The house was quiet. So quiet, in fact, that it was rather unsettling.

She tiptoed barefoot across the narrow hallway and looked into the bedroom. There he was, exactly how she'd left him. He hadn't moved an inch.

But then, what did she expect? After what had happened within the last hour, no wonder her imagination was playing tricks on her! Feeling at least somewhat reassured, she turned off the light and went back into the living room.

Angus had already made himself comfortable on the floor beside her armchair, his head on his paws. When one of the wooden floor panels squeaked under the weight of her feet, he casually opened one eye, shot her a brief glance and dozed off again.

Shaking her head, Marisa pushed a footrest closer towards the armchair and fluffed up her pillow. With a hardly stifled groan she sank into the chair, covered herself with a blanket and tried to find a halfway convenient posture. In the end, she gave up and reached for the light switch. Listening to the noisy breathing of her canine companion, she eventually fell asleep.

*[English Translation by H Fischer, NetWords Unlimited, Cambridge, UK]*