

## VISIONS IN THE DARK

(St. Agnes Series)

By: Denise Jeffries

*Bam. Bam. Bam!*

*His hand cupped the back of her head, lifted her and pulled her body into his chest. A hoarse groan escaped his throat as his fingers stroked the wet tendrils of blood soaked hair from her face. Pressing his forehead to hers, he grieved the only way he knew how. "Oh, God! I'm sorry. So sorry." His voice trembled with despair. "Marianne. What have I done?"*

Hunter jolted awake. A moan caught in his throat, strangling him. Sweat poured from his body soaking the sheets and pillow. No matter how many times the nightmare returned it was always as potent, as painful, as the first. As the day he found Marianne, mangled, bleeding, dead. The night when he'd come to the crash. Saw his car wrapped around the tree. They came after him. Cut the brake line. In the recesses of his mind he knew they'd try something eventually. But, Marianne? *His Marianne.*

She was his life. His love. A part of him he could ever get back. And now, now she was his nightmare.

"Damn-it." Chief Hunter Roberts scrubbed his hand across his face and tried to remove the dregs of the dream. Fractured sounds surrounded his head, pulling his attention back to the present.

*Bam. Bam. Bam!*

He growled as he rolled over in bed, grabbed the clock off the bedside table and brought it to his face. One o'clock. "This had better be good," his voice cracked with dry expectation.

Hunter pulled the drawer open and grabbed his Glock. One thing he didn't appreciate was late night callers, even if he was thankful whoever it was woke him from the dream—no, nightmare. Crawling out of the bed, sliding into the jeans he left on the floor, he stumbled to the living room. The remnants of sleep still clogged his mind.

Chief of Police, Hunter Roberts had been a cop for too long and anxious visitors always put him on edge, especially in the middle of the night. He padded to the front of his house, gun tucked in the back of his pants and eyes coated with sleep. Stepping up to the door, he looked through the security hole, blew out a breath and swung it open as he rolled his eyes in disgust.

"Took you long enough." The tall, thin man pushed his way in and walked past Hunter. He ambled down the hall, glanced in the

bedroom and then the kitchen. Coming back to the front room he propped his hip on the side of the sofa. “Were you asleep?”

Hunter hadn’t moved from the front door and refused to waste his energy on such a stupid question. Why wouldn’t he be asleep? It was, after all, the middle of the night. His body rigid, he reached behind him, pulled the gun from his pants and slid it into the drawer of the armoire next to the door. He walked over to the chair, flopped down and settled his gaze on the man.

“Long time, Paul.”

It had been a long time, maybe a year since he’d seen him, maybe a little longer. The stress of the job showed drastically on his face. Shadows of fatigue circled his eyes and Hunter wondered if he’d stayed in the business if his hair would be as gray as Paul’s. After all, they were the same age. He noted his shoulders were weighed down with worry.

“Not long enough.” Paul glanced around the room as if searching for something. Someone. “You live alone?”

Hunter didn’t answer for a long minute. “What do you want? Why are you here?”

“I need a favor.” Paul ran his hand across his head, stopped at the nape of his neck and massaged the tight muscles. He diverted his gaze to the floor and sucked in a breath.

“Oh no.” Hunter stood and walked over to the front window. “The last time you came to me like this I almost got killed. No.” He peered between the curtains. “I’m not interested in anything you have to say.”

“Give me a minute, will you.”

Hunter turned and studied Paul’s face. He read him like a book and this was the type of favor that would most likely get him killed.

“Hell no. It’s time for you to leave. I’m not interested.”

Paul stood and paced a line from the chair to the window. He’d paused for a second, glanced outside and then walked back to the sofa. “I need your help.”

Hunter shook his head. “Not interested. I’m finally getting used to my quaint little town here. Get out.” The words came out harsh. Cold.

Shaking his head again he walked to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and splashed several handfuls on his face. After drying off with the hand towel he walked back into his living room.

“You’re still here.” He sat down, placed his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together and waited.

He’d known Paul Sommers for more years than he wanted to count. They went to college together, joined the service together. After the service and depending on whom you asked, they followed each other to a career with the U.S. Marshals. Time would pass, maybe even years before they would catch up with each other, but Paul Sommers was as close to a brother as Hunter would ever have. Hunter stared at

Paul but didn't speak. He rubbed his tongue across his teeth, rolled his eyes and tried not to look as disgusted as he felt. Whatever it was that Paul needed, he knew he was going to be right in the middle.

Paul walked to the couch, plopped down and stared up into Hunter's dark gaze. "I got nowhere else to go." There was desperation. Something simmered just under the tone of his voice. Something Hunter couldn't remember ever hearing before... fear.

Hunter rubbed his hand across his forehead, leaned back and closed his eyes, knowing he was in. "Make it fast."

"I've got a federal witness who I need to make sure is at trial and I've got no place to put her." He talked fast, so fast his words ran together.

"Why not one of your safe houses?" Hunter opened his eyes and sat up, his back going rigid with each of Paul's words.

Settling his gaze on Hunter's face, Paul confided, "There's a leak."

"There's always a leak."

Paul hunched one shoulder. "There have already been two breaches in security and I've already lost one man and the other witness. I don't want to lose this one."

Hunter stood and walked over to the window. "So you figure," he blew out a breath he didn't know he was holding, "you bring your witness to my nice little town and if anything blows off, then if it's not in your backyard, it's out of your Jurisdiction."

"No!" Paul jumped up and stormed to the kitchen. Coming back with a beer he popped the top and took a long swig. "Damn-it, man." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "No one would suspect my witness of being here. Why would they? We haven't been in contact with each other in what, a year?" He had a point, a very good point. "I come and get her in a week or so and take her to court."

"What did the wit see? Who?" Hunter pulled the curtains open, turned to face Paul. "I want to know everything. Where's the jacket?"

"It's not only what she saw, it's who, it's how. She's a little different than the average wit. She's a bonafide medium. Claims to be able to see things, talks to the dead. Shit like that. She—"

"*She.*" Hunter cut him off. Realization of what Paul said hit him a second later. "Medium? You shitting me, right?"

Paul blew out a breath. "Her name's, Jade. Jade Porter-Wells. I finally got Martucci in my grasp and can't keep a witness alive to save my life. I've had him before on more than one occasion. Each time my witnesses either end up dead or invisible. I don't—" he paused and swallowed hard, "I can't afford for it to happen again."

"Yeah, I know." Hunter brought his hand up and rubbed the long time healed bullet hole in his shoulder. "Where is she?"

Paul let out a breath of relief. "I'll go get her." Moving to the door, he pulled it open a fraction and glanced around the yard and

down the quiet street. “One more thing. She doesn’t like the arrangements and she thinks she’ll do better on her own.”

“Maybe she would.”

He stared at Hunter for another minute before disappearing outside. The sound of the van side door opening fractured the silence of the room and then was accompanied by the shuffling of feet. Paul returned with *Jade Porter-Wells* and her under stuffed duffle bag in tow. Her hands were bound in front of her with handcuffs. Her mouth was covered with duck tape. She stomped into the room, was pulled to the chair and pushed down.

“You think you can be any rougher.” Hunter slammed the door. “What’s with the restraints? I thought you said she was a witness.”

“She is, but, she likes to fight, bite and run. Oh, and scream.” Paul sidestepped to avoid the kick to the knee she tried to give him.

“Wonderful.” Hunter’s voice drawled out, mindful of the reasons why he didn’t want to do this.

The last thing Hunter needed right now was a federal witness hiding out in his town. St. Agnes was a lot of things. A safe house it wasn’t. The people were too noisy, too close knit. No way would he be able to keep this firestorm hidden from the community. He couldn’t think of a single reason why he should put himself or St. Agnes in the line of fire except the blaze he saw in Ms. Porter-Wells eyes when he looked into her face. She was angry and afraid, but under it all he saw something delicate, soft. The fear he recognized as soon as she tromped into the room. She tried to mask it, but he could read that emotion like a book. He’d seen it too many times in the past on others and in his own mirror. The softness, he wondered.

Hunter’s gaze slid up and down the length of her body. Average height. Average weight. Her complexion reminded him of the richest coffee with just a hint of cream. Her hair jet black with streaks of brown fluttering through the strands, cut short so that it framed her face and just barely touched the nape of her neck. Her eyes a dark brown, darker than her skin, reminded him of molten brown puddles floating in a bowl of chocolate. Her muscular body tucked nicely into a pair of body hugging jeans and t-shirt.

However, Jade’s expression was cold. Worried. Suspicious. He didn’t fault her for that at all. He’d be worried too if he was up against Martucci, one of the worse crime bosses of this decade. And, being saddled with witness protection that he knew had problems didn’t help matters.

Hunter walked to her, held his hand out for the key and snapped his fingers when Paul didn’t react fast enough. He slid the key in the cuff, turned and removed the metal bracelet off her wrist. Jade reached up, pulled the tape from her mouth, cringing as it tugged her skin. “You son of a bitch!” Jade touched her lips with her fingers, curled her hand into a fist. “Let me go!”

“Can’t do that.” Paul said from the corner of the room.

She brought her fist up and before Hunter could react connected her clenched hand with his jaw. His head jerked slightly to the side in response. Luckily he caught himself before his reflexes went into motion and before he fell on his butt.

*Oh, yeah. This is a great idea.*

“That’s one.” Hunter held up his index finger, tucked his tongue into his cheek and stared at her until she blinked. “And trust me when I say this, Ms. Wells. This is not a ball game. You do not get three strikes.” Hunter wiped his finger across his bottom lip. He settled his gaze on Paul’s face. “You will owe me for this.” Ms. Porter-Wells. You are going to have to trust us on this one.” Hunter grasped her chin between forefinger and thumb and turned her face to his. She tried to divert her gaze to the floor and he forced it back to meet his eyes.

“Trust me, I can keep you safe until the trial and then let him,” he motioned to Sommers with a tilt of his head, “find you a nice new life.”

“I—am not—going anywhere with that jerk.” Jade started to stand and Hunter touched her shoulder and shoved her back down.

“Sit down,” his voice gruff.

“I don’t trust anyone. Not anymore, especially these ass holes.” She paused when Hunter chuckled and glanced at Paul. “And I trust you as much as I trust Martucci. I am not giving up my life for you, him, or anyone. Now let me go!” She kicked out with her legs, just missing Hunter’s crotch. “The Feds are idiots. They always blow the case and it’s usually after everyone’s had their tongue ripped out or dead. I don’t plan on either.”

“That may very well be true, Ms. Porter-Wells, however,” Hunter leaned down to meet her gaze eye to eye. “I am neither a Federal agent or stupid. You. Will. Stay.” His voice came out like a cold whip, hoping it would cool her fire.

She sucked in a breath, blew it out and folded her arms across her chest. “What am I, your dog?”

“The last dog I had got squashed by a truck.” He smiled. “We wouldn’t want to see you under a truck tire like that, now do we? He arched his brow and waited for her to answer.

She remained quiet but mumbled under her breath, “Probably was trying to run away from you.”

A hearty rumble of a laugh escaped Hunter’s throat. “Leave her papers and the information on the trial on the table and get out.”

Paul moved toward the front door, reached out, grabbed the knob and paused. “No one, and I mean no one knows she’s here but you and me.” He pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and tossed it to Hunter. “Hit send.”

Hunter grabbed it mid air and stuffed it in his pocket.

He waited for the door to slam shut and the sound of the van pulling off before he turned back to Jade. She had inched her way toward the kitchen. As soon as Hunter turned around she bolted for the back door. Her hands grabbed the knob and fought to open it.

Hunter shook his head and walked to her. This may be the county but he almost always dead bolted his doors. For once he was thankful. He stepped up to Jade, ignored the stomping of her heel on his bare feet and placed his hands atop hers. Grasping her fingers, Hunter pried them loose and turned her to face him.

Jade's right hand swung up and sliced across his face. He didn't falter. He was expecting her to do just that. Fight. When her left came up, he grabbed it, pulled her arms behind her back and lifted her off the floor. Tossing her over his shoulder he strolled back to the living room and flopped her down onto the chair. Jade jumped up to stand, he cupped her shoulders and pushed her back to the chair.

"Let me go!" She spat out the words.

"No." Hunter's voice was cool, almost cold.

He kneeled down and put his hands on the armrest, leaning into her so his face was inches from hers. She slapped him again. This time it stung. Hunter cursed under his breath but knew it was loud enough for her to know she was plucking his last nerve. Grabbing her hands and pulling them behind her back at the same time he cuffed her wrist together.

Jade huffed, struggled against the restraints and screamed. The curses floating from her lips were eloquent to say the least. Not exactly what he thought should come out of the mouth of such a delicate looking flower.

Smiling, he said, "No one can hear you."

After a moment, she quieted and glared at him and at the same time tried to catch her breath, now coming out in short erratic gasps.

"You didn't ask for me." Jade turned her head. Hunter grasped her chin with his fingers and didn't care that it was hard and she'd grimaced. He turned her back to look at him. "I didn't ask for you. But, unless you want to be dead, I'm your only hope."