

The hauntings won't stop...
...until he kills Fitz. But who exactly is Fitz?

A MAN AMONG GHOSTS

Steven
Hopstaken



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For Melissa, who keeps all my ghosts at bay.

Chapter One

A Change of Venue

When David first saw the house, he felt no fear. Others might look at a neglected Victorian house as possibly haunted, or at the very least a potential money pit, but that thought never entered David's mind.

The house beckoned him to approach. It had a large, open front porch, begging for a pair of wicker chairs and a small table, where its owners could sit with a cup of coffee or a glass of wine and wave to their neighbors. The two ornate second-story windows were a pair of friendly eyes watching over the urban neighborhood.

It was smaller than the other houses on the street. At one time, the neighborhood had been upscale, and the street lined with mansions. Now, most of those stately homes were divided into multifamily units or abandoned entirely, boarded up with graffiti-tagged plywood.

This house stood out as a jewel of stained glass and solid construction, ready for the urban renewal and gentrification poised to come.

The house to the right looked well-maintained and freshly painted. The lush garden in front and solar panels on the roof told David that the neighbor at least cared about the environment.

The house on the left was another story. Boarded-up windows shut it off from the world. Its sagging roof looked as if it were about to collapse under its own weight. Having this dilapidation next door was a concern to him, but he knew the struggling neighborhood was why this house might be within his budget. Houses rarely came up for auction in the Bay Area unless they were having trouble being sold the traditional way.

David stood on the sidewalk, admiring the house, then joined a group of people milling around on the porch.

There were two couples and a single man also taking the tour, which didn't bode well for David's chances.

"Seems like a lot of work," one woman said to her husband, as she poked at a broken floorboard on the porch with her foot. She had leaned against the porch railing and was unaware that it left a brown smudge on her yellow dress.

"It's a fixer-upper," her husband said. "But I'm good at that stuff."

David hadn't noticed the broken floorboard, and once pointed out, all the other flaws of the house jumped out at him: peeling paint, a crumbling sidewalk, a cracked window.

"Needs a new roof," the single, older man said, looking up. "Yep. That's ten thousand right there." His plaid shirt, work boots, and tape measure made David think he knew what he was talking about. The guy looked like a host of one of those house-flipping shows. Although David knew the roof comment might be a ploy to discourage the other bidders, it did give him pause.

"I love it!" another woman said to her husband. Both were dressed more like they were at a gallery opening than a house auction. David had seen them getting out of a Mercedes earlier.

"If the neighborhood were better, it would make a great B and B," her husband replied. "But we could divide it into two apartments, I think." David swallowed his irritation. Typical rich folks, looking for an investment opportunity where others just wanted a home.

A woman in a gold blazer approached and smiled at him. "Are you here for the auction?"

David smiled back at her. "I am." He held out his hand. "David Dusek."

She shook his hand. “Tammy Barnes. Come on. We’re about to start a tour.”

Tammy led David and the rest of the group into the house, joyfully pointing out its assets.

“The house was built in the Victorian style by a bookstore owner in 1900. It survived the 1909 earthquake and every earthquake after that, so you know it is well constructed,” she said.

As she pointed out the elaborate crown molding in the large living room, David ran his fingers over the blue velvet couch. He imagined himself welcoming party guests, or curling up on the couch to watch a movie with his wife.

He pushed away the thoughts that threatened to bring him back to reality. The truth was, David didn’t know what friends he would invite to a party if he had one. He’d lost touch with most of them once they married and started having children. The exception was Gary, and even he was moving away soon.

As for that wife, he didn’t even have a girlfriend at the moment.

It had been Gary’s idea for David to go to the auction. “If you can get a property for three hundred thousand or less, the house payment will be less than your rent. It’s about time you started making an investment in your life.”

He was right. As a software developer, David was making good money. He shouldn’t be throwing it away on rent when he could build equity.

Gary was now making Las Vegas money and was investing it like a responsible adult. The only investing David had done was in collectible *Star Wars* figures and a 401(k) from his company.

This could be my thing, he thought. “*Oh, you know David. He’s that guy with the Victorian house he’s fixing up.*”

Tammy rattled on. “Original oak beams, hardwood floors, and that large brick fireplace is in working condition. A new

chimney was put in just two years ago. The gravity furnace has been red-tagged by the inspectors and will have to be replaced, but a prior owner installed all the ductwork for a forced-air gas furnace in 2001. And I have names of some reliable heating contractors if you need them.”

“That’s another six to eight grand,” the house flipper muttered.

The group of bidders followed Tammy into the formal dining room, taking notes. David felt stupid. He hadn’t brought a notebook, and made a mental note to get one for the next auction.

“All the furniture is included in the auction. Some are antiques, I would imagine,” Tammy said. “So, you’ll save money on furnishings.” The mahogany dining room table was big enough to seat eight comfortably. David imagined Thanksgiving dinner laid out along its length, and every chair filled with guests laughing and passing around the potatoes.

Tammy moved them briskly along into the kitchen. “Yes, the kitchen is small by today’s standards, but it has newish appliances.”

“So outdated,” the woman in the yellow dress whispered to her husband.

David thought the kitchen was cozy and charming, with green-tiled walls that looked like jade, and a hardwood floor painted yellow. True, it was small, but there was a bistro table and two chairs under a window. A great place to drink coffee and read the news in the morning.

“Shall we take a look at the backyard?” the real estate agent said, opening the creaky door and stepping out into the sunlight.

It was overgrown with weeds and there was a large walnut tree in the center that needed a good pruning. David imagined having friends over for a barbecue or to hang out around a fire pit and drink beers.

“Nice and private,” Tammy said, pointing to the large wooden fence that enclosed it. There was a board or two missing here and there, but it still looked in good shape to David.

They reentered the house, and the tour continued. “The basement is unfinished and has a dirt floor, but plenty of room for a washer and dryer.”

She led them to a padlocked door, unlocked it, and led the group into the basement’s depths. It seemed odd to David it was padlocked, but he guessed it was easy for burglars to break into the basement and gain access to the house.

“Easy enough to finish,” Tammy said as she moved to the back of the basement to make room for the group. “Pour a cement floor, put up some drywall and you could make the space quite livable.”

It was a large basement with a higher ceiling than other basements David had seen. Most of it was taken up by an enormous octopus of a gravity furnace and an old coal bin from when the house had a coal-fired boiler. David peered into the bin, amused to see there were a few lumps of coal still in it. Coal that might have been in there for over a hundred years.

There was a chute sealed with a metal hatch where the coal must have come down. *How weird to have your fuel delivery once a week, David thought. We take central gas heating all for granted.*

The single man was busy feeling the cinder-block walls for dampness. “Seems okay,” he told David. “No cracks that I can see.”

The woman in the yellow dress shrieked as a mouse ran over her feet and disappeared around the furnace. That was it for her. She took her husband by the hand. “Not for us,” she said.

The two of them hurried back upstairs. David smiled at their leaving. *Easy enough to call an exterminator, he thought.*

The only electric light in the basement was a single bulb hanging from a wire over the stairs. It flickered and went out

with an audible *pop*, leaving the group in darkness. Four small basement windows let in very little light through their dingy lace curtains.

“These old bulbs,” Tammy complained.

David felt someone shove him forward.

“Hey, watch it,” he said, pushing back. There was no resistance.

“Watch it,” a voice whispered into his left ear, mocking David’s tone. David wheeled around just as Tammy was turning on her cell phone light.

No one was behind him. The single man was at the other end of the basement, still inspecting the foundation. The rich couple was ahead of him, already walking up the stairs and out into the kitchen.

“Shall the rest of us go upstairs?” Tammy didn’t wait for an answer and marched up the back stairs to the left of the kitchen. David followed, but the single man remained in the basement. He had taken out a flashlight of his own and was checking out the ductwork from the furnace.

As the tour continued up the back stairs to the second level, David became a little worried he wasn’t checking out the house thoroughly enough. Not that he knew what to look for. He made another mental note to bring a measuring tape and flashlight for the next tour. It would make him look like he knew what he was doing, if nothing else.

“There are three bedrooms up here and a full bathroom,” Tammy said. “You don’t see an upstairs bathroom often in these old Victorians.” She lowered her voice. “They used commodes, went right in the bedroom, carried it out in the morning.”

She swung the bathroom door open. “Just look at that marvelously deep clawfoot bathtub.”

David only had a shower in his apartment, and the tub looked inviting. He supposed the bathroom was close to how it was

originally decorated. Like something out of a Dickens novel: ornate woodwork, a window trimmed with stained glass, and velvet wallpaper that somehow held up to years of humidity without peeling. It looked more like a bedroom than a bathroom to David, but he had to admit it had style.

They all shuffled into the master bedroom, which had a large, canopied feather bed at its center.

“Nice big master bedroom,” Tammy said. “And notice the fireplace. How cozy is that?”

The room smelled a little musty, but a good cleaning and airing out should fix that. David imagined himself in bed, reading a book by the light of the fire. This was his room, in his house. He suddenly wanted this house more than he had wanted anything in a long time. The thought of losing the auction made him strangely sad.

His therapist had told him, “When you feel sad about losing something, that means it is important to you.”

Tammy took them to a second, smaller room that David thought would make a great office.

He decided the third one would be a guest room. Gary and his girlfriend, Shannon, could come spend weekends. Maybe even his father would come and stay for Christmas.

They headed down the hallway toward the other set of stairs.

“Downstairs there is a room off the dining room that could be another bedroom or office, along with a quarter bath under the stairs.”

They came down the front stairs, which had an ornately carved banister and newel posts. A finial topped by a gargoyle stood guard, watching the big oak front door where fairies frolicked in the frosted-glass panel.

The man from the basement was walking toward the front door, mumbling to himself. He looked agitated.

“Find any cracks?” David asked him.

“No. Foundation is fine. Still, something about this place doesn’t feel right. You get a sixth sense about these things when you’ve been at it as long as I have.”

He left through the front door.

David was glad to see the competition go, but felt like the man had insulted his house. Sure, it needed a new roof and furnace, but that was an expense he could handle, and all old houses needed that kind of work.

Tammy gestured toward the front door with a cheery, “Shall we start the auction?”

The rich couple that remained stepped outside with him. An auctioneer was at a podium. David was discouraged when he saw there were two more couples already gathered for the auction. They must have had an earlier tour.

The gray-haired auctioneer banged his gavel on the podium.

“Before we start, we must disclose the house needs a new furnace and roof,” Tammy said at the auctioneer’s side.

With that information confirmed, one of the couples left the circle and headed back to their minivan.

The auctioneer shouted, “We will start the bidding at six hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

David did not have to wait for the others to outbid him. His own bank account did that. He almost turned to leave himself when he realized no one else was bidding either.

“No?” the auctioneer said. “Do I hear five hundred thousand?”

Still no one raised their hands.

“It’s worth at least that,” the auctioneer protested.

David seized the opportunity and shot his hand up. “Two hundred thousand!”

“Now we’ve got an auction,” the auctioneer said. “Do I hear two fifty?”

“Two fifty!” a man behind David yelled.

“Do I hear three fifty?”

“Three hundred!” the rich man shouted. His wife gave David a smug look as if to say, “We can do this all day.”

The higher bid caused the other couple to walk away.

Tammy, who had been looking over notes in a big binder, stopped the auctioneer and whispered something to him.

“Really?” he said. He gave a sigh and turned back to what was left of the crowd. “The State of California requires me to disclose that there was a murder—”

“Killing,” Tammy corrected.

“A killing in this house.”

“What kind of killing?” the rich woman in the remaining couple asked.

“Does it matter?” her husband asked her.

Tammy stepped forward, reading from her binder. “A man was shot by the police and died in the house. That is all the information I have.”

“How are we going to rent two units in a murder house?” the rich man asked his wife.

“Some people like that sort of thing. Maybe it’s haunted,” she said.

A bang rang out from down the street that might have been a car backfiring, but sounded like a gunshot.

“Neighborhood is too dangerous,” the rich guy said. “We’re out.”

“I hope no one stole our tires,” his wife said as they walked back to their Mercedes.

“The blood was professionally cleaned,” Tammy shouted. “And it was two years ago!”

The auctioneer slammed his gavel down and pointed at David. “Sold to the young man in front for two hundred thousand dollars!”

David stood, stunned, for a moment. Five minutes ago, he had been about to walk away, and now he owned a house. This house.

Tammy led him back into the house to sign the paperwork. David stepped inside, not believing it was going to be his.

Even with the additional cost for the roof and furnace, it was much less than he had budgeted for.

His amazement was punctured, however, by a buzzing in his ears and the blurred vision that foretold a migraine was coming. It hit him full on like a freight train full of bees, and Tammy noticed the sudden grimace on his face.

“Are you okay?”

“No, I’m having a migraine. I need to sit down.”

She led him over to the blue velvet sofa in the living room.

“My sister gets those. They’re terrible. Can I get you a glass of water?”

“Yes, thank you.” He fished through his pants pocket for his pills. He’d had migraines for years, but they were coming on more frequently lately, so he made sure to always have his meds with him.

She went off to the kitchen, leaving David on the sofa with his head in his hands.

He thought he heard Tammy come out of the kitchen and looked up. Even through his blurred vision, he could tell it was not Tammy. The person was man-shaped. He was talking to David, but the buzzing in his ears was so loud he couldn’t make out what the man was saying.

“What?” David said. He was doing his best to focus his eyes, but the man was still just a hazy blur. “What did you say?”

“If you are going to be living in my house, you will have to do your part,” the man said in a husky whisper.

A smaller shape came up from behind him, a little girl from what David could see through his squinted eyes. “Don’t let him in,” she said. Her voice sounded frightened.

His headache spread across his entire skull and David felt as though he might throw up, which did happen sometimes. He put his head between his legs and the sick feeling subsided.

The buzzing in his ears suddenly stopped, and his focus returned.

He returned to an upright position to see that the man and girl were gone.

Tammy bustled in from the kitchen. “Here we go,” she said, handing him a glass of brownish water. “It’s a bit rusty, but safe to drink. We had it tested.”

He thanked her but, after seeing the swill in the glass, swallowed his pill dry. “Who was that guy?”

“What guy?”

“He was just here. Had a kid with him. I think it might have been the previous owner because he told me it was his house.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. I thought the bank changed the locks when they seized the property.” She looked around. “I don’t see them here now.”

The auctioneer entered, and she asked him if he’d seen anyone leave through the front door. He hadn’t.

“He didn’t go out the back. He would have had to pass me in the kitchen,” Tammy said.

“I’ll check upstairs and make sure he’s not still here,” the auctioneer said.

He came back down a minute or two later. “No one was up there either. Maybe they went down the back stairs and slipped out the back door after you’d left the kitchen.”

“I’ll have the locks changed today,” Tammy said.

David asked if he could use the restroom before they continued with the paperwork.

She smiled. “It’s your bathroom now. Use the one under the stairs. The upstairs toilet isn’t in working order at the moment.”

He knew that would be the first thing he would have to fix.

The bathroom under the stairs was just a toilet and pedestal sink. Tammy had put a small bowl of potpourri on the sink and there were clean hand towels.

With the door shut it was cramped. He was six feet tall and had to bow his head while he peed to avoid hitting the slanted ceiling. The toilet had a pull-chain flush with a ceramic handle dangling at the end, making him think it might have been original to the house.

He washed his hands, then splashed some brown water on his face. It was refreshingly cold and chased away what was left of his headache.

He dried his face and shook water out of his sandy-brown hair. The mirror had minor chips and cracks, but wasn’t in too bad shape for an antique. *People at Pottery Barn pay a lot for faux finish mirrors like that*, he thought. He had accidentally splashed water on the glass and wiped it off with the hand towel. It smeared a trail of soap across the surface of the glass. As he went to wipe again, markings began to appear in the soap trail. It looked like writing. David peered at it as letters took shape: *Fitz and Kang*. His soap-brushed artwork amused him. *Wasn’t Fitz Kang an old-time director?* he thought. As he wiped it away, he remembered it was Fritz Lang who was the director.

David emerged from the bathroom and went to find Tammy in the dining room. “Feeling better?” she asked.

“Yeah, thanks,” he said. “That was a bad one. They always pick the most inopportune moments.” He made a mental note to call his doctor’s office for an appointment.

They finished going through the paperwork, and David signed the purchase agreement and went home to his apartment.

Looking around, he realized it was not the home of a thirty-year-old man. Movie posters were the only art on the walls. A whiskey-barrel coffee table, left over from his college days, sat in front of his threadbare sofa. His TV and PlayStation were sitting on old milk crates.

He couldn't wait to leave this place behind him and really start adulting.

The cloud that had hung over him most of his life felt like it was lifting. His depression, while not gone, was at least taking a back seat and, for the first time, felt like it was something that could be managed.

* * *

David watched the moving truck drive away just as Gary texted that he and Shannon were on their way.

He felt another migraine coming on, so he popped a pill and washed it down with some room-temperature coffee he had gotten at the gas station down the street.

He returned to the living room to unpack boxes while he waited for his first visitors.

Even though Gary and Shannon had been together for over a year, David was still surprised his friend was part of a couple. Gary had never been one to tie himself down with a girlfriend. His life on the road wasn't the best for long-term relationships and his newfound fame seemed to give him a steady supply of groupies. High school girls might not like a magician, but grown women sure did.

Gary had met Shannon at the Dublin Fringe Festival, a sixteen-day theater festival where dozens of shows were put on across the city: plays, sketch comedy, musical acts, jugglers, and the like. The 'Gary the Gory Show' was the hit of the festival. A mix of comedy, magic, and lots of stage blood set his magic show apart from the competition and he

had sold-out crowds every night. He won an award at that year's festival, which came with a cash prize and a chance to take his show to other Fringe Festivals around the world.

Shannon was a volunteer at the Dublin festival, doing graphic design work for signs and staging. Gary was immediately smitten with the raven-haired beauty and she ended up traveling with him that fall to his many shows.

David liked Shannon and was glad to see she wasn't just one of Gary's flings, but that was as much for his sake as for Gary's.

She had been instrumental in getting David into therapy.

The three of them had joined a local softball league. The Tuesday night games had quickly become just another chore on David's to-do list. It was important to Gary, so it became important to David.

While they were having beers one night after a game, Shannon took David aside and asked if he was all right.

"You don't seem to like playing this game," she said. "Why do you do it then?"

Her forthrightness had taken him by surprise. It was true he didn't enjoy playing, but then he didn't enjoy anything, really. For most of his life, he followed the path of least resistance, and that meant joining Gary in his activities.

David knew not getting out of the house was bad for him and he at least liked having regularly scheduled obligations that got him outside. But he wasn't a good player and had never been a competitive person, like Gary and Shannon were. However, like most social things in his life, he'd thought he was faking it well.

"More balls hit you in the head than you catch," she teased. "That's not the way to get your head in the game."

David found himself confessing all his apathy to her, and she armchair-diagnosed his depression.

“In Ireland, depression is a national pastime,” she said. She told him she, too, had suffered bouts of depression throughout her life. “You really should talk to someone, David. It can help. That, or start drinking heavily.”

He had talked to people in the past, mainly pastors who told him depression was anger turned inward. But he didn't feel angry; he didn't feel anything at all.

“Fight or flight, that's the only way you kick depression to the curb,” Shannon said. “I have a friend who's a therapist. I'll give you her number.”

He'd started seeing Dr. Green on a regular basis and she helped him take stock of his past and think about the future he wanted.

The house was a manifestation of this. A way to engage with life. He had found himself listening to music again, as he had worked to clean the house before moving his belongings in.

He was lucky he didn't have to buy furniture; each room had been stocked as if it had always been waiting for him to occupy it. But he quickly realized he would have to clean, paint, and decorate all the old, dusty rooms. This oddly filled him with a sense of joy. He might even be good at it.

They might want coffee, he thought, and returned to the kitchen to make some. When he turned on the faucet, the pipes groaned and spit out a torrent of muddy water. He let it run awhile and it didn't become any clearer, so he gave up the idea of coffee and returned to the living room.

David was startled to see a black-and-white long-haired cat was cleaning itself on the back of his sofa.

“Who are you?” David asked.

The cat ignored him and continued cleaning.

David opened the front door. “I'm not in the market for a roommate. Out you go.” The cat reluctantly complied, jumping off the sofa and walking toward the open door.

In what David saw as an act of defiance, it walked very slowly.

“Out!” David commanded.

It continued its slow march out the door and onto the porch, finally disappearing into the hedges.

Gary and Shannon pulled up to the house in Gary’s newest sports car.

“Perfect timing,” David yelled from the front porch. “You can help me unpack.”

Shannon ran up the steps holding a large potted plant, and Gary followed with an enormous bottle of champagne.

“It’s beautiful!” Shannon said, giving him a hug with her free arm.

Gary clapped him on the shoulder and David ushered them both inside.

“Charming decor. Were the first owners the Addams Family?” Gary asked.

“Don’t listen to him. I think it’s grand. I can see the potential when it’s all fixed up,” Shannon said.

Gary held up his magnum of champagne. “Have you unpacked the glasses yet?”

They went into the kitchen, and David rummaged through boxes for glasses.

“Do you smoke weed?” Shannon asked. She plunked the plant down on the counter and fluffed up its leaves. It was the first time he noticed it was a marijuana plant.

“Gary said you didn’t smoke,” she continued, “but it’s the only thing that didn’t die in my garden.”

“I don’t smoke, but I could always make brownies or something with it. Thanks.”

“Makes good tea,” she said.

David continued his search and found his Burger King *Star Wars* collectible glasses. He pulled them out and unwrapped them from their newspaper cocoons, then, out of habit, went to the sink to give them a rinse. The faucet groaned, banged, then let out a belch of brown water. He decided it would be more sanitary to not rinse them.

“I have a plumber coming tomorrow,” he said.

Gary popped the cork, and it went rogue, whistling upward past Shannon’s ear and cracking the ceiling light’s glass cover.

“Watch it, wanker!” she shouted. “You nearly took me head off!” Surprise made her Irish accent extra Irish-y.

“Sorry about that, David,” Gary said. “I hope it wasn’t an antique, but I suppose everything in the house is.”

“I’ll add it to the list of things to be fixed,” David said, handing out the glasses.

Shannon examined her glass and said, “Oy, I want the Princess Leia glass. I’m not drinking out of Darth Vader.”

Gary raised his Wookiee glass to give a toast. “Here’s to David’s change of venue.”

They all took a drink, and the cracked ceiling fixture took that moment to shatter completely, raining shards of glass on them.

“I will totally pay for that light,” Gary said, shaking the glass out of his hair.

David searched for a broom and noticed a tall skinny door that he took to be a broom closet. He opened it. There was an old broom in there surrounded by a web writhing with dozens of spiders. He slammed the door shut and decided to clean the glass up later when he could find his vacuum cleaner.

“Give us a tour, then,” Shannon said, setting Princess Leia carefully in the sink.

He took them upstairs and Shannon ran from room to room like she was a teenager picking out a bedroom on moving day.

“So, when does your move to Vegas happen?” David asked Gary.

“Going out next week to find a place,” he said.

“What does Shannon think about your moving?”

“She’s coming with me.”

“Oh, that’s great,” David said. “I’m happy for you.”

Shannon zoomed out of the bathroom. “The tub is huge!” She ran down the hall to the master bedroom.

“There’s a wedding chapel on every corner in Vegas,” David teased. “Isn’t that a dangerous place to take her?”

Gary and David went into the master bedroom, where Shannon was bouncing up and down on the big feather bed. “They don’t make them like this anymore,” she said, as the mattress kicked up a billowing cloud of dust. “Did you tell him yet?” she asked Gary.

Before Gary could say anything, she blurted out, “We’re getting married!”

It was a shock to David. A feeling of loneliness took him by surprise. For the first time, he realized they were not only moving away, they would have a life without him.

He felt a frown taking over his face and forced a smile, shouting, “That’s great!”

The overcompensation of happiness didn’t get by Gary, who put his hand on David’s shoulder and said, “It was a sudden decision. Her visa status had us re-evaluating our relationship, and we decided we’re ready for the next move. I would have told you sooner, but with my new job and all.”

“Yeah,” David said. “Makes sense. I’m glad someone will be with you for the big career change.”

“I want to get married by an Elvis impersonator,” she said. “Is that still a thing in Vegas?”

“We’re going out to find a temporary apartment until I start at the Rio.”

“They’re giving him a penthouse suite. Can you believe that?” Shannon said.

“It’s all happening so fast,” Gary said.

“Wait, will we have tigers as neighbors?” Shannon asked excitedly.

“Can’t make any promises,” Gary said.

David felt sad even as he tried to console himself with the fact everyone was moving on with their adult lives and that was a good thing.

David’s feeling of melancholy was interrupted by a shriek from Shannon, not a shriek of joy but of terror. A large rat came out from under the bed and ran over her feet and out the door. It was followed by the white-and-black cat emerging from under the bed in hot pursuit.

“I didn’t know you had a cat,” Gary said.

“I don’t. He keeps getting in here somehow.”

“Lucky, that,” Shannon said. “That rat could have taken off one of my toes. You need a cat in this house, apparently.”

“I have an exterminator coming tomorrow,” David said. “For the rats, not the cat. I think there’s a nest of them in the basement. I hear scratching coming from down there.”

“Let’s get you unpacked and we’ll take you out for dinner,” Gary said.

“I’m not particularly scared of rats,” Shannon explained. “It just startled me.”

“I would have screamed too,” David said.

“It was more of a shriek,” she said as they made their way downstairs. “Honestly, we had plenty of rats on the farm where I grew up. We would catch them with our bare hands.”

“I know you aren’t a scaredy-cat,” David said.

“Not at all. I’ve chopped the heads off of chickens. I’m not a girly girl.”

“You should buy a litter box and some cat food,” Gary noted.

“I’m not keeping the cat.”

“We’ll see,” Gary said.

They did a little unpacking, then went to dinner at one of his favorite restaurants in San Francisco, The Stinking Rose. The restaurant featured garlic in most of the main dishes and even in the desserts.

David had almost said he wasn’t up to going out since another headache was coming on, but the pill he had popped earlier seemed to have turned it off before it started. Getting out for some fresh air was just what he needed.

* * *

Gary pulled up in front of the house and left the engine idling. “Thanks again for dinner,” David said.

“Our pleasure. Congrats again on the new digs.” Gary reached into the back seat and he and David clasped hands in a combination handshake/high five. David hopped out of the car and Shannon blew him a kiss as he turned to wave goodbye.

He should have been exhausted from a day spent moving and unpacking, and an evening that included champagne, cocktails, and more wine with dinner. But once he was alone in his new house, David felt keyed up and restless, and decided to use that energy productively.

He decided to focus on his bedroom so it would be ready when he got sleepy. He’d left the window cracked open and the cool night air had freshened up the stale-smelling room. He vacuumed and Febrezed the feather mattress and made the bed with the clean bedding he’d brought from his apartment. He dusted every surface and cleaned under the bed, nervously checking for rats. To his relief, there was no sign of infestation; the one earlier must have been a fluke, a

particularly brave rodent that had ventured out of the basement. Luckily, the cat had shown up when it did.

David was unpacking the last box in the bedroom when he found his photo album. He sunk down onto his freshly made bed and lifted the red vinyl album cover, which had cracked over the years, showing its cheap cardboard construction underneath.

All the pictures were of a happier time, yet it pained him to look at them, so he seldom did. It was mostly pictures of his mother and sister, Jenny, both of whom had died in a car crash when David was thirteen.

The confirmation that Gary and Shannon were moving away had already put him in a melancholy mood, and these pictures weren't helping. He tried to let the old snapshots trigger happy memories, but they would not come.

The photos were mostly Polaroids, faded with the passing of time. Soon they would disappear altogether, just like the obsolete technology that produced them.

One spread of the album was dedicated to his sister's high school years.

She was older than David, and popular at school, a good student and athlete. David struggled with most of his classes and teachers always urged him to, "Be more like your sister. She studies hard and can get into any college she wants on her grades alone. You need to think about your future, like she does."

Of course, as it turned out, she didn't have a future. She would never graduate high school, would never go on to college, and never have a family of her own.

He turned the page to a photo of his mother fitting him and his sister with Halloween costumes. It was the year he went as Mork from *Mork & Mindy*, a favorite TV show of his that was being rerun in the afternoons. His sister was dressed as a vampire, or perhaps just a Goth Girl, as he couldn't see any fangs in the photo.

In some ways, it felt like Jenny had never left home. Her pictures and trophies were everywhere. Her room was kept just as it was the day she died.

His mother, too, always seemed like she was just out shopping and would be back at any moment. His father wouldn't get rid of his mother's and sister's clothes and they continued to hang in closets, waiting for them to return.

His dad never bought new furniture or put up new pictures on the wall. David and his father shared their home with their memories permanently etched into the decor of the house. The two men just wandered around in it like squatters. It was the girls' house; it always had been.

David had been closer to his mother than to his father. She was the one who introduced him to the nerdy things like *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. She understood him and why he had trouble focusing at school.

"Your brain works like mine," she had told him. "It's always someplace else than the here and now. You'll have to learn how to concentrate on one thing at a time or you won't make it in this world."

She was a buffer between him and his father. Both his parents had always been religious. They went to church every Sunday and to Bible study every Wednesday.

When David told his mother he might not believe in God, she told him to pretend he did until he was out of high school and college. "Your father might not pay for college if he thinks you aren't saved."

He and his sister fought the way siblings do, but they were family and she protected him at school. Her friends were the jocks and popular crowd and he was off-limits to their bullying. That ended when she died. It was like they resented him for being alive when she was gone.

His father got even more religious after the accident. He had to believe in God more than ever. He had to know his wife and

daughter were waiting for him in heaven or he could not go on with living.

David turned the page in the photo album and found a picture of the whole family. It looked like it was posed at a family reunion or some other outside gathering. He didn't remember being in the photo or seeing it before. It wasn't a Polaroid and still had all its colors and contrast. His dad was smiling.

David pulled the photo from its protective sleeve and looked on the back where there was usually a note from his mother about when and where it was taken. There was none. But there was a date stamp from the photo processing that was two weeks after they had died.

His father must have gotten the photo in the mail weeks after his mother had sent in the film roll. It would have been gut-wrenching for his father, but he dutifully put it in the correct album his wife had started.

They were already ghosts when he got this, David thought. He didn't believe in ghosts beyond the metaphor, but the thought sent a chill up his spine.

He searched his memory for happier times outdoors when the photo could have been taken. He scanned the background, looking for clues to what park or backyard it could be, and saw none.

He did notice a person out of focus behind them. Perhaps it was just a trick of the light coming through the trees, but the blob of light looked like a blond woman in a light blue summer dress. *Might be Aunt Edna,* he thought. *So maybe that big family reunion at that park in Ashland? That one near Lake Superior.*

His out-of-focus eyes caught a glimmer of something in the full-length mirror that was on the back of the bedroom door. It was the same fuzzy outline of a person with blond hair and a blue dress. It was as though the image in the photo had burned into his retina, like looking at the sun too long. But as he tried to clear his vision, the blurry figure moved deeper into the

mirror to the point where it was behind his own reflection sitting on the bed.

He turned his head sharply to look behind him, painfully twisting his neck in the process, but nothing was there.

When he returned his gaze back to the mirror, his image was alone. The headlight from a passing car came through his window, danced along his wall, and sparkled in the mirror. *That's all it was, he thought. A trick of the light. And that's all these photos are.*

David shut the cover on the photo album and slid it under his bed. *This is all I have of them now, he thought.* Fading photos that were slipping further and further out of his view.

The door to the bedroom suddenly flung open, startling David out of his reverie. *Probably a gust of wind, David thought.* He shut the door and was now facing his reflection in the full-length mirror. It was dusty. One of things David had missed in his cleaning frenzy. He then noticed words traced in the dust. Words you could only see up close: 'Fitz and Kang'. The letters were scrawled like a child's writing, crooked and uneven. Still, the names were clearly there. David grabbed his dust cloth, gave the mirror a good polishing, then got ready for bed. *The first of many nights sleeping in my new house, he thought. The first night of my new life.*

* * *

"One thousand five hundred," the exterminator said as David filled out the check. "You might experience some bad smells as the ones in the walls and crawl space decompose."

"Wonderful," David said, ripping the check out of the book and handing it to him.

"Ninety-day guarantee, so if you see any rats alive after today, give us a call."

The plumber came up from the basement as the exterminator was leaving. "Flushed the sewer and clean water line," she said. "You might hear some rattling and banging as the air works its way out."

“How much do I owe you?”

“Seven hundred sixty-five,” she said, packing up the rest of her tools. “Your furnace looks like it needs replacing. We do heating and cooling work too.”

“How much would that cost?”

“Because you’re so nice, I could do it for four grand and labor.”

He told her it would have to wait until after the roof was done, since that took priority. She was an attractive redhead, and she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, so he thought about asking her out, but then realized she must get that a lot from clients and it would be awkward for her.

She left, and he grabbed a beer from the kitchen. The light in the refrigerator was blinking, and the beer was warm. Another damn thing he would have to fix.

Damn it, she was flirting with me, wasn't she? David thought. Earlier, she asked if he was fixing up the house by himself. *She wanted to know if I had a girlfriend.*

He realized he would have to get better at picking up signals if he were ever to meet someone. Women did find him attractive. *At least until they get to know me*, he thought, then made a conscious effort to stop the negative thinking. *I have a good job and now I have a house. I'm a good catch.* David had practiced daily affirmations, like his therapist had told him to, even though he found it silly. “I’m good enough, smart enough and gosh darn it, people like me,” he said to his reflection in the toaster, then gave himself a mocking thumbs-up.

The clock radio on the counter was blinking: 8:30, 8:30, 8:30. It had come with the house and looked like it was something from the 1980s or 90s. He put his beer down and fiddled with controls on the back to change the time, but he couldn’t figure it out. He yanked out the plug and threw it into the trash as he headed out the door to the backyard.

He waded through the weeds and sat down at the picnic table under the walnut tree. He realized then he would have to get a

mower, and sprinklers and all the other stuff you need for a backyard.

“Howdy, neighbor,” he heard a friendly voice call out. A man in the yard next door was sticking his head over the wooden fence. “I’m Gus.”

David stood up and went over to the fence. “David.” He reached up and offered his hand for a shake, which Gus accepted with vigor.

“Glad to see someone bought this house,” Gus said. “Or are you renting from the bank like the last couple?”

“No, she’s all mine. At least the mortgage is.”

“Want to come over for a beer?” Gus asked.

David went around as there was no side gate. In fact, just like David’s house, there was no way into the yard except through the house, so Gus met him at the front door.

“You can borrow my mower if you haven’t got one yet,” Gus said as he led him into the living room.

“Thanks, I just might do that.”

“Have a seat,” Gus said. He went to the kitchen and came back with two bottles of beer.

They did all the small talk new neighbors do. David told him he was a computer programmer and found out that Gus was a semi-retired professor of anthropology and African studies at Berkeley.

His house was decorated with all sorts of African art that he had collected during his travels. Paintings, statues, and face masks adorned the walls.

He was a widower whose wife had died ten years ago.

“I’m so sorry,” David said.

“It was pretty rough for a few years, but you learn to make peace with it,” Gus said. He grabbed a framed photo from an end table and handed it to David. It showed a younger Gus,

without the gray peppering his black hair, and a pretty young woman standing in front of Gus's house.

"She's beautiful," David said, handing the photo back.

There was a long, awkward pause that David broke by changing the subject.

"I saw the solar panels on your house," he said. "Are they worth the investment?"

"Sure. If you're planning on staying in the house for a few years. My electric bill is zero most months and some months the power company pays me. Any excess juice is fed back into the grid and I get a credit."

"Wow, I might look into getting panels on my house." Then he remembered how many expenses were already piling up and laughed. "After I pay off the plumber and the roofer and the electrician, and, well, you get it."

Gus laughed too. "Yeah, been there. But if you can swing it, it's worth it in the long run. I have a well too. I don't use it, but I could and be completely off the grid for water and power, if I wanted to."

David noticed a computer monitor on a small writing desk in the corner that had a view of Gus's front porch on the screen.

"I've been thinking of getting one of those camera doorbells too," David said.

"Worth every penny. It pays to keep an eye on who's at your door in this neighborhood."

"Yeah, I'll probably do that."

"I have a digital keypad lock too, so I don't have to worry about forgetting my keys," Gus said.

David then asked Gus if he knew about the killing in David's house.

"Yeah, that was, let's see, two years ago? That would be Danny, the youngest of the Mullins boys. They were a nice family. They moved into the neighborhood about the same

time as my wife and I did, twenty years ago. When the parents moved to Florida, Danny and his older brother, Mike, got the house. Then Mike moved out, and it was just Danny. He got in with a bad crowd and started selling drugs.”

“So that’s what the police raid was about, drugs?”

“Yeah, the police showed up one night and broke down the door and there were shots fired. They took him out on a stretcher. The house was seized, and ever since then, the bank has been renting it out. No one stays for very long. Last couple were only in the house three days when they took off in the middle of the night.”

“I don’t blame them. I’d take off after three days if I hadn’t sunk so much money into it already.”

“This neighborhood used to be great. A lot of families with kids, people that took care of their yards. It’s gone downhill over the years. The house on the other side of you has been abandoned for a couple of years now. Squatters use it to shoot up in. I’ve called the city a bunch of times, but they haven’t done anything.”

David knew it was a run-down neighborhood. It was one of the reasons the house was so cheap. It hadn’t occurred to him that it also might be dangerous. *A drug house next door and a drug dealer was dead on my floor*, he thought. The memory of the names Fitz and Kang on his bathroom and bedroom mirrors popped into his mind.

“Any of the renters named Fitz or Kang?” David asked.

“Not that I recall, but then I didn’t get to know all the renters.”

David thanked Gus for the beer and said he needed to get back. “I have a few more things I want to get done in the house today.”

“Why don’t you come over for supper tonight?” Gus offered. “Nothing fancy. I’ll just throw some burgers on the grill. You won’t feel like cooking if you’ve been working on the house all afternoon.”

David told him he had a couple of friends coming over.

“Invite them over too, the more the merrier.”

David didn't want to impose, but on the other hand, he still had very little food in the house and he did want to be neighborly.

“That would be great, thanks. I'll bring the beer.”

* * *

“So, David tells me you teach at Berkeley,” Gary said as he popped open a beer in Gus's backyard.

“Yeah, semi-retired now, but I still teach a couple of classes a semester to keep my hand in,” Gus said. He flipped the burgers and they sizzled on the grill. “And what do you do for a living, young lady?” Gus asked Shannon.

“I draw pictures for Google,” she said. “Not very exciting, but the pay is good and I can work from anywhere.”

David was busy admiring Gus's well-manicured lawn and raised garden beds. He didn't think he would ever get his yard to look like that. Even more impressive, the three of them were sitting at a picnic table Gus had made himself. David found himself wishing he had paid more attention when his father tried to teach him woodworking. It would be a useful hobby.

“David didn't tell me he was bringing a celebrity to dinner,” Gus said to Gary. “I saw your act on YouTube. That is some crazy stuff.”

“He's got a job opening for Penn & Teller,” Shannon said proudly. “We are moving to Vegas in a few months.”

“Wow. I'll have to come see it,” Gus said, taking burgers off the grill and setting them on buns. “I get out to Vegas a few times a year.”

“Let me know when you come. I'll get you tickets,” Gary said.

Gus served the burgers and coleslaw and sat down to join them.

“How’d you two lovebirds meet?” Gus asked.

“Are you asking about me and Gary or Gary and David?” Shannon asked. “Because I wonder about these two sometimes.”

“I swept Shannon off her feet when I was doing my magic act at the Fringe Festival in Dublin,” Gary said. “I swept David off his feet when I transferred to his school senior year.”

“He kidnapped me from my beautiful Irish home and whisked me off to America to be his love slave,” Shannon said. “I’m sure some sort of magic spell was involved.”

“And he introduced me to Dungeons & Dragons, the AV club, and the theater kids,” David said. “He turned me into the nerd I am today. Probably some magic involved there too.”

“You bastard!” Shannon said. “Did he make you go to the Renaissance fair, David?” She reached over and took David’s hand. “You can tell us, this is a safe space.”

“If I remember right,” Gary said, “David’s father hired me to tutor him in history.”

“Why study the dead? What could they possibly teach me?” David asked. “But yes, Gary kept me from being a high school dropout. And I kept Gary from getting beat up for being the weird kid.”

“Not how I remember it,” Gary said. “I remember the whole high school being impressed with my sleight of hand.”

“He dyed his blond hair black and drew on a mustache with his mom’s mascara,” David said. “It was all I could do to keep him alive in the school hallways.”

“I was dedicated to my persona from an early age,” Gary said.

“You’re really a blond?” Shannon said. “When were you going to tell me? Carpet does not match the drapes, apparently.”

“I don’t want to hear about Gary’s carpet,” David said. “Back to my story. Magic is the only thing he was ever interested in doing for a living. He did birthday parties, performed at nursing homes and was the opening act for garage bands. I guess all that hard work paid off.” David raised his beer bottle for a toast. “All hail, Gary the Gory – Blood Magician.”

“How did two Wisconsin boys end up in California?” Gus asked.

“I got into Berkeley,” David said. “Thanks to Gary’s tutoring, I got a computer science scholarship.”

“His dad was vehemently against him going to school in California, because of all the sin and depravity, but I said I’d go too and keep an eye on him.”

“I don’t know how you had my dad fooled. You were the one who was the bad influence.”

“I dropped out after the first semester. Just wasn’t for me,” Gary said.

“Wait! Gary, you’re from Wisconsin?” Shannon said. “Just kidding, I knew that. I don’t know where Wisconsin is, but I did know that.”

David looked over at the fence between their houses. Of course, Gus’s side was nicely painted. There was an ornate design on it, a colorful eight-pointed star decorated with flowers and birds that looked to be hand-painted.

To David’s surprise, a man popped his head over the top of the fence and was staring at them. The only way he could do that was to be trespassing in David’s yard. And he would have to climb the fence to do that since there was no fence gate leading to the outside.

“Hey, who are you?” David yelled at him. The others turned to see who he was talking to.

But as soon as the words were out of his mouth, David realized his mistake and laughed out loud. He was looking into

a mirrored ball hanging from a tree, one of Gus's many garden decorations.

"Oh, he has an ugly mug, David," Shannon said. "Best not start a fight with him."

Gus laughed. "That there is a 'gazing ball'," he explained. "Wards off evil spirits. Plus, the birds like to look at themselves in it."

He pointed to the design on the fence.

"And that's a Pennsylvania Dutch hex symbol. You might have seen them on barns and such. It's also to ward off evil spirits and bad luck."

"Do you think it works?" Shannon asked.

"Probably not. But it's a pretty design."

David smiled at his face in the mirrored ball. To David's confusion, his reflected face lost its smile and frowned at him. The reflection raised its hand and pointed at David. This startled him so much he had to look down at his own right hand, which was firmly clutching beer. When he returned his gaze, the reflection was under his control again.

David put his beer down on the table. *Too much beer in the sun*, he thought.

Chapter Two

A Dance with Death

“There’s an app for your phone that monitors this camera,” Gus explained as he slid the doorbell camera onto its base and secured it with the last screw. “So you can see who’s at the door wherever you are. The lock too. You can let in delivery people without being home. Pretty handy.”

David finished his part of the install, which was putting a code into the digital lock pad. He pressed the code button and thought for a moment about a code he could remember and punched in *2030*.

“Don’t use the house address,” Gus laughed. “That’s too easy to guess.”

“Oh, right.” David cleared it and typed in *1701*.

“The designation of the starship *Enterprise*,” Gus observed. “I like it.”

“I see you are a fan of the show,” David said.

“The original,” Gus said. “*Next Gen* and *DS9* are okay, but all the new ones I don’t like much.”

David’s phone rang. “It’s my doctor. I should take this.” David answered the call and Gus showed himself out.

“I got the MRI back and I think you should come in as soon as possible so we can discuss it,” the doctor said.

David felt his stomach drop and sat down quickly. He asked for more information, but the doctor said, “Really, I think it’s best we don’t do this over the phone. Do you have someone that can come with you?”

“Why, how bad is it?” David knew it was bad if the doctor wanted him to come in right away.

“Sometimes it’s good to have another person there to ask questions. We also might need to run some more tests, which would require sedation, so it would be best to have someone who can drive you home. Can you come in first thing in the morning?”

David said he could and hung up. *Great*, he thought, *not only is the house falling apart, so am I.*

Gary and Shannon were out of town and David had no one else to go with him to the hospital. That haunting loneliness overtook him again. He went next door to talk to Gus.

“So, I hate to ask for another favor when you just installed my doorbell camera,” he said, then explained the situation.

Gus readily agreed to go with him to his appointment.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Gus said. “Migraines can be a tricky thing to diagnose.”

David nodded, grasping on to whatever hope he could.

The next morning, David felt childish about having the older man sitting with him in the doctor’s office. He barely knew Gus and here he was, watching David have a meltdown.

“I don’t understand,” David said as the despair overtook him. “Why can’t you operate? You can use lasers or something, I’ve heard of that.”

“We certainly will try that, and chemotherapy too,” Dr. Anderson said. “But I’m afraid it’s spread rapidly, and it’s in an area of the brain where permanent damage could be caused trying to get to it by surgical means.”

After that, David’s ears were ringing, pulsing with every beat of his heart. He had trouble hanging on to the doctor’s words.

“Six months to live...three good ones...dementia will set in...put your affairs in order.”

Gus had his arm around him, which was the only thing keeping him from sliding off the office couch.

“I’ve put your name in for some clinical trials, including a new treatment that’s shown some promise for extending life.”

“That’s good,” Gus said. “Right? I mean, there is hope for a cure.”

“If not a cure, it could give you more years of life,” the doctor said.

Gus drove David home and got him into the house. “Thanks, Gus,” David said, more calmly than he felt. “I know this was a lot more than you bargained for when you agreed to drive a neighbor to an appointment.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Gus said. “I have a class this afternoon, but I can stay if you want me to. I hardly ever cancel class. My students would be thrilled.”

“No, I think I need to be alone now. I have a lot to think about.”

“Of course,” Gus said. He put his hand on David’s shoulder. “I’ll check on you when I get home. If that’s all right?” David nodded absently.

When he left, David felt very much alone. Alone with his thoughts. Alone in the world.

He went out to his front porch and retrieved that day’s mail, more out of habit than anything else. He seldom got anything but junk mail these days, with every transaction being done on the internet.

Most of the mail was addressed to *occupant*, but a big pink envelope stood out and he opened it. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding,” he said out loud. It was an invitation to Anne’s wedding.

A year ago, David and Anne were celebrating their engagement at a jazz club when she slipped out into the alley with the bartender and out of David’s life for good.

Looking back, he realized their relationship had never been a great fit. She was into astrology, homeopathy, and other things David thought to be pseudoscience nonsense.

He was infatuated with her because she had an energy that David needed in his life. She was the one to get them out of the house to socialize and be out in the world. Anne got him to exercise and lose weight. She was the one who made sure he ate healthy food and went to his doctor's appointments. It was Anne who said it was time to get married, so that made it especially hard when she dumped him.

He had seen from her Facebook page she had moved on from the bartender to a series of boyfriends. He hadn't seen the latest one until now. There was a picture of the happy couple enclosed with the RSVP card. David wasn't sure why they had stayed friends. He thought often about unfriending her and cutting her out of his life forever, but never was able to hit the button.

The last thing Anne had said to him as she was moving her things from the apartment was, "I realize now I'm not the kind of person who will ever be married."

David laughed and tossed the invitation into the wastebasket by the door. He thought for a moment, then fished it out. After retrieving a pen from the roll-top desk he had just bought at an antique store, he checked the *Won't be attending* box. He drew a smiley face next to the checkbox, and wrote, *Can't come, I'll be dead*. He slipped it into the return envelope, stepped outside, popped it into the mailbox, and put the flag up.

He went back inside to the dark, lonely house and thought about how he had no other family and his circle of friends was the smallest it had ever been.

Who were his friends now? Gary and Shannon. Guys from work he played video games with sometimes.

Why hadn't he made more of an effort to live his life?

Gary and Shannon would move away to Vegas and start a family. David would not even live long enough to see that.

Now all he could think about was all the things he hadn't done. The trip to New Zealand he had always wanted to take.

Learning Spanish. Scuba diving lessons. Everything now seemed too far out into a future he would never see.

He felt a migraine coming on and welcomed the pain because it would make it easier to do what he decided to do at that moment.

He grabbed a bottle of bourbon out of the cupboard as a bunch of spiders scurried away from his hand. “Hey, relax. It’s your house now,” he said. He got some candles and a lighter from the drawer, grabbed his cell phone off the kitchen counter, and headed upstairs to kill himself.

* * *

The warm water was filling the tub. Ironically, the water from the tap was now running perfectly clear, with no more cloudy brown sediment. The water in the tub, however, was quickly turning red with the blood flowing from David’s wrists, so it still looked brownish in the dim candlelight.

At least the next owner will have clean water, David thought.

He had soft music playing on a Bluetooth speaker on the counter, a birthday present from Gary and Shannon.

David hoped if there were an afterlife, he would see his sister and mother again. He very much wanted his father to be right about heaven and wrong about nonbelievers not going. He waited for the light that was supposed to appear, with loved ones beckoning him toward it.

It didn’t come. He wondered why he hadn’t passed out yet and worried he hadn’t cut his wrists deeply enough to keep them from clotting. He heard that happened sometimes. But the water was becoming darker and darker and he was feeling sleepy.

He took the last big slug of whiskey and tossed the bottle across the room, where it landed safely in the laundry hamper. “Two points,” he muttered.

The feral cat wandered in and meowed at him.

“Sorry dude, the house is all yours now. Oh, except for the spiders.”

The cat wandered back out into the hallway.

“Hey, come back!” He suddenly didn’t want to die alone. He wanted some living thing to see him off. He tried to stand up, but he was too weak from the loss of blood and he just slid back down.

The water was almost overflowing the tub, and he somehow found the strength to turn it off. He caught his reflection in the chrome of the faucet and didn’t like what he saw. He was looking at an idiot. A coward who was just giving up. He had been given three good months to live, and he was squandering it. *Hell, for those three months I could be on that trip to New Zealand.*

He suddenly wanted to live, but was it too late? A sudden rush of adrenaline made his heart race. One of his wrists had stopped bleeding, but the other was pumping out blood faster in big spurts. He grabbed a towel and tied it around his wrist to stem the flow.

Struggling to remain conscious, he managed to lean over the tub and retrieve his cell phone from the floor. He dialed a *nine* and a *one*.

That’s when he saw her again. The blurry woman in blue from the photo. He couldn’t make out her face through his foggy vision, but she was three-dimensional and standing there. She was shrouded in a white light almost too bright to look at, but he could see she had golden hair and a light blue dress as the light filtered through it.

“It’s all right, David. You don’t die today,” she whispered.

David pressed what he hoped was the final *one*. He was too weak to hold the phone any longer, and it tumbled to the floor, but as it did, he heard the operator say, “911, what is the nature of your emergency?”

“Send an ambulance to 2030 Hill Street,” he said as loudly as he could muster. “I’ve cut myself in the upstairs bathroom.

The door code is one, seven, zero, one.”

The world went black before he could say anything else, even though in his mind he was screaming for help. He fell deeper and deeper into the darkness.

Am I dead? he wondered.

He felt the presence of others around him. The blackness enveloped him like warm, comfortable summer air. A feeling of joy and hope held him up.

“This won’t work!” he heard a voice say. He couldn’t tell if it was a man or woman.

“What won’t work?” David heard himself say into the darkness.

Then the woman from the bathroom said, “It will. He just has to open his eyes.”

Could they not hear him? “My eyes are open,” he yelled into the void, a darkness so black it was beyond his comprehension.

In the darkness, a tiny dot of light appeared above him. A single star to wish upon and he wished to be alive again. It was as though the powers that be heard his prayer and the star expanded in front of him.

The voices talked in unison like a Greek chorus. “He’s going back!”

The woman’s voice said, “That’s right, David. Come back to life. Breathe.” He felt himself drifting closer to the light, trying to propel himself, but not really sure how to navigate in this state between life and death.

Suddenly, a violent yank halted his ascent. He felt a new presence, one of anger and sadness, surrounding him and pulling him down.

“No!” the chorus sang. The malevolent entity was pushed away, and David continued moving.

“How can *he* be here?” a voice called out in despair.

“Don’t let the bad man in,” he heard a little girl’s voice say.

“It’s our fault. We opened the door for him,” the woman in blue said. She sounded scared.

In the distance, David heard a siren. “Hurry,” he whispered, then blacked out completely.

David fought his way out of sleep and found himself strapped to a hospital bed, gasping for air.

“Welcome back, sleepyhead,” a nurse said, adjusting his pillow and bed so he was sitting upright. “Do you know where you are?”

“I’m hoping it’s a hospital, and not heaven,” David said.

“Highland Hospital, so no, not heaven,” she said. “But it looks like the angels are watching over you. You are very lucky to be alive. I’ll get the doctor.”

A man in a white coat entered and told David he was a psychiatrist and that David was under observation. He pulled up a stool and sat next to David’s bed. “Your cuts weren’t very deep. That usually tells me your heart wasn’t in it. And you did call 911, so that’s always a good sign. Why did you try to kill yourself, David?”

David didn’t hesitate. What would be the point? He had no time to waste. “I have a brain tumor and only six months to live. After three, I’ll be stark raving mad.”

“I’m so sorry. I can see why that frightens you,” the doctor said in his soothing psychiatrist’s voice.

“I am scared, but not enough to kill myself, apparently. Listen, I won’t try it again, so please, let me go. I don’t want to spend my last good months in the looney bin. I called 911 because I realized I want to make the most of whatever time I have left.”

“Standard procedure is to keep you for at least seventy-two hours after a suicide attempt.” The doctor looked at him searchingly for a moment. “All right, I’ll confirm the tumor diagnosis with your physician and if the story checks out, I’ll

start the release paperwork. If you can get someone for me to release you to, I think we can get you out of here in twenty-four hours.”

Relief washed over David. “Really?”

“You’ll have to promise to see someone,” the doctor said, writing something down on a pad.

“Yes, I can do that. I have a therapist I see regularly,” David said. “Dr. Helen Green.”

“Good, I’ll check in with her as well. Don’t make me sorry, David. You can pack a lot of living into three months, and there is always hope you’ll get more. You aren’t dead till you’re dead.”

The doctor left David alone with his thoughts and he couldn’t help thinking about the dream he had while he was unconscious. *Was I unconscious?* David wondered. He had never felt more conscious of his self than he had during that time in the darkness. He had never felt so much love as when those voices around him were pushing him toward the light.

I’m going to be okay, he thought. *I don’t die today.* And even if he were to die in the next few months, he wanted to live during that time.

* * *

David woke the next day in a private room. He lay in his hospital bed, waiting for his release paperwork to go through and thinking about what to do with his next few months – his last few months.

The door opened, and he looked up eagerly, sure it would be a nurse telling him it was time to go. To his surprise, it was his father. *The hospital must have called him when it looked like I wasn’t going to make it,* he thought.

David was genuinely shocked that he’d come all the way from Wisconsin. They hadn’t spoken since his stepmother, Vivian, had died of COVID almost a year and a half ago. Neither his father nor Viv believed in the vaccine. Every

phone call was a fight. Eventually, his dad stopped picking up the phone.

He looked old to David, so much older than he remembered. His hair was thinning and now all gray. Wrinkled lines of worry marred his face.

“May I come in?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He came in and shut the door, then stood there in a long, awkward silence.

“I’m fine. It was a stupid mistake. The hospital didn’t need to call you.”

“They didn’t. Gary did.”

David had forgotten he had put Gary down as his emergency contact.

“He and his girlfriend are here; they’re waiting in the lobby.”

David felt a surge of anger at Gary. If he hadn’t called, maybe his father wouldn’t have ever found out about the suicide attempt. Now his dad was here, upset and worried. David would have to deal with the shame of putting his father through this. Why was Gary always interfering in his life?

His dad took the chair next to the bed.

“Listen, I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. Not just lately, but, you know, growing up. I was a mess. After the accident.”

David’s anger deflated.

“Me too,” he said. “I should have made more of an effort, been a better son.”

His father shook his head. “You were just a kid. I have no excuse. I knew better then and I know better now. I’m sorry I shut you out when you shut God out. That’s when you needed me more than ever.”

“Hate the sin, but love the sinner,” David said with a bit more hostility than he intended.

“We all take our own paths. I should have been by your side on your journey.” Tears were welling up in his dad’s eyes and David found himself choking up too.

His father stood and hugged David in the bed and they both started to cry. The tears were for all they had lost: loved ones and time together they would never get back.

“May I pray for you?” his dad asked.

“Couldn’t hurt,” David said.

His dad returned to his seat and, holding David’s hand, prayed to Jesus and asked for protection and guidance until His return. “Send an angel to look over my son in his trying times ahead. Amen.”

There was a quiet knock on the door, which opened slowly, without a response.

Gary and Shannon were at the door.

“Are we interrupting?” Shannon asked, and for some reason, she was whispering.

“No, come in,” David said, wiping his eyes. “The more the merrier.”

Shannon rushed in and hugged David. “You are so stupid! Don’t do that again or I *will* kill you. And it will be painful.”

“You look well, considering,” Gary said. He looked pale and shaken as he leaned in to give David a quick hug.

“I wish you two hadn’t cut your Vegas trip short,” David said.

“And I wish you hadn’t cut your wrists before talking to me,” Gary said. “But here we are.”

“I’m fine, really. They’re letting me out today.” David paused, then told them, “Well, I’m not actually fine. I have a brain tumor and it’s terminal, and I was just not thinking straight and feeling sorry for myself, as usual.”

His father moaned, and his lips started moving in silent prayer. Gary swayed a bit, then sat down on the edge of David's bed, as though afraid his legs wouldn't support him any longer. Shannon put an arm around Gary's shoulder and grabbed David's hand with her other hand.

"Oh David! Why didn't you tell us what you were going through?" Shannon asked. She started to cry. "How long?"

"Six months. Three of them good," he said, handing her a tissue from his bedside table.

"This is feckin' awful," she said. She couldn't hold back the tears. "You should have told us."

"I only found out yesterday. Besides, you two are just starting your lives together. I didn't want to burden you with my problem. But I see that I was wrong not to tell you. I really do."

"You should come stay with us," Gary said. "You don't want to go back to that dreary house."

David had a sudden vision of the woman in the blue dress from his dream. Was it a dream? Was she really there somehow? The memory made him feel safe, and he wanted to be back in his own house.

"No, I'll be fine. You have packing to do and I have a trip to plan. I'm going to embrace life for whatever time I have left."

They all just stared at him skeptically.

"No, really, I *am*." He turned to his father. "Do you want to see my new house? You can't be going back to Wisconsin today. You can spend the night."

"That would be great, son."

The four of them talked some more and even managed to have some laughs while they waited for the hospital bureaucracy. After a couple of hours, an orderly appeared at the door with a wheelchair and a nurse trailed behind with a stack of paperwork.

The orderly ordered him into the wheelchair. "Hospital policy," he said.

David's dad walked alongside them as David was wheeled to the lobby.

They passed an agitated old man in a hospital gown, wandering the halls and mumbling to himself. He stopped and looked at David as he was wheeled past.

"You can't beat death!" he yelled as he made eye contact with David.

"Don't I know it!" David yelled back.

A nurse came into the hall and gently took the old man by the arm. "There you are. Let's get you back to your room."

The old man shook off the nurse and shouted at David as he and his wheelchair rounded the corner. "God has a book of names and you're not in it!"

They heard the nurse calling for security and the old man went silent.

"What a horrible thing to say," his dad said.

David almost pointed out his dad had said similar things to him in the past, but decided to keep his mouth shut.

* * *

Gary and Shannon drove them back to David's house. Gary shut the car off and David could tell he wasn't sure whether he should come in.

"It's okay, Gary," he said. "I'm not going to try it again, I promise."

"Not on my watch," his dad piped up, and David smiled. He wasn't used to this kind of attention.

David was surprised at how much pride he felt showing his father around the house. Occasionally it would hit him that he wouldn't be around to really fix it up the way it deserved, but

he was able to push the dark thoughts away and focus on the work he'd already accomplished and the plans he'd made.

"The next big projects are the roof and the furnace," he said. "I figured the roof was more important."

"Makes sense," his dad said, nodding. "It's relatively mild here, at least compared to Wisconsin. You can always use the fireplaces for heat if you have to."

But there's no point in even doing the roof now, David thought. *I might as well use that money for travel.* He managed to not say that out loud. His father had gone into a monologue about all the major snowstorms to hit Wisconsin in the past fifty years.

"Remember when you were fifteen, and we were snowed in for three days?" David did, as it was a horrible three days where he and his father fought the whole time. He kept himself from mentioning that part, though.

When David was little, his dad had been a fun-loving guy, popular with everyone in their small Wisconsin town. He was an electrical engineer who worked for the railroad and had been happy with his job. But after the deaths of his wife and daughter, he became withdrawn. His only form of entertainment was listening to AM radio shows about UFOs, the paranormal, and other conspiracies.

Eventually, his dad joined the Temple of the End Times and his renewed faith helped him move on.

The church had a spiritualism-based doctrine, so they believed in talking to the dead and helping troubled spirits move to the afterlife. Other than that, they were indistinguishable from other fire-and-brimstone evangelical Christian sects.

He had thrown himself completely into his new church community; most of his money went into the church coffers, and he devoted all his free time to working on the church building and volunteering in any other way he could.

When David was in college, his father married Vivian. The match was made by the church. It all seemed medieval to David, but he attended their wedding and it seemed like all the other ordinary weddings he had been to. Vivian, at least, appeared to be happy and marrying his father of her own free will.

At the reception in the church basement, his dad tried to convert David and bring him into the congregation.

When David told him, politely but firmly, that he was not a believer, his father said, “You’re already dead then. I can’t help you if you don’t open your eyes, if you choose to be ignorant.”

The funny thing was, that’s what David thought when his dad wouldn’t get the COVID vaccine, even after losing his wife to the disease.

If anything, his mom’s and Jenny’s deaths had made David more of a nonbeliever. How could a god let something like that happen? The world seemed more believable as a series of random events. There didn’t seem to be a plan in the works, and that gave David a sense of comfort. If there were a god, he would have to take everything personally. But while he was comfortable with his beliefs, they strained his relationship with his father even more.

But now, talking with his dad was easier than David would have imagined it would be. He enjoyed catching up on their lives and they both did their best not to talk about religion or politics.

They ordered a pizza, and while they waited, David showed his dad the photo album of his sister and mother.

“Oh, I haven’t seen these pictures in years,” his dad said, happily flipping the pages. “These are great.”

“I’m glad you wanted to see it. I wasn’t sure if you would.”

“I suppose there was a time it was all too painful,” his dad said. “But I know I’ll see them again one day, and these pictures only bring back happy memories.” He ran his hand

over a Polaroid of David's sister playing basketball. "I remember this game. She sank the winning shot with seconds to go."

"Oh, there's a picture on the last page that doesn't have a place listed on it," David said.

His dad turned to the last page and examined it.

"Oh, yes, this was taken in Ashland. Your grandmother's birthday party, I think."

"Who's the woman standing behind us?" David asked. "I thought maybe Edna."

His father looked at the photo more closely.

"I don't see anyone behind us," he said, handing David the album.

David looked at the photo, and the blurry image of the woman was gone.

"I could have sworn there was a person standing behind us last I looked at it. Maybe the tumor is making me see things."

His dad frowned and said, "I'm sure it was just a trick of the light. These old photos are so blurry, anyway."

David got his dad settled in the guest room and turned in himself.

It was hard to absorb everything that had happened to him in the last day or so. He looked down at his bandaged wrists. A slightly deeper cut and he wouldn't be here now. Any hope for recovery, no matter how slim, would have been gone.

He climbed into bed and sank into the pleasure of its softness. He slipped his legs between the cool, crisp sheets, doing his best to appreciate the little things now.

He pulled out his iPad and started the app that monitored his front doorbell camera.

It was a windy summer night and David watched a crumpled newspaper page sail across his porch and out into the street.

The camera's view was suddenly taken up by a blurry face, startling David so much he dropped his pad. He quickly retrieved it to see the face pulling back, so that it was in focus now.

"Hello?" she said. She took a few steps back so David could see her fully now. It was a little girl wearing flowered pajamas. She couldn't have been more than five or six years old. She was clutching a tattered teddy bear. One of its legs was missing and one of the button eyes was hanging by a thread.

David pressed the button on the app that let him speak through the doorbell.

"Hello," David said. "Are you lost?"

"No," she said. "But you are."

A figure came into view behind her. It was a tall man. He appeared to be injured, like he had been in a car crash. Even with his face hidden partially in the shadows and distorted by the fish-eye lens of the camera, David knew the guy needed an ambulance. His face appeared to be bashed in, his eye popped out of its socket. David assumed the man and girl were together, a father and daughter in search of help.

Then the little girl turned and saw him. She clutched her teddy bear to her chest and screamed, "The bad man! Don't let him in!"

Springing out of bed, David grabbed his cell phone off the bedside table and ran into the hall and down the stairs to the front door. Not even stopping to look through the glass, he flipped the lock and flung the door open.

There was no one there. He ran down the porch steps and out into the street, looking up and down it for any signs of the girl or the man. There was no one on the street or sidewalk. *Did the man drag her into a car and speed away?* he thought. *No, I would have heard the car.*

He looked down at his phone, thinking he should call the police, but the buzzing in his ears gave him pause. He brought up the app and played back the footage from the last few

minutes. There was no one there. Just David's voice saying, "Hello, are you lost?"

There was no little girl, no man with a mangled face. It had all been in his head.

David went back to bed, too exhausted to think of what his last few months of sanity would look like, and fell into a deep sleep. Despite all he had been through over the last few days, he had happy dreams. He and the little girl were sitting at a child's table having a tea party where David was the guest of honor. David felt safe and grateful in the dream as they drank their imaginary tea.

* * *

David was in the kitchen the next morning fixing breakfast when his father came down.

"You okay, Dad?" he asked as he cracked the last of his eggs into a bowl and started whisking. "You look troubled. Did you sleep well?"

"Something is not right in this house," he said. He sat down at the kitchen table and poured himself some coffee.

"I know, roof, furnace...."

"No, nothing physical," he said. "I had troubled dreams all night. I felt a malevolent presence."

"Well, someone was killed in this house, so it might be a ghost," David said, pouring the scrambled eggs into a pan. He was joking, of course, but his father didn't take it that way.

"We should pray, send that troubled spirit on its way," he said.

David agreed.

And so, after breakfast, his father went into various rooms of the house and prayed. David followed along dutifully and bowed his head at the appropriate times, wondering if this would be the moment when he finally felt the Holy Spirit. It wasn't.

After praying throughout the house, his father looked defeated. “I still feel it. He won’t move on. But at least he knows this is a Christian house now.”

His dad left him with a Bible and a silver cross for protection and went off to visit church members in the area, after which he would catch a plane back to Wisconsin. He’d offered to stay longer, but David was worried that with too much time together, they might return to their old fights. David told his dad that he needed to get back to work and make plans for how he was going to spend his final months. He promised he’d come out to Wisconsin soon.

His father hugged him for a long time, then his cab pulled up. He left, wiping tears from his eyes.

After cleaning up the kitchen, David thumbed through the Bible his father had left him, then waved it in the air and said, doing his best southern preacher voice, “Ghost, you are not welcome here! Be gone with you!”

The lights in the entire house flickered and went out.

“And stop messing with the circuit breaker!”

For a moment there, he almost believed in ghosts.

Chapter Three

A Life Renewed

David gazed down at the travel brochures strewn across his dining room table.

He hadn't known there were still travel agencies in the internet age, but there were and they were very happy to help him plan a trip of a lifetime.

How far could I go in three months? he wondered. New Zealand was doable, as was an extensive tour of Europe. He could put everything on his credit cards and be dead before he would have to pay them off.

His phone rang, and he glanced at the screen: Dr. Anderson. He answered the call, his heart rate quickening; what if he had less time than he thought?

“Good news, David. A spot has opened up in a medical trial for a new tumor removal technique. They're looking for invasive tumors like yours.”

Now his heart was really pounding. After a moment, he managed to ask, “Will it help?”

“Judging from past cases, it could at the very least buy you some more time. They've had a cancellation and I can get you in on Saturday.”

David wondered if ‘cancellation’ meant a patient had died, but he pushed that thought away. “Good, because if you can get me another three months, I can make it all the way around the world.”

As David ended the call, a loud buzzing began in his ears. *The bees in my head are back again*, he thought. He grabbed his migraine pills off the counter, popped one in his mouth, and went to the fridge to get a beer to wash it down with.

The light inside the refrigerator flickered, grew bright, then popped off. The overhead kitchen lights dimmed, then grew brighter again. He was glad the electrician was coming in the morning to upgrade the electrical box; he had thought about canceling the appointment since the house would someone else's problem in six months, but had ultimately decided to go ahead with the upgrade. With his luck, the house would burn down and who wants to go out that way?

He twisted off the bottle cap and took a big swig of beer, then swung the fridge door shut, already reaching his arm out to toss the beer cap in the trash.

A man was standing by the sink.

David froze like a rabbit in front of a barking dog. It was the man he'd seen on his doorbell camera.

Now, under the bright kitchen lights, David could see the man's face was smashed in, his nose unrecognizable, his teeth mostly missing from his evil grin. His left eye was gone and his right one was barely hanging on by a twisted vein. The man tried to speak but only a garbled noise came out as three of his teeth fell out of his mouth and hit the floor with an audible *click, click, click*.

David shut his eyes hard. He knew this had to be some sort of hallucination. No one in that condition would just be standing in his kitchen, smiling at him. The doctor had said that he might see things not really there, but David thought he would have months before that happened.

He slowly opened his eyes, then slammed them shut again when he saw the man was still there.

“Fuck!”

The fear reached his heart, pumping ice-cold blood through his body.

“Go away! You're not real!”

“Out!” a female voice shouted from another corner of the room.

The buzzing in his ears stopped. He took a deep breath, opened his eyes again, and the vision was gone. The voice had to have been another hallucination, and the vision of the woman in the bathroom must have been too. He had chalked up seeing the little girl and injured man on his doorbell cam to a nightmare. But now that nightmare had crossed over into his waking life.

Dad put that ghost idea in my head, he thought. But why am I imagining the smashed-in face on the ghost? Something symbolic about my relationship with Dad?

He looked at the pill bottle on the counter. He wondered if the pill had caused the hallucination or had stopped it. This was the second time a buzzing in his ears brought on a vision instead of a migraine. He took another swig of beer and held on to the hope that Dr. Anderson had given him; if nothing else, maybe the experimental procedure would stop the hallucinations.

* * *

The next morning, Dr. Anderson met David at the radiotherapy treatment clinic and went over the procedure with him.

“A tiny needle drills a hole in your skull,” Dr. Anderson explained. He pointed to a spot on a model of a head that he was showing David. “Very tiny, ten times smaller than a sewing needle. Then a syringe injects microscopic metal particles into the tumor. After that, a transmitter will send radio waves through your brain. The metal particles will heat up from the oscillation of the radio waves and cook the tumor from the inside, effectively killing it. Then rounds of chemotherapy will attack the remaining cancer cells.”

“Sounds fun,” David said, forcing a smile while his hands clutched the arms of his chair in a death grip. His words didn’t fool the doctor.

“I know it sounds alarming. But it’s safer than surgery and less invasive than other laser treatments. They don’t even have to shave your head. Although you may or may not lose your

hair in the chemo treatments. The brain itself doesn't feel pain, so there is only a local anesthetic. I'll check in and see how you're doing this afternoon, after your recovery, which I'm told will only be a few hours."

David followed a technician in a lab coat into an antiseptic white room. It was the whitest room he had ever seen. It hurt his eyes just being in there, and he feared it would bring on a migraine, but when he lay down on the table, the overhead equipment provided shade.

The tech strapped him down and gave him an injection of mild sedative. Clamps on both sides of the table restrained his head. The inability to move his head even a fraction of an inch made him feel claustrophobic, and he did the best he could to tamp down a panic attack. When was that sedative supposed to kick in?

The technician saw his fear and said, "Take deep breaths and try to relax."

"Yeah, sure thing," David muttered.

Another technician was calibrating equipment over his head. A large red LED readout displayed four digits that were incrementing as David watched. The numbers stopped on 2030, much to the consternation of the tech. He called someone else over and they fiddled with it until it read 0000. "Just gets stuck sometimes," one tech said to the other. This was not a comforting explanation for David.

Despite what the doctor had said about them not shaving his head, they did shave off a patch the size of a quarter and swabbed it with antiseptic, then gave him a shot of anesthetic into his scalp.

David could hear, but not see, a drill being revved up behind him. It made a high-pitched whining sound as it drilled into his skull, which thankfully he did not feel.

The drill and the hypodermic were on a robotic arm, so it was all automated, though that did not make David feel confident.

As a computer programmer, he was well aware of bugs in the code, and this robot was messing around in his brain.

But then the sedative they had given him kicked in and he no longer worried about anything.

“Okay, we have injected the metal solution,” the technician said behind him as she pulled away the robotic arm and moved another robotic arm in place. It held what looked like a dinner plate.

“This is the radio transmitter,” she said. “You won’t feel it, but the tumor sure will.”

The other tech came into David’s field of vision. “I’ll be asking you questions to monitor brain function as we go. The whole process takes less than two minutes.”

“Transmitter activated,” the first tech, out of view, said.

There was no noise, and he felt nothing. David mused it might be a scam, like crystals or homeopathy.

“How are we doing, David?”

“Just fine. I’m picking up a smooth jazz station. Kenny G., I think.”

The tech laughed. “Well, it will only last another ninety seconds. What day of the week is it?”

“Saturday,” David said.

“Can you count from one to five for me?”

“One, two, three,” David counted.

Then the world was shut off: light, sound, sensation, all gone.

A series of horrific images flickered before his eyes, eyes he could not shut. They went by so fast he could only grab an image here and there, but they were disturbing: people burning in hell, crows picking out the eyes of people in an open field. He saw the rotting body of his cat on the porch of his house, full of flies and maggots. It suddenly came back to life and hissed at him.

The horrific images came with terrible sounds: screaming, the sound of angry bees, a child yelling, “Don’t let the bad man in,” an angry male voice yelling at him, “You took everything from me! For what?”

Then, the most disturbing of all, a replay of himself in the bathtub with his wrists slit. He looked dead, pale, and drained of blood. Like the cat, his eyes sprang open as if he knew David was seeing him. “It’s only a matter of time, David,” said the ghastly vision of his dead self.

David suddenly found himself back in the world and could hear his own voice screaming. He was clawing at the headgear. “Get me out of this thing! Get me out!”

“David! David!” the technician was saying as calmly as he could. “It’s okay, you’re fine. Are you in pain?”

David stopped his screaming and a wave of relief came over him and mixed with the sedative. “No. No, I just saw and heard things. Horrible images and sounds.”

“That’s a new one,” the tech, out of view, said.

The tech in front of him was quickly removing his head harness.

“Sorry, that’s really never happened before. How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Five.”

“What color is my smock?”

“Blue.”

He spent the day in the hospital. They ran tests to evaluate if the procedure had damaged important areas of the brain. They asked him about his memories, colors, smells. Asked him to solve puzzles and tested his motor skills.

Dr. Anderson checked in on him and decided it was best to keep him overnight for observation. In the morning, he felt fine. More than fine, in fact. The pressure that had been there

for over a year was gone. He'd had a good night's sleep, the first in a long time, and felt refreshed and invigorated.

When he was released from care, Gus drove him home.

"How was it?"

"Horrible," he said. "But I feel great now."

"Maybe they got it," Gus said.

David didn't dare say it out loud, but deep down, he knew he was going to be okay.

"I'm not going to die today," he said, remembering what he had heard from the lady of the light in the delirium of his blood loss. "We'll worry about tomorrow, tomorrow."

* * *

David spent less than a week recuperating. He felt great and wanted to go out and have some fun, which surprised him. Going out had long been an obligation, something to get out of if he could.

Gary and Shannon were back in town and when David told them he had signed up for an open-mic comedy night, they enthusiastically agreed to join him there.

As they walked to the venue, Shannon said, "I'm really looking forward to this, David. I had no idea you were funny."

"I might not be," David said. "I guess we'll see."

"I won't laugh if you aren't funny," Shannon said. "There are some things a girl can't fake." She flashed Gary a mischievous smile.

"Funny," he said. "Maybe you should sign up for a slot too." He turned to David. "This has been on your bucket list for a while, then?"

"Not really, but it's always scared me and I want to start doing things that scare me."

They took their seats with their watered-down, two-drink-minimum cocktails and waited for David's turn.

A lot of amateurs went up who weren't so funny, along with a few professionals trying out new material who were.

Shannon jabbed Gary in the ribs. "You should go up and do that bloody nose trick, it's pretty funny."

"Let the amateurs shine. It's my night off. Plus, I don't have any blood with me."

"I'll get you some. There's a guy across the way who keeps ogling the waitress. I'll take it from him," she said.

They waited as a juggler came and went with booing from the crowd. Four more hopeful comedians came up, each doing five minutes before the MC cut off their mics, and it was finally David's turn.

"How are we all feeling tonight?" David asked as he adjusted the mic stand and it gave a loud feedback buzz. His heart jumped for a moment, thinking another vision was being triggered. But, by the looks of irritation from people in the audience, it was clear they were hearing it too. David stepped back a bit, and the feedback stopped.

"Me, I'm feeling great. I have cancer. Brain cancer, to be specific." The crowd shifted uneasily, not sure whether to laugh or not.

"Cancer really is just mutated cells. And I'm wondering why there isn't any good cancer. You know, like the kind that gives you superpowers."

He launched into both sides of an imagined conversation.

"I have cancer, Steve."

"Aw, that's terrible, man. I hope you beat it."

"No, it's the good kind. I can read minds and shoot lasers from my eyes. I'm joining the X-Men. And I know about you and my girlfriend, Steve. *Zappppp!*"

The crowd chuckled, and he continued.

"No, it's not the good kind. It's the kind where I only have six months to live, and they won't be a good six months,

judging by *all* the six months I've had so far.”

The crowd laughed.

“It's going to be a lot of binge-watching shows with short seasons while binge-eating Oreos. As you can tell by the clothes I'm wearing, I have no incentive to do laundry. I've let it pile up for six months before. I can do it one more time.”

He told some more amusing anecdotes, some that got laughs and some that got groans, but it was a pretty good set for an amateur. The MC even let it go on a little longer than the five minutes usually allotted to open-mic participants.

Finally, he wrapped it up with, “Well, our host obviously doesn't want to be the one who pulls the plug on a cancer patient, so I'll spare him the trouble. Thank you very much. I won't be here all week.”

He walked back to his table as the crowd applauded. He figured it must have gone okay since people made eye contact with him as he passed. Some even gave him a thumbs-up, and one guy stood, put a hand on his shoulder and said, “My brother had brain cancer. I really hope you beat it, man.”

David thanked him and moved on.

“That was great,” Gary said, patting him on the back as he sat down.

“Yeah, I would never have the nerve to go up there,” Shannon said. She was distracted by something across the room. “David, isn't that your dad?”

“What? Oh wow, it is.” He turned to Gary. “You didn't tell him I was performing, did you?”

“Yeah, when you said you were going up, I thought he'd want to see your debut.”

“Why did you do that?” David said, irritated. “And shouldn't he be back in Wisconsin?”

“Sorry. He called me to check up on you. I thought you would want him to see you are doing well and getting out.”

“Lucky you didn’t have a whole set on masturbation like the last guy,” Shannon said.

His dad was doing his best to stay in the shadows by the door.

David waved until his father was forced to acknowledge him and come over.

“I thought you had gone home,” David said, getting him a chair from an empty table.

“I had more people to see from my church. They needed help putting in a PA system, so I rebooked and stayed another week. I’m flying out tomorrow.”

Without telling your only son, who’s dying, David thought, but didn’t say out loud. Why kill the mood?

“What did you think of David’s set?” Shannon asked as he sat.

“Oh, I’m not one for this comedy stuff. It all seems pretty silly to me with all that’s wrong in the world,” he said. “But it was pretty funny, right?”

Gary and Shannon agreed it was.

The MC came to the stage and said there would be a break before the next act, because whatever it was required the stage to be covered in plastic. Gary perked up, then saw the upcoming performer setting up on stage.

“Ugh, I’ve seen this guy before. He’s a hack. I think that’s our cue to go,” he said. “I’ll drop you two off at David’s.”

“Oh, I’m staying with some church members. They’re closer to the airport and I have an early flight. I’ll get a cab.”

“Are you sure?” David asked. “I can put you in a cab from my house tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to impose again....” He paused and then came clean. “Honestly, I can’t spend another night in that house. It has a bad effect on me.”

“Uh, okay,” David said.

“I would feel better if you didn’t stay there either,” his dad added. “I mean until I can get some more people over there to pray away that evil presence.”

“Oh, do you have a *ghost*, David?” Shannon asked, genuinely excited.

“Apparently. Well, Dad, I’ve done fine in there for all these weeks, so I’m staying.”

“Putting in the PA system wasn’t my only reason for staying an extra week,” he confessed. “I’ve consulted with Reverend Pendergast, a bishop who’s knowledgeable about these matters. We did some research on the man who built the house. He died in the house, hanged himself in the basement.”

“Did you know you had a roommate, David?” Shannon asked.

“I was told by the real estate agent he was a wealthy bookstore owner,” David said. “The agent didn’t mention anything about suicide.” Images of his own attempt filled his brain, and he did his best to push them out. All he managed to do was imagine the owner swinging from a beam in the basement by his neck.

“And he was no ordinary bookseller,” his dad said. “He sold books of the occult and was charged with selling pornography.”

“A horny roommate,” Shannon added. David shot her a look. He wasn’t comfortable hearing the word ‘horny’ in such close proximity to his father.

“Fine. If you want to send an exorcist or two by, I wouldn’t mind giving the place a good cleansing.”

This seemed to make his dad happy. He gave David a hug and left to find the Uber David had ordered for him.

While they waited to settle their tab, Gary said, “That was interesting. I always remember your dad believing odd things,

but this is pretty weird. So ghosts gel with his flavor of Christianity?”

“The founders of his sect bounced off of Spiritualism a hundred years ago. There wasn’t enough Jesus for them in the New England Spiritualist movement, so they moved to Wisconsin. When my dad stayed over, he tried to pray a ghost away for me, but I guess it was above his skill set. Now I’m going to have to have his fellow TOETs in my house.”

“TOETs?” Gary asked.

“Temple of End Times. That’s the church he’s in now. Ghosts, Jesus, and salvation, serving all of your apocalyptic needs.”

“Write that down for your next set,” Gary said. “There’s a good seven minutes of comedy there.”

“It’s lucky you moved into a haunted house,” Shannon said. “It gives you two something to bond over.”

“You joke, but it sort of does,” David said. “He made an effort to reconnect, and the least I can do is humor him for now. Very weird, though, that he’s been here a week and didn’t tell me.”

The waitress stopped by and they paid their bill, got up, and headed for the exit, Gary keeping his face pointed toward the back of the room so the next performer wouldn’t spot him. David looked toward the stage and waved. Gary glared at him. “What are you doing?” he whispered.

“Relax, he’s not even looking.”

“Everyone’s a comedian,” Gary grumbled.

“We should so have a séance in your house,” Shannon said. “Or at least try a Ouija board and find out what the ghost wants.”

“I’m humoring my dad, not you,” he said. “There will be no paranormal mumbo jumbo in my house.”

“We’ll see.” She smiled and winked at him. She took out her phone and brought the screen up to her face. “How do you spell Ouija?”

* * *

Over the next few weeks, David’s hope for extending his life paid off beyond his wildest dreams. He was having frequent follow-up appointments, and almost immediately the MRI scans showed an improvement. When David arrived for the fourth office visit, Dr. Anderson was going over his scan with the radiologist.

“It’s remarkable,” Dr. Anderson said. “It’s like the tumor was never there.”

“So I’m cured?” David asked, bewildered.

“It appears so,” the radiologist said. “I can’t even see any tendrils from the tumor. Just a small void where the tumor was.” He then explained that brain cells don’t regrow, but the brain can do a good job of rerouting signals.

“We’ll do some more blood work and one more scan to be sure,” Dr. Anderson said. “But this is a very good diagnosis. Almost miraculous, really.”

“And no chemo?” David asked.

“No chemo,” the doctor said. “No need! Your blood tests show zero roaming cancer cells.”

On the way home on the bus, David sat in a daze.

It’s like the tumor was never there.

No chemo.

He was going to live.

Great, just as I had a pretty solid cancer comedy set going, he thought, and laughed out loud. Then a wave of relief came over him so strongly that tears poured down his face.

An old lady sitting across from David smiled and said, “Happy and sad tears are all part of God’s plan.”

“These are happy tears,” David said, as more flowed down his cheeks. He wiped them away with shaky hands.

The bus stopped, and the old lady stood to leave. She bent down close to David. “Enjoy the good tears, for there are most definitely dark times ahead.”

Geez, lady, let me enjoy the bus ride home, he thought. “And a fine day to you too,” he said.

“Fitz is here,” she said, showing a grin of poorly fitted dentures and receding gums.

She turned and shuffled down the aisle behind a woman and her toddler, and all three of them got off the bus.

David stared after her, baffled. Had he misheard her? Did she say, “Fitz is here,” or “My stop’s here”?

Was she another hallucination? Was Fitz some metaphor his brain was conjuring up to represent death?

Whatever. He wasn’t about to let his subconscious ruin his day like it always did. He pushed the odd encounter aside in his mind and focused on his future.

I’m going to live, he thought. *I guess this means I’m stuck with the house. That stupid, run-down, wonderful house.*

* * *

With his near-death experience behind him, and all his life in front of him, David tackled the house with a new gusto.

It seemed to resist all attempts to drag it into the modern world. The latest trendy colors just looked wrong on the wall. Brightly colored carpets refused to coordinate with the dark wooden floors. Modern lightbulbs flickered and burned out quickly. He finally gave up and found some old incandescent bulbs at a garage sale, and they stayed lit.

To find decor for the house, David found himself antiquing, which he thought would never be his thing. He bought a Persian rug, and various knickknacks he thought would look good scattered around the house.

He painted, decorated, and repaired the house back to a reasonable facsimile of its former glory.

He also stopped kicking the cat out and gave in to the inevitable. The cat was now his roommate. Just like Gary had said he would be.

David bought a litter box and cat food. He even brought the cat to the vet for a checkup and all its shots. He drew the line at naming it and just called it 'The Cat'.

The house felt like a real home now, yet odd things continued to happen. Loud scratching noises from the basement that stopped when he opened the basement door; a wailing sound from the walls on windy nights and clocks that set themselves to eight thirty.

On his first day back to work after his medical leave, David woke up looking forward to the next step back to normalcy. He filled the cat's bowl and said, "You behave yourself while I'm at work." The cat just looked at him with an expression that said, "*Oh, are you still here?*"

David whistled as he showered, and the bathroom was pleasantly steamy as he toweled himself off. When he opened the medicine cabinet to retrieve his shaving cream and razor, a warm gust of air blew over him, so strong that it blew the cabinet door shut again.

There were letters on the steam-fogged glass, as if drawn by someone's finger. He blinked a few times to refocus his eyes, but the letters were clearly there. The words:

Fitz

And below it,

Kang

David looked all around the bathroom. He remembered the writing in the soap trail the first time he was in the house, and the "Fitz and Kang" written in dust on the bedroom mirror. It was the same names he'd seen then.

He chalked it up to dirty mirrors or a prank by Gary. He'd mentioned the writing on the mirror to Gary and Shannon, and Gary was never one to let the opportunity for a gag go to waste. He could have traced the words on the glass with a soapy finger so they'd reappear when the mirror was fogged. *Nice try, Gary, but hardly scary.*

He wiped the words off the mirror with a quick swipe of his hand, ready to get back to his morning routine, but before he could squirt shaving cream into his hand the writing came back.

But not exactly. This time it was four lines:

K

Fitz

A

Kang

He wasn't sure how Gary would pull something like that off, but David had to admit it was a creepy effect. He grabbed a washcloth and gave the glass a good scrubbing, then quickly shaved and went on with his day.

He dressed, grabbed his backpack (the official briefcase of computer programmers everywhere), and headed off to the bus stop. One of the great things about his house was that it was so near the route to work. The stop was just down on the next corner.

As he waited for the bus, he looked around at his neighborhood. It was run-down, yes, but there were signs of houses being renovated, just like his. He smiled, thinking, *I'm part of this neighborhood. This is my home.*

A young man was sitting on the park bench across the street, going through his book bag. Like David, he stood out as a white person in this primarily Black neighborhood. *A student on his way to school*, David thought, and gave him a wave. David really didn't know why he did it. Perhaps he just felt

like making a neighborly gesture. The teen looked up from his bag and actually waved back.

A fancy BMW full of more white kids pulled up to the corner and waved the other kid over. He leaned down to the passenger side window, and after a brief conversation they made a quick exchange. It was then David realized he was witnessing a drug deal.

All his good feelings about his neighborhood started to fade.

David went back to looking down the street for his bus. A homeless man in tattered clothes was sitting up against a light post. With his face in his hands, he started to rock back and forth and moan.

David tried to ignore him.

The man started to chant between moans, “Two, zero, three, zero. Two, zero, three, zero,” over and over again.

I was just congratulating myself on being part of this neighborhood, David thought. *Neighbors help each other.*

He walked over and asked the man, “Are you all right?”

The bus was approaching. *Great, if this guy really needs help,* David thought, *I’m going to miss my bus.*

The man stopped chanting, looked up at David, and screamed, “Help me! Why won’t you help me?”

“Should I call 911?”

The man leaped to his feet and grabbed David’s sleeve. “Help me! You’re the only one who can!”

David struggled to break away from the man as the bus pulled up.

The door swung open and the bus driver called out, “Let the man go, John!”

The man did and David got on the bus as fast as he could, stumbling up the steps.

The driver slammed the door shut on John as David scanned his bus pass. “Did he hurt you?” he asked.

“No, just freaked me out a little. He seemed to be in pain. I was just trying to help.”

“He’s mostly harmless,” the driver said. “But I don’t let him ride this bus anymore. He gets too agitated when he’s drunk.”

David went to find a seat as the bus pulled away. Through the window, he saw the homeless man gazing after him. It looked like he was crying.

* * *

David stepped into the office to applause from his coworkers. They slapped him on the back and congratulated him for kicking cancer’s ass and told him the place was falling apart without him.

Once the congratulations were over, David quickly segued into his routine at the computer screen. It was hard to get back into the rhythm of work after nine weeks away. Despite the horror of his last few weeks, at least it hadn’t been boring.

His mind returned to the words on his mirror. Maybe Gary didn’t plant them there. Maybe it was a former resident who traced it and it just took a sufficient head of steam in the bathroom to make them appear.

‘K. Fitz’ and ‘A. Kang’. *Names perhaps, he thought. People that lived in the house before the Mullins family, maybe?*

He stopped his work and did a quick Google search. ‘K. Fitz’ brought up some social media accounts, but no one from his area.

‘Kang’ was a Chinese surname and somewhat common in the San Francisco area. There were a few social media pages for ‘A. Kangs’ but again nothing with an obvious connection to his house or neighborhood. The Urban Dictionary said ‘kang’ was slang for stolen computer code, which was new to David. He had never heard of it in all his years of programming.

“This is stupid,” he muttered. Some long-ago kid had probably kept tracing the names of his favorite cartoon characters or athletes on the mirrors and the soapy patterns were particularly stubborn, that’s all. He closed his browser, happy to go back to the familiar drudgery of coding.

* * *

Later that morning, David heard his coworkers talking about a group lunch. He couldn’t face a trip to Applebee’s after a morning of talking about himself, so he slipped out of the office unnoticed.

He was walking toward his favorite sandwich place when he saw her. An attractive blonde in a blue dress sitting at an outdoor cafe table. She was working on her laptop.

She looked so familiar, but he realized he would have remembered meeting such a beautiful woman before. Still, his brain was yelling at him to go talk to her. In the past, there was no way he would have had the nerve, but the taste of death can make the fear of being rejected seem like nothing.

David stepped over the flimsy knee-high fence that kept the foot traffic to the right side of the sidewalk and approached her.

“Excuse me, have we met before?”

She looked up from her computer screen and squinted at him. This crinkled her nose and made her look even cuter. She looked him over with no recognition.

“Seriously, that’s the best line you have?”

But where he recognized her from had come flooding back and it just flowed out of his mouth unfiltered. “Now I remember. I saw you in a dream. And in this dream, you saved my life.”

“Really? That doesn’t sound like something I would do. How did I save you?”

“You gave me something to live for.” David smiled.

“Okay, that’s a better line.” She continued to squint at him, now with some glimmer of recognition. “You do look familiar somehow.”

“I’m David.”

“Cassandra,” she said. “My friends call me Cassy.”

“Nice to meet you, Cassy. But I didn’t mean to disturb your work. I’ll leave you alone.”

“It’s not work.”

“No?”

“I’m just telling people on the internet they’re stupid. I can do that later.” She slid a chair closer to him. “Care to join me?”

“Telling people on the internet they’re stupid, or for lunch?”

“Let’s start with lunch and see how it goes.”

They ordered food and stayed talking for over two hours.

He told her he was a computer programmer at Elysium Tech, and she said she was in public relations. She had only moved to the Bay Area from New York two years ago.

“I have a big-time client and my agency paid to move me here. I like the lack of snow, but still miss New York.”

She had bought an apartment and was having it remodeled and that opened the door for David to talk about his house and it possibly being haunted. “Strange noises from the basement might just be the house settling,” he said. “But my dad and my friend Shannon are convinced I have a sad ghost moping around.”

“Prices are crazy in this town,” she said. “I’m paying two hundred grand for my one-bedroom apartment, plus the association fees. I would put up with a ghost or two for a whole house.”

David completely forgot about going back to the office until it was almost two o’clock.

They exchanged numbers, and he rushed back to work in an excellent mood. *That tumor might have been the best thing that ever happened to me. From now on it is carpe diem all the way.*

Chapter Four

A Trip Down the Rabbit Hole

David snuggled deeply into his feather bed. He'd kept the mattress that came with the house because it was so damn comfortable. It took a lot of vacuuming and a steam-cleaning, but there were no more clouds of dust when he lay down on it.

He wondered how long the bed had been in the house. Since it was built, perhaps? Had dozens of people slept in it? How many children were conceived in it? How many people had died in it?

It didn't bother him to think he might be sleeping in a bed someone had died in; in fact, he assumed he was. Most people die in bed, after all. And having been so close to death himself made him more aware of life and how short it is.

In bed is the best way to go, he thought. It was a vessel to carry you off to oblivion in comfort. Sleep is great because you aren't actually dead, but you're also not awake; it's a win-win situation.

David rolled over and looked at his alarm clock, which was blinking 8:30. He knew that wasn't right. He had watched the ten o'clock news before going to bed. David unplugged the clock and set an alarm on his phone.

It was windy out, as it often was in the Bay Area, and the house creaked and groaned. The wind whistled through the attic with its usual whine and this serenaded him to sleep in the cloud of feathers beneath him.

A loud banging noise from downstairs startled David awake. He sat up and listened. At first he thought it had just been a dream, but then he heard another one. *That damn cat is up to something*, he thought. It was always pushing things off shelves or chasing shadows and crashing into the furniture.

Thump! Thump!

It became steadier and more rhythmic.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

David got out of bed and retrieved a softball bat from his closet.

He dialed a *nine* then a *one* on his phone with his finger poised to strike the last *one* to summon help if needed. He opened the bedroom door and started down the hallway toward the stairs.

He flipped the switch at the top of the stairs, which lit a lamp on a small table at the foot of the stairs.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

He rounded the first landing, which gave him a good view of the downstairs hallway and front door, but saw nothing.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

He gripped his baseball bat tightly in his right hand and pressed the final *one* on his phone with his left, because it was clear this noise was not being caused by the cat.

Three more steps down gave him a line of sight into the living room, where he froze. A man was sitting on the floor up against the sofa. He was rolling forward and banging his head on the coffee table.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

“911, what is the nature of your emergency?” a voice on the phone said.

David took one step back up the stairs to be out of the man’s field of vision. “I have an intruder at 2030 Hill Street,” he said in a hushed tone.

“Officers are on their way,” the voice said. “Do not hang up the phone. Stay on the line.”

David gathered up the courage to take four steps down and shout at the man, “Get out of here! The police are on their

way!”

As he got closer, he recognized the man’s dirty red jacket. It was the homeless guy from the bus stop; he must have followed David home. The man was probably harmless and just in some sort of mental distress.

David slipped his phone into his pajama pocket and gripped the bat with both hands. He didn’t want to hurt the man, but was ready to bash him if he got violent.

He continued down and stepped off the stairs.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

“Stop that! I said get out!” The man stopped his head banging and slowly looked up at David. His face was badly burned, the skin peeling away. His eyes were bloodshot and he grimaced in pain. He extended a hand out toward David. “Help me!” he pleaded.

David backed away quickly. He hit the hall table, knocking over the lamp and plunging the room into total darkness. He scrambled to find the stairs as he heard the man getting up and coming toward him.

“Help me! Why won’t you help me?”

“Stay back!” David yelled into the darkness. “I will hit you if I have to!” He swung the bat wildly around, only striking air balls.

David tripped over the fallen table and fell to the floor, but he had found the lamp. His hands felt along the floor and found the plug. Then he put his hand on the wall, searching for the socket to plug it into.

He could hear the man breathing in the darkness, coming toward him. David dropped the plug and put both hands back on the bat. “I said, stay back!”

Then a flashlight’s beam came through the front door and illuminated the room enough for him to see the man was gone.

The police knocked on the door, and David rushed over to open it. The door was chained. It took a moment of fumbling for David to open it and let them in.

“You reported an intruder,” the cop said, stepping inside with his partner.

“Yes, he’s still in the house, I think,” David said.

“We’ll take a look,” the other officer said. “Is he armed?”

“I don’t think so,” David said. “He’s injured. He has burns on his face and hands.”

“Stay here,” one of them ordered.

They searched the house from the basement to the attic and came back to the living room.

“The back door is locked from the inside,” the officer said. “Same with all the windows.”

“Are you sure someone was here?” his partner asked.

“Yes, he’s a homeless man I’ve seen around here. Tall guy in a dirty red down winter jacket.”

“Sounds like John Bird,” one said to the other. “A vagrant we’ve had trouble with before. He was squatting in the abandoned house next door.”

“Probably got confused and entered the wrong house.”

“But how did he get in?” David asked. “The doors were all locked from the inside. You said so yourself.”

“Maybe he guessed your code. You didn’t use the house address or 1234, did you?”

“No. That would be too obvious.”

The other cop said, “Maybe the coal chute in the basement. I would lock the door in the kitchen and maybe get a padlock on that coal chute or have it welded shut.”

“If he comes back, give us a call,” the other cop said. “We’ll check to see if he’s in the abandoned house next door and if he needs medical attention.”

When they left, David dug through the junk drawer in the kitchen and retrieved his gym locker padlock.

He flicked the light switch at the top of the stairs. A bulb hanging from a wire at the bottom of the stairs flickered on. He made his way down the creaking wooden stairs and thought, *This is the point in the horror movie where one of the steps breaks and the light burns out.* He stopped for a moment and, when neither of those things happened, he continued on.

He passed the furnace and found the coal chute. The door was slightly ajar. He pulled it open and saw it led into the backyard. He quickly shut it and fastened the padlock through its hasp.

“Is this how he got into the house?” he asked out loud to the cat, who was twisting around his legs. “Is this how *you* get in here?”

The cat meowed at him.

“Do you think this house is haunted, Cat?”

With that, the lightbulb over the stairs exploded, plunging them into darkness.

Terrified, David froze in place, then felt ridiculous for being afraid of the dark. This house had electrical problems, after all, and lightbulbs were always exploding.

Then he heard the scratching sound.

“Cat?” he called out into the darkness. But it couldn’t be, because the cat was still snuggling around his ankle.

The scratching sounded like it was all around him. The noise was like a burrowing animal trying to claw its way out of the hard-packed dirt floor.

David pulled his cell phone from his pajama pocket and turned its screen on for a flashlight. It gave him enough light to see the stairs, which went out of view as something – someone – stepped between David and the stairs.

Before David could focus, a hand swatted the phone out of his grasp and it crashed to the floor, its light snuffed out.

The cat snarled and hissed at the intruder. David tried to scream, but only a gasp of air came out. He dropped to his knees and felt around on the ground for the phone.

“Not all things stay buried, David,” the thing in the dark said in a husky whisper. The voice was garbled and phlegmy, like it was coming through a mouthful of marbles.

“Stay back, I have a gun,” David bluffed.

The door upstairs was yanked open and light from the kitchen poured down the stairs. The figure was gone.

“David, you down there?” Gus called down.

David and the cat ran up the stairs and into the lighted kitchen.

“I saw the police were here. The front door was wide open,” Gus said.

David explained the events of the night over beers in the kitchen.

“I caught that homeless guy sleeping in my garage once,” Gus said. “You think it was him in the basement?”

“No, this guy is taller,” David said. “And he knew my name. I didn’t get a good look at his face or clothes. It was too dark. But I think this wasn’t the homeless guy I saw upstairs.”

“Sounds like you might have a ghost or two in this house,” Gus speculated. David was about to laugh, but one look at Gus’s face told him the older man was serious.

“You believe in ghosts?” David asked.

“I grew up in an old sharecropper’s shack in Alabama and it had a ghost or two,” Gus said, then took a swig of beer.

“My dad agrees with you. If any house could be haunted, it would be this one.” David looked at his kitchen clock on the stove, which had stopped at 8:30.

“I have a colleague at the university who’s a bona fide ghost hunter,” Gus said. “Want me to see if he would investigate the house?”

“Well, maybe if I have another sighting.” He didn’t tell Gus he thought maybe his ghosts were a hangover from his brain tumor.

Gus thought a moment, then added, “You think the man in the basement might be looking for drugs? If he’s a user and got them here before, he might think that dealer who owned the house is still living here.”

“Sounds plausible,” David speculated. “But how did he get out of the house? He didn’t get past you, and he didn’t go out of the coal chute. I locked it.”

They looked at each other, eyes wide, having the same thought at the same time. *He could still be in the house.*

Gus went home and got his gun. David armed himself with his trusty softball bat, and together they searched the house again.

The padlock was off the coal chute, but now that he thought about it more carefully, David couldn’t remember if he had locked it when he put it on the latch, or even if he had dropped it when he was frightened by the man. But he put it back on and made sure it was securely locked.

David saw Gus out the front door. The cat was on the back of the sofa cleaning itself and David made a mental note to get a throw to keep its hair off the sofa.

He returned to the kitchen to find the cat now on the counter cleaning itself.

“Are there *two* of you?” He returned to the living room and saw the twin cat now sleeping on the back of the sofa.

He returned to the kitchen. “Listen, this isn’t a cat sanctuary,” he said. The cat was no longer there. *I’m cracking up*, he thought.

He checked all the locks and windows and returned to his bed, to a restless sleep and troubled dreams, with his softball bat next to him.

After an hour of this, he went downstairs and made a cup of herbal tea, which he infused with some weed from the plant Shannon had given him.

He sat in his big comfy chair by the fireplace in the living room.

As he finished his tea, the cat jumped up onto his lap, something it had never done before. The cat purred loudly as he petted it, and David fell asleep in the chair. A deep, relaxing sleep.

He dreamed he was in Wonderland with Alice – the Disney animated version. The Cheshire Cat offered him two button mushrooms, one red and one blue.

Alice was next to him with her golden hair and blue dress, looking very much like Cassy if she were drawn by Walt Disney. She said to him, “Feed your head.”

David awoke with a start and checked his watch for the time. It said 8:30, but his phone said it was 7:00 a.m. He headed back upstairs to get ready for work.

* * *

David sat bleary-eyed at his desk in his Elysium Tech office. His workstation was in the middle of a row of identical cubicles, with programmers to the left, right, and behind him. Today, he’d gotten in early and found himself alone in the row.

While he was on sick leave, the company won a contract from General Motors to work on their self-driving car software. In his absence, his coworkers had snatched up all the interesting parts of the project. He was stuck with optimizing code, which was just cleaning up unused snippets, deleting comments, and other housekeeping. It was all work that was normally reserved for new hires, and normally it would frustrate him to be saddled with the menial work, but today it was okay with him since he could put his brain on autopilot.

David was exhausted from dealing with the home intrusion the night before. He had thought about calling in sick, but the truth was he wanted to be away from the house for a while. He placed his cell phone on his desk and kept an eye on his front porch with his doorbell camera app. It would alert him if the homeless guy or the basement man returned. David had changed the code on his door lock, just in case that's how the guys got in.

He brought up his current coding project. As he stared at the glowing screen, he felt a deep sense of remorse. He had drifted into computer programming in high school. Sure, he was good at it, but he didn't remember choosing it. It was the first class he got an A in, and that was all it took to put him on that course.

He really enjoyed working on the stage crew for high school productions and had once considered making that his career. Somehow, it was too close to the electrical work his dad was doing and David had pushed that idea out of his head. Now he wondered if he could have been working on Broadway instead of sitting here in front of a screen all day.

The fluorescent light right over his desk flickered. It did that from time to time, but today the fluctuation seemed brighter and more frequent. It was more than he could take after his harrowing night. The last thing he needed was for it to trigger a migraine.

He climbed onto his desk, opened the hinged cover and tapped on the bulb; it stopped flickering. As soon as he jumped down and settled back in his chair, it started up again.

He just wasn't in the mood to fight with a lightbulb, so once again he climbed up and opened the cover, this time intending to take the bulb completely out. But as he twisted the bulb, it stopped flickering and grew brighter – so bright he couldn't look directly at it. It became too hot for his fingers, and he let go, flipped the light cover closed, and returned to his seat.

The light cover swung open on its own, creaking as it swung on its hinge. David shaded his eyes from its abnormally bright

glow. Then, with a loud pop, it exploded, raining dust and glass onto David's head.

"Whoa, are you okay, man?" David stood and looked around. Kurt, another programmer, had popped his head up from a cubicle a couple of rows behind him and was staring alternately at the shattered light fixture and at David. He'd pulled a pair of headphones off his ears and David could faintly hear something with a heavy bass line coming out of them.

"I think so," he said, shaking the glass out of his hair and brushing what he could off his shoulders. *Good thing I was covering my eyes*, he thought.

"You should report that," Kurt said, still staring at the fixture.

"Right, good idea." He gave Kurt a talk-to-you-later wave and went to the bathroom to see if he was cut.

The bathroom too was lit by harsh fluorescent light, somehow hot and cold at the same time. A large mirror over the double sinks just enhanced the brightness. He picked a few remaining bits of glass from his hair and took off his shirt and shook it over the basin to make sure no more shards were clinging to it. He bent down over the sink to splash some cold water on his face.

He turned off the tap and waved his hand under the automatic towel dispenser. His eyes returned to the mirror as he patted his face dry with the rough brown paper towel.

A woman was standing behind him. He jumped and his heart raced with embarrassment. Had he wandered into the women's bathroom? But there were urinals behind her, so she was the one who was in the wrong place.

The woman was someone David didn't recognize, but she was wearing corporate casual and seemed to belong to an office.

"Uh, looks like you're in the wrong bathroom," he said, in a voice he hoped sounded more helpful than accusatory. He

grabbed his shirt and quickly shoved his arms through the sleeves.

The woman looked confused, maybe drunk.

“How can this be happening?” she asked, looking around.

“Doors are next to each other, happens all the time,” David said, buttoning his shirt.

“It can’t be real, don’t you see?” She walked toward David, becoming more agitated. “None of this is real! None of it!”

David stepped back, but his retreat stopped when he bumped into the sink. “Are you all right?”

Her eyes were wide and frantic. “Open your eyes, David. How could it be real?”

“Do I know you?”

The woman let out a scream and David watched in horror as her face and skin liquified. A torrent of flesh and blood flowed down her body, over her sensible shoes, and into the drain on the floor. The sickening smell of burning hair and flesh filled his nostrils.

David tried to scream, but the air felt as though it was being sucked out of his lungs and he just stood there wheezing and frozen in fear. All he could do was close his eyes against the onslaught of what he was seeing.

The lights stopped buzzing, and David opened his eyes. The woman was gone. There was no sign of the river of gore that had poured off of her. There was no putrid smell.

Great, now I can smell hallucinations, he thought. He remembered hearing that people often smelled burned toast when having a stroke and that sent him into even more of a panic.

David finished buttoning his shirt and rushed out of the bathroom. Everything in him told him to run home, but the thought of the empty house made him return to his seat. By

now, the row was filling up with people and he very much wanted to be around them.

He sat for a moment at his computer and tried to make sense of what he had just seen. *Is the tumor back? First the guy in my kitchen and now this.* Was the missing part of his brain somehow affecting his hearing and vision?

His cube mate, Brian, was making small talk with him, but David was incapable of listening.

“Are you feeling okay, Dave?” Brian asked. Brian always called him Dave even after being corrected many times that he was a David.

David smiled apologetically. “No, not really. Maybe I came back to work too soon,” he said. “I...I just need a minute.” He excused himself and decided to go to the roof for some air and sunlight.

He climbed the stairs and went out onto the rooftop patio. His coworker Ron was smoking a cigarette. “Ah, you busted me,” Ron said under the no-smoking sign.

“Could I bum one off you?” David asked.

Ron passed the pack and lighter to him. “I didn’t think you smoked.”

“Seems like a good time to start,” David said, lighting up and handing back the lighter and cigarettes.

“Yeah, careful with that,” Ron said. “I wish I’d never picked up the habit.”

Ron finished his smoke break and returned to the stairwell.

The cigarette gave David a coughing fit, and he decided it was not a good day to start smoking after all. He crushed it out in a planter.

David wished Ron had stayed longer, as he did not want to be alone. He noticed an older man looking over the wall of the roof and he went over to him.

“Hi,” David said. “Are you new here? I don’t think we’ve met.”

The man turned and looked at him. He smiled and said, “Hell is full.”

“What?”

The man then climbed up on the wall and simply stepped over the side.

“Jesus!” David yelled.

Out of instinct, he ran toward the stairwell with thoughts of getting help, but stopped himself.

Was it a hallucination?

David listened for screaming or car honking from below; there was none. He was eighteen stories up. There was no help to get at this point for the poor man. He cautiously approached the four-foot wall, not wanting to get too close for fear of setting off his vertigo. David remembered almost falling into the Grand Canyon before his father had yanked him away from the edge.

He slowly peered over the ledge, both fearing a smashed body below or seeing nothing and confirming his insanity.

There was no body smashed on the pavement, no crowd of horrified onlookers, just a steady flow of foot traffic on the sidewalk and a gridlock of cars on the street.

With his head swimming with vertigo, he felt hands slam into his shoulder blades and pin him hard to the wall.

“Hey, stop it!” David yelled. He struggled against the attacker and tried to push himself away from the wall, but whoever was behind him was steady and immovable, trying to push him over the wall.

“Help! Help!” David screamed as he imagined himself hurtling down to the pavement below.

“No!” a woman yelled. He felt the hands retreat. There was a sudden, loud rush of air behind him, and the pushing force let

go of its unnatural grip on him.

David collapsed hard on his butt to the roof floor and turned to see the woman from the bathroom, unmelted but with the same confused look on her face. The man that had gone over the edge was standing there too.

“Open your eyes, David, before it’s too late,” the man said. “Next time, we might not be here to save you.”

The two of them walked away and disappeared behind a large air-conditioning unit.

The stairwell door swung open and two women with coffee cups came out onto the patio, chatting away about an important meeting.

They glanced at David on the ground but continued with their conversation as he stood up and dusted himself off. He checked behind the air conditioner, but no one was there.

David returned to his desk and pretended to work. As upset as he was from the feeling he might be losing his sanity, part of him was intrigued. What was happening to him was a mystery. His analytical mind wanted answers; answers could lead to a cure.

Once he’d collected himself, he found an empty conference room and shut the door. He called his neurologist and explained what had been happening. The doctor told him to come in right away for some more tests.

David told his boss he didn’t feel well and left for the doctor’s office. He felt better, and proud of himself for facing whatever this was. *If I am crazy, it’s something I can deal with.*

* * *

“Breathe in,” Dr. Anderson said, a stethoscope cold against David’s back. David breathed in. “And out.” David wasn’t sure what his lungs had to do with his condition, but figured this was standard stuff like taking blood pressure.

As the neurologist continued the exam, David told him what he had been experiencing. When he finished, the doctor

paused for a long time before saying, “Besides that, are you feeling okay?”

“Aside from the panic attacks and not sleeping, sure,” David said.

“Well, we know that tumors can cause hallucinations,” Dr. Anderson said. “And what you’re experiencing is most likely just a residual effect after its removal. If they continue, we can schedule another scan, just to rule out anything else going on in your brain.”

He prescribed David Xanax to deal with his anxiety and sent him on his way.

Once home, despite the calming effect of the drugs, David found himself more agitated and fretful. He went on a deep dive on the internet of mental conditions that caused hallucinations, which did not help calm him down.

The list of vision-inducing conditions included: brain tumors – check.

Damage to brain tissue (lesions) – check. David figured those tiny shards of metal used to destroy the tumor from the inside still had to be in his brain, floating around.

Bipolar disorder – he’d never been diagnosed, but his Aunt Edna had it, so check.

Post-traumatic stress disorder – well, he had been through some stress lately, check.

Schizophrenia – another condition that ran in his family. He remembered his dad telling him of a cousin who suffered from it. Check.

Alzheimer’s, which his grandfather had – check.

Parkinson’s disease, which, as far as he knew, didn’t run in his family.

Migraines, which could cause visual auras – check.

Epilepsy, which he could rule out since he wasn’t having seizures.

Something called ‘Charles Bonnet syndrome’. This caused people with vision problems, like macular degeneration, to see things.

One of the more disturbing conditions was ‘Cotard’s syndrome’, aka ‘walking corpse syndrome’. People who suffer from that believe that parts of their body are missing, or that they are dying, dead, or don’t exist. They may hear voices telling them they’re dead and don’t exist. For some reason, this was the one that gave David the shivers. Maybe because there were times in his life he felt like a ghost, just walking through the world as an observer and not a participant.

‘Capgras syndrome’, was another strange one. With this disorder, people believe that a friend, spouse, parent, or pet has been replaced by an identical imposter.

None of these, with the exception of schizophrenia, could cause hallucinations to the extent he was experiencing. And schizophrenia usually showed up in men in their late teens or early twenties. It was rare for someone in their thirties to start showing symptoms.

Meds to combat hallucinations seemed few and far between. *Your doctor may prescribe pimavanserin (Nuplazid). This medicine treats hallucinations and delusions linked to psychosis that affect some people with Parkinson’s disease.*

The most common effective treatment seemed to be simple cognitive behavioral therapy, which focused on changes in thinking and behavior to manage symptoms.

David’s phone buzzed, and he picked it up. It was from an unknown number, so he didn’t answer it, thinking it was a sales call. The phone clicked ‘accept call’ seemingly by itself and he heard a female voice say, “We are watching you, David.” Then the phone went dead.

He took another Xanax, washed it down with a beer, and went to bed, where the exhaustion of the day finally caught up with him and he fell into a deep, troubled sleep.

He dreamed he was a ghost strolling down a crowded sidewalk, passing unnoticed through the living. As he passed through people, he picked up their joys and sorrows. He found himself laughing, then crying, then laughing again. *Each person is a world unto themselves*, he thought.

On the sidewalk ahead there was a dark, indistinguishable shape he wanted to avoid, but he could not. It sucked him in like a pool of tar, and he was wrapped in its pain and suffering.

David awoke with a start, gasping and sweating. The nightmare was already fading from his memory and it was nothing he wished to hold on to, so he let it slip away.

* * *

Since hallucinations were a bit out of his regular therapist's field, she referred him to a psychiatrist who specialized in brain disorders, Dr. Kendrick.

Dr. Kendrick looked over David's records on an iPad while he sat on her couch thumbing through a *National Geographic* from 1996.

She finally looked up from the screen. "I'm sorry for what you're going through, David," she said. "All this must be very disconcerting to you. How many visions did you see and can you describe them to me?"

"Let's see. I thought I saw a little girl and a man with a mangled face on my door camera, but I think that might have been a dream. There was the homeless guy who broke into my house, who was probably real, so don't count that one. I saw him earlier in the day at the bus stop, so he may have actually broken in, but we couldn't find any evidence to prove it. I saw the mangled-face man again in my kitchen and I think he knocked a cell phone out of my hand in my basement."

The doctor was quickly writing with a pen on her tablet. "Any others?" she asked without looking up.

"Then there was a woman in my office bathroom who melted before my eyes. At first, she seemed to be a real person. She was dressed like an office worker, but I didn't recognize her.

She was confused and agitated, which I chalked up to her going into the wrong bathroom. She talked to me.”

“What did she say?”

“She said, ‘How did this happen? This can’t be real,’ or something like that. Then her skin liquified, and she flowed into the drain on the bathroom floor. I assume that wasn’t real.” He forced a chuckle.

Dr. Kendrick looked up from her iPad. “That does sound terrifying.”

“After that I went up to the roof to get some fresh air, where I talked to an older man. I had never met him before, but it’s a big office building and we share the rooftop garden with other businesses. Anyway, as I was talking to him, he got on the ledge and jumped over the side. But I looked over the ledge and saw nothing on the sidewalk below, so I know that wasn’t real.”

“What did you talk about?”

“I introduced myself and he said, ‘Hell is full.’ So, my hallucinations aren’t really great conversationalists.”

Dr. Kendrick smiled politely and jotted something on her tablet.

“I saw him and the melting woman again standing behind me after I imagined someone trying to push me over the edge of the building. It was this vision that was the most disturbing. I really felt like I was going over the edge.”

She looked up from her notes with sympathetic eyes. “Is there anything you think might have set off the visions? What were you doing moments before you saw the melting woman, for example? What were you thinking about?”

He thought back. “Well, I was exhausted, for one thing. This was the day after the break-in. I was working on code for a new app. I guess I was thinking about how boring it all was. How I should have gone into a more interesting line of work. Do you think that had something to do with what I saw?”

“You said the visions looked like office workers. They might have represented work to you. The combination of a tired brain and work anxiety might be worth examining.”

“I never made the connection,” David said. “That makes sense, though.” He felt relief wash over him. If it was just stress, he could find a way to deal with it.

“You had the tumor for a long time,” she pointed out. “Did you have other episodes prior to buying the house? Other hallucinations?”

“No. Just the bad headaches. Could removing the tumor cause some sort of brain damage?”

“I suppose it could, but according to your neurologist nothing is showing up on your scans. I don’t want to rule out post-traumatic stress disorder. You had two big scares, with the tumor and the suicide attempt. I also think it’s interesting that the visions start with buying a house, which is one of life’s big stress points.”

“Meaning?”

“Our own subconscious has a way of haunting us sometimes.”

“So, am I crazy?”

“Everyone is a little crazy,” she said, smiling. “Nobody is perfectly rational a hundred per cent of the time. The mind is complex. The brain has a very powerful dream state. Ever notice no matter how strange the dream is, you never question it while you’re in the dream?”

“Yeah.”

“If that dream state is strong enough, it can be activated when we’re awake. The fact that you’re seeing visions of people that you see during the day, the homeless man, for example, tells me they’re coming from your own memory. Even if we just glimpse someone for a second during the day, they can show up as characters in our dreams later.”

“What do I do about it? It’s getting so I can’t tell fantasy from reality.” David fidgeted uneasily in his chair. “You don’t think it could be schizophrenia, do you? I looked up symptoms online, and it sounds like it could be. I know I’m a little old for it, but it’s not unheard of.”

“I wouldn’t jump to that conclusion,” she said. “According to the notes from Dr. Green, you don’t show other symptoms, like agitation, intrusive thoughts, or paranoia.”

She looked down at his records. “You’ve done very well on the cognitive tests, and all your brain scans look good. It’s possible the visions will fade as your brain reroutes its signals. Or, you might have to find a way to live with the visions, if they’re going to be long term.”

“You mean I might have to live with this for the rest of my life?”

“Maybe. But it doesn’t mean you can’t live a full and happy life. Others I treat are going through similar things. We have a support group that meets on Thursdays. I think it might help you to come and talk about it with others going through the same thing.”

David agreed to go.

“In the meantime, I think you should try to get some sleep. This kind of thing is usually made worse by exhaustion.”

“What if I have another episode?”

“I would try to find out what these visions want from you. Use the visions as a way to tap into your subconscious.”

“They seem so...angry. So real.”

“Next time, if there is a next time, listen to them. Remember, they’re just visions. They can’t hurt you.”

David remembered the invisible hands trying to push him off the roof, but then decided that could have just been a bad case of his vertigo, exacerbated by the nicotine from the cigarette.

“Look for signs that it could be a hallucination,” she said. “You said they often come with a buzzing in your ears. That they look different from real people. If you can learn to identify when you’re seeing something not there, you can take a moment to relax and let it pass.”

Even as he sat there listening to her, the visions were fading from his mind, like they were just a waking nightmare. He was feeling a bit silly that he somehow had let it take him over.

“I see your neurologist has prescribed you Xanax. Is that working for you?”

“I think so. Tamps down the panic attacks, I guess.”

“That’s fine, I think. I’ll prescribe you an Ambien so you can get some sleep tonight. But I would avoid alcohol, caffeine, or marijuana. We don’t want anything that will interfere with your sleep or have psychotropic properties. Don’t self-medicate.” David agreed.

“Now, there are some relaxation techniques I’d like to show you should you be confronted with a hallucination again.”

He left her office feeling better than he had in a long time.

As he waited for an Uber outside, a drunk homeless man wandered up to him and asked for some change.

David fished out a five from his wallet and handed it to him. “You are real, right?”

“Are any of us?” the man quipped as he stumbled his way down the sidewalk.

* * *

David walked out of his radiologist’s office into a warm, sunny spring day. The doctor, who had supervised his experimental therapy, was as amazed as David’s neurologist had been at the success of the treatment and wanted to take scans of David’s head for a paper he was writing. Since the treatment had saved his life, David was happy to help and spent the morning being examined and interviewed.

He had a lunch date with Cassy after the appointment. He decided to walk since they were meeting nearby, but he hadn't taken the vertical ascent into account. As much as David hated driving in San Francisco, he hated walking in the city more. He huffed his way to the top of a steep hill to meet Cassy in a botanical garden.

He made it to the bench where they had agreed to meet. He was glad to see she wasn't there yet so he could sit for a minute, catch his breath, and wipe the sweat from his forehead before she got there.

A buzzing in his ear momentarily put him on the alert for another hallucination, but then he realized there were bees buzzing around his head. The roses and other flowers were still in full bloom and their scent filled the air, attracting birds and insects.

David had been to this garden before. He and Anne had discovered it one Sunday morning after brunch at a nearby cafe.

He noticed a woman by a fountain who reminded him of Anne. It couldn't be her, of course, because she was living in New York now with her new husband. Her head was turned looking at the fountain, but from behind the woman looked just like her: the same height, and the same hair style and color. She was even wearing the same jeans and pink blouse he remembered from the day they had been here together.

The woman turned to look at him. It was Anne! But it couldn't be. He'd seen her Facebook post earlier that day; she was on a boat with her husband on Lake Placid.

David got up from his bench and walked toward the woman, who continued to stare at him.

The closer he got to her, the more he was sure it was her. "Anne?"

She smiled at him in recognition. "Hello, David."

"Why are you here?" He stopped just out of hugging range, not sure if they were hugging friends now.

“I’ve been looking for you,” she said.

“Oh, well, I’ve moved. I just bought a house.”

“Open your eyes, David,” she said. “You need to see us.”

He heard Cassy call his name and turned to look at her. She latched on to him, giving him a hug.

“Cassy, this is....” He turned back to the fountain and Anne was gone.

“What?”

He looked around, but there was no sign of Anne anywhere.

“Did you see me talking to a woman just now?” he asked.

“No, did I scare her away?”

“I guess so.”

“Good,” she said, taking his arm. “Let’s go, I’m starving.”

It turned out the lunch place Cassy had in mind was the same one Anne and he had eaten brunch at that day years ago. He kept expecting to see her there too, but did not.

He checked Facebook on his phone and there were more pictures of Anne and her husband on the boat, taken only minutes before.

The woman in the garden was another hallucination, he thought. It had been so real that he worried he could no longer tell what was real and what wasn’t.

“Are you okay?” Cassy asked. “You seem distracted.”

“Sorry, just thinking about the past. My old girlfriend, Anne, and I used to come here.”

He told her about her and how she had ditched him at their engagement party.

“And you’re still Facebook friends?” Cassy asked. “Don’t be a pushover, David, unfriend that bitch.”

David laughed and did just that.

Chapter Five

A Search for Answers

It was the first chilly day of fall and David spent a good hour getting a fire going in the living room fireplace. After nearly smoking himself out of the house, he found the flue lever and opened it, and a short time later, the fire was burning nicely.

There was a knock at his door. He peered through the lace curtain that hung over the door's glass panel and saw three people standing there, looking like something out of a horror movie about a Puritan family.

They were dressed in old-fashioned clothes one would see the Amish wear. The men wore black suits and white straw hats. The woman was in a black dress with a white bonnet. They were all clutching Bibles.

The shorter of the two men had a beard while the taller man was very thin, clean-shaven, and, by the look of his white clerical collar, the one in charge.

David had never heard of the Amish going door-to-door, but then he remembered his father was sending over some people from the California branch of his church to de-ghost the house. These people weren't dressed like the church members he had met in Wisconsin, so David wasn't totally sure they were his ghostbusters.

He opened the door.

"Is this a good time?" the taller man asked. "Your father sent us to cleanse your house."

"Uh, sure. As good a time as any," David said, opening the door wider and ushering them inside and into the living room.

"I am Pastor Pendergast," the tall man said. "This is Brother Dixon and Sister Abigail."

“Can I get you a drink, coffee, water?” David offered.

“Some water would be wonderful,” the pastor said. The others agreed, and David asked them to have a seat, then went off to the kitchen to fetch some.

When he returned with the glasses, the three of them were standing in a circle, already deep in prayer. Their eyes were closed, and they were holding their Bibles over their heads, mumbling something David could not hear clearly.

David quietly put the glasses down on the coffee table, trying his best not to break their concentration.

Pendergast stopped and his eyes sprang open. “It is here. It is malevolent.”

“I saw a ghost right where you’re standing,” David said. “It was a homeless man with a burned face.” David still wasn’t sure if that one was an actual ghost, but he wanted to give them something to work with after coming all this way.

“Yes. One was here, but he’s gone now. He isn’t the one you need to worry about,” Pendergast said.

“More than one, huh?” David said. An image of the mangled-face guy flashed before David’s eyes. He was hoping that wasn’t his ghost.

“So much sorrow,” Sister Abigail said.

“So much pain,” Brother Dixon said, his palm facing the kitchen. “In there, I think.”

“No, from below,” Pendergast said. “Do you have a cellar?”

“Yes, shall we go down there?” David asked.

“Just us,” Pendergast said. “It is very upset with you.”

“Good to know,” David said. He led them into the kitchen and unlocked the basement door for them.

They disappeared into its depths.

David listened at the top of the stairs and heard them praying in some language he didn’t recognize. Then in English,

Pendergast shouted, “Be gone in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!”

This all seemed silly to David, but it was important to his father and he wanted to keep an open mind.

“I said, be gone!” Pendergast shouted louder.

The lights below flickered. Then the kitchen lights flickered. A gust of warm, foul-smelling air blew up from the basement and passed over David, but that often happened when he opened the basement door.

The three exorcists marched back up the stairs, out of breath, their skin glistening with sweat.

Pendergast looked at David and asked in an accusatory tone, “What happened here? I have never felt such an evil presence before.”

“I don’t know. I mean, a drug dealer was killed in the house, and the original owner hanged himself in the basement. That’s all I know. But it’s an old house, so I suppose other things could have happened here over the years.”

“Why does it want to harm you specifically?” Pendergast asked, continuing his interrogation. “It knows you. What did you do that you aren’t telling me?”

David didn’t like the turn this had taken. “Listen, I was fine letting you in here because it’s what my dad wanted, but I don’t think I like your tone.”

Pendergast forced a smile. “I apologize if I have offended you. In any event, it is gone now. We banished it from this house. I don’t think it will be back as this home is now under the protection of the Lord until his return in the end times.”

David thought that was a pretty good warranty, since the plumber and exterminator would only guarantee their work for ninety days.

He wrote a check, a small donation to the church for their services, and walked them to the door.

“Please let my dad know you got rid of the spirit. I don’t want him to worry.”

“We will,” Pendergast said.

As they exited, Sister Abigail grabbed David’s arm and said, “If they come back, don’t listen to them, they lie. They appear as people you love to trick you into doing things.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Bad things! They came to me as my Norman.”

She let go and followed her congregation back to their white minivan, leaving him to wonder who her Norman was and what bad things he made her do.

David watched them drive off, then noticed one of them had left their Bible behind on his coffee table. He wasn’t sure if it was on purpose or not. Now he had two Bibles in the house, when he never even wanted one.

He walked around the house to see if anything felt different. It did somehow. He knew it was probably a placebo effect, like when you feel your car runs better after a car wash.

He went down into the basement. A gust of wind blew the door shut behind him, as it often did. “Not a ghost, just the wind,” he said out loud as he went down the wooden stairs.

He had to admit, the basement did feel quieter and emptier. Then he jumped as he felt something rubbing up against his ankle.

“Damn it, Cat! I almost stepped on you.” The cat looked up at him and purred.

“Is the ghost gone, Cat? Aren’t your kind sensitive to stuff like ghosts?”

He was bending down to pet it on the head when he heard what sounded like footsteps upstairs. The cat heard it too, because it looked up at the ceiling and hissed.

David followed the sound above. The steps sounded like they were in the dining room, and he heard them moving into the kitchen and toward the basement door.

David remembered the coal chute door. He went to the combination lock he had put on the latch and frantically dialed the code – 000, since he never had set it – and popped off the lock.

The knob on the cellar door began to rattle.

David flung open the chute door, and it clanged against the wall.

He climbed out of the cellar into the fresh air of the backyard. He ran to the picnic table and grabbed a board that had fallen off the table to use as a weapon. The cat was close behind, then sprinted out through a hole in the fence.

“Thanks for the support,” he muttered as he hid behind the walnut tree with his two-by-four.

Gus’s head peeked over the fence. “Are you okay, David?”

“I think someone’s in my house again.”

“I’ll get my gun,” Gus said.

The two of them cautiously entered the house through the back door and found it empty.

They once again searched all the rooms, made sure the doors and windows were locked. In the living room, David laughed as he noticed the Bible that had been on the coffee table was gone.

“They must have come back to get it,” he told Gus. “It was one of them up here.”

“Still pretty creepy they didn’t knock and were just wandering around your house,” Gus said.

David agreed and thanked Gus once again for his house-checking services.

David got a beer from the fridge and sat on his sofa. The fire was just embers now, but still giving off a pleasant heat.

The cat wandered back into the living room.

“How did you get in here? All the doors and windows are locked.”

The cat jumped up on the back of the sofa and settled down for a nap.

“Oh, right, I need to lock the coal chute door again.”

As David got up to do that, he noticed something in the fireplace, nestled in the last of the burning embers. He grabbed a poker and dug at the dark rectangular object. He flipped it over; it was the Bible that had been on his coffee table.

A chill came over him, one the heat of the fireplace could not quell.

Did the ghost do this on his way out as a last act of defiance? David thought. *Or is it still here?*

* * *

Cassy breezed into David’s house with a bottle of wine.

“Wow, I thought you were a nerd, but this is pretty classy,” she said, taking it all in. Then she noticed the *Star Wars* poster and PlayStation in the living room. “Ah, there it is.”

“I am what I am, baby,” he said. “Come out to the kitchen. I have to stir the sauce.”

“Should I open this?” she asked, holding up the bottle.

“There’s a corkscrew in that middle drawer, not sure where I put the wineglasses. Wait, do I have wineglasses?”

“You do,” she said, retrieving them from the cupboard. “Looks like souvenir glasses from Dick’s Halfway Inn.” She blew dust off of them and then decided rinsing them in the sink would be better.

“What’s cooking? Smells good,” she said.

“My grandmother’s recipe. Pay no attention to the Ragu jars in the recycling.”

Over dinner, David said, “There’s something I think I need to share with you. I mean, if this relationship is to continue. It is

a relationship, right?”

“I don’t do relationship talk until the tenth date,” she said.

“What’s the ninth?”

“A three-way with my friend Karen.”

“Something to look forward to,” he said. “Anyway, I told you I had a brain tumor.” He paused.

She swallowed her food and put her fork down. “Yes, and?”

“Well, what I didn’t tell you is ever since the operation, I’ve been having the occasional hallucination.”

“Anything good?” she joked, then saw by the look on his face he was serious. She took his hand. “Sorry, that’s nothing to joke about. It must be disturbing.”

“Yes. I mean, I can tell when it’s happening. I usually get a headache. There’s a buzzing in my ears and then I see people who aren’t there.”

He told her about each one. And that his psychiatrist was hopeful it was just temporary.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said, squeezing his hand. “If there’s anything I can do to help, please let me know. For example, I can tell you that guy in the corner isn’t really there.”

He glanced over quickly, then turned back to her, laughing. She winked and started eating again.

They finished dinner and cleaned up the dishes, teasing each other and singing along to the music from his stereo while they tidied up. David enjoyed playing house with Cassy. He could imagine a lifetime of dinners and household chores with her.

They went upstairs to the bedroom.

She had her clothes off and was under the sheets before he had even gotten his shoes off.

“Nice bed,” she said, bouncing slightly. “What kind of mattress is this? Bamboo?”

“Feather,” he said.

“Wow, I’ve heard of them, of course, but I’ve never been on one. I was on a waterbed once.”

He clumsily finished undressing in front of her and slid in beside her.

She pulled his left hand out from under the sheets and ran her fingers over the scars on the wrist. The right one hadn’t needed stitches and had healed over without a scar.

“Did it hurt?”

“Yeah, more than I thought it would.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to bring down the mood,” she said.

She kissed his scars, then worked her way up his arm to his mouth.

It had been over a year since he’d had sex and he felt fumbling and awkward until Cassy took charge, aggressively choreographing the moves and telling him what to do.

In the heat of passion, he felt connected to his own body and the living world. For a moment, while she was on top, he looked past her and saw a shadowy figure watching them.

Perverted ghost, he thought. He closed his eyes and refused to let the hallucination take over.

Afterward, they lay in bed, sweaty and spent, and he asked how it was.

“I’ll be honest with you,” she said. “I’d give it a six out of ten, but I can see with some further training we can easily get you up to an eight.”

“I’m available for practice every day after school,” he said.

They stayed up late and watched *Back to the Future* on David’s laptop in bed. He wanted to educate her on nerd culture.

“So what’d you think?” he asked.

“I liked it. It was funny. Although I think it’s odd that his siblings faded out of the picture one by one. The picture wouldn’t have existed at all in an alternate reality.”

“I always thought that was weird too.”

“And where did rich Marty go?”

“Rich Marty?”

“Yeah, when poor Marty returns to the future, he’s surprised to find his father is now wealthy and confident.”

“He changed the past when he helped his father stand up to Biff.”

“I get that part. But when Marty returns to find successful parents and Biff working for them, he’s surprised. He was surprised to see his pickup truck. But there had to be a Marty who got the truck for his birthday. A Marty who grew up with the successful parents. Where did he go? Does he just blink out of existence?”

“I hadn’t thought about any of that before,” David said. “I’ll admit the temporal mechanics are a little iffy. But yeah, I’ll go with blink out of existence. It’s too sad to think he was suddenly dumped into poor Marty’s life.”

“It was still fun,” she said.

“You’ve really never seen it before?”

“No. I’m not into sci-fi.”

“*Star Wars, Star Trek?*”

“No, and no. The only thing with a star in it I’ve seen is *Dancing with the Stars*. Sci-fi and fantasy stuff has never been my thing.”

She snuggled up to him. “I experimented with geekism in college,” she confessed. “I played Dungeons & Dragons for a while with this cute guy who was a drummer in a ska band. I was always the Dungeon Master. I liked controlling people’s lives and deciding who lived or died.”

“Thanks for telling me about the ska band,” he teased. “We all have skeletons in our closets.”

“I like horror movies. Surely those are nerd-adjacent?”

“I suppose so. I’m not a big fan.”

“Really? Have you seen *Halloween*?”

“No. I’m not into slasher movies.”

“*Lost Boys, Fright Night*?”

“No, and no.”

“*Jacob’s Ladder*?”

“Never heard of it.”

She sat up. “What the...? Oh, you have to see that one. It’s a mindfuck. Not gory. I’ll bring it for next time.”

“We could do a movie night at your place,” he suggested.

“No, then I’d have to clean my apartment, do laundry. It’s a whole day shot. Plus, I like your house.”

She put the laptop on the nightstand and said, “Want another go? Marty making out with his mother really turned me on.”

* * *

David had almost talked himself out of calling Gus’s paranormal investigator friend at Berkeley, but he kept thinking about the vision of the mangled-faced ghost in his kitchen and the smoldering Bible in the fireplace. That wasn’t a hallucination. He had the charred remains as proof. When he got through to the man, he found Gus had already told him he might call.

Lembeck asked for some background on the house.

“It’s an old house, built in 1900. At least two people died unnatural deaths in the house. The original owner killed himself. He was an occult bookseller, so maybe he was predisposed to hang around.” David laughed, embarrassed. “Sorry, that doesn’t make much sense.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Lembeck said. “A lot of folks in my line of work would probably want to do a little haunting when their time comes.”

“And the last owner was a drug dealer. He was shot in the house during a police raid. Mullins was his last name. I don’t know his first name.”

“What’s the address?”

“2030 Hill Street, Oakland.”

“I’ll do some research on the house,” Lembeck said. “Could you come in today, say after four o’clock?”

* * *

The sign in the hallway outside Lembeck’s office said, *Theology and Comparative Religion*. David was a bit disappointed. He was hoping Lembeck was a scientist of some sort and not in one of the philosophy disciplines. David didn’t want more religion; he wanted scientific proof.

“Ah, David, I presume. Welcome,” Lembeck said when David knocked on his door. The small office was strewn with papers, books on the paranormal, and blurry photographs that David took to be ghosts.

The professor appeared to be in his late fifties, and with his white goatee he fit David’s notion of what a Berkeley professor would look like. A light scent of pot filled the room, which was not uncommon on the Berkeley campus, but made David wonder if this hippie could do the job.

Lembeck hastily cleared a pile of papers from a chair. “Have a seat. From what you and Gus have told me, it seems like you might have bought a very haunted house.”

David told him about seeing his first potential ghost at the auction and the woman he saw during his suicide attempt.

“And just last week, I saw a ghost who claimed to be my ex-fiancée. She couldn’t be a ghost, could she? She’s still very much alive.”

“Ah, yes. They do that sometimes, appear to you as someone you know.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Often to gain your trust. To bond with you. Spirits very much want to be a part of the world again and any way they can get you to engage helps them do that.”

Then David went through the rest of the rogues’ gallery of ghosts, starting with the little girl on his doorbell camera, the man in his kitchen, the homeless man, and the office ghosts.

“Interesting,” Lembeck said. If he was shocked or judgmental about the incident he didn’t show it. “Now on to the paperwork.”

Lembeck had a form he filled out for each sighting, that included questions about any unusual sounds or smells that accompanied the appearance, how the encounter ended, and whether anybody was attacked or injured by the ghost. David explained about the buzzing in his ears and headaches that generally accompanied a sighting. By the time he finished listing them, his throat was dry, and he pulled a bottle of water from his backpack and took a swig.

“The spirit on your office roof, it tried to kill you?” Lembeck asked with concern in his voice.

“Maybe. I think it tried to push me off the roof. But the other two office ghosts stopped him. I didn’t see who attacked me, but I think it was the mangled-face ghost. He’s the only one who seems...threatening.” He felt ridiculous saying it, but it was true. He got a bad feeling when he saw that ghost, worse than any of the others.

“This is very troubling,” the professor said. “So, we have at least one malevolent ghost who wants you dead.”

“Or it’s all just paranoid delusion,” David said. “Because of my broken brain. Maybe I tried to throw myself off the building.” It was the first time David had said this theory out loud to anyone. He hadn’t even told his therapist about that fear yet.

“For the sake of argument, let’s assume they’re all ghosts at this point. Is there something you’re not telling me?” the professor asked. “Have you recently harmed anyone? Someone who died?”

David almost dropped his water bottle. “What? No, nothing like that. Why?”

“Spirits require a great deal of energy to touch things in the living world. Ghosts that can actually move objects come in two flavors. One is the poltergeist, which usually draws energy from an adolescent in the house. They’re mostly harmless.”

“And the other flavor?”

“A vengeful spirit.”

David’s fingers clenched, and he took a deep breath, willing himself to stay calm. “Well, if I did something to piss off this ghost, I don’t know what it was.”

“It is imperative you find out, David. If this ghost can touch you, your life is in grave danger. These kinds of ghosts get stronger over time as they soak up more energy from this world. This one can already show himself and physically touch you. That is extremely rare.”

“Lucky me,” David muttered.

“The ghost could be this Mullins fellow,” Lembeck said, making a note. “Even though you had nothing to do with him in life, he might resent you for living in his home.”

“Great. How am I supposed to fix that? You know, in the beginning I chalked it up to my brain tumor. Now I almost wish that’s what it was. But if anything, things have gotten worse since I was cured.”

“You’ve had trauma to the brain and a brush with death. Both these things can lift the veil between worlds. Being momentarily in the land of the dead can make you a lightning rod for the paranormal.”

“Is that why I see so many ghosts?” David asked. “Does this mean all those people died in my house?”

“No. Sometimes ghosts haunt a place they were happy in. They might have lived in the house at some point, then returned when they died. They might be drawn there by the presence of other ghosts.”

The professor fished out another questionnaire from his desk drawer.

“Just a few more questions. These are more general, nothing to do with any individual spirit sighting.” He paused, his pen poised over the clipboard. “Have the walls of your house dripped blood or has blood come out of the faucets?” He asked this in all seriousness.

“No, in fact, for a long time, water barely came out of the faucets.”

“Have you witnessed a massing of flies on the windows?”

“No. There have been the words ‘K. Fitz’ and ‘A. Kang’ written in steam on my bathroom mirror.”

“Oh, that’s fascinating. They’re trying to communicate,” the professor noted. “Have the other ghosts, the benevolent ones, tried talking to you, made any sounds? Have they tried to warn you?”

“The little girl I talked with through my doorbell camera told me not to let the bad man in. The one I saw when...when I cut my wrists said I ‘wasn’t going to die that day’. The ghost posing as my ex-fiancée said she missed me, which— Ha! Not a chance. I think a ghost called me on my cell phone, telling me they were watching me. That all sounds crazy, right? They can’t be haunting my phone.”

“Oh, the haunting of electronic devices is becoming very common. Ghosts are mostly electrical energy, so it’s the easiest way for them to communicate.”

“Well, they’re using up my minutes,” David joked. “Maybe we could just get them onto Twitter.”

“I’m concerned that you’re seeing ghosts outside the house. It may mean *you* are the one haunted and not the house.”

“Wait, what?” David asked, eyes wide. “They can do that?”

“There is a famous case of a woman haunted by an incubus that followed her from house to house her whole life.”

“Incubus?”

“Incubus and succubus. Male and female demons that have sex with you while you’re sleeping.”

“Why can’t I get a ghost like that?” David asked.

“Oh, you wouldn’t want that. They drain the life force out of you.”

“Always a catch.” David sighed. “Why are all these ghosts haunting me?”

“It could be they just attached themselves to you when you momentarily crossed over into their world.”

David then remembered the chorus of voices he heard when he was in a coma after he slit his wrists. *Had I crossed over?* he wondered. *Did I drag some back with me?*

Lembeck continued, “Have you experienced any missing time?”

“No.” He thought for a moment. “But I can’t keep clocks in the house set to the right time. Clocks with hands all go dead at eight thirty. Digital clocks blink eight thirty no matter how many times I reset them.”

“That’s twenty thirty military time,” Lembeck pointed out. “Reinforcing your address, perhaps? 2030 Hill Street?”

“I never made that connection,” David said. “So, what’s the next step? An exorcism or something? Because some religious people tried that and it didn’t work.”

“No. We’ll try the scientific approach. We’ll do more research on the house.” He checked his notes. “See if a K. Fitz or an A. Kang ever lived there. We’ll check to see if anyone else besides the original owner or this Mullins man died in the house.” He took out his cell phone and brought up a photo. “After we spoke this morning, I was able to track down a

picture of Mullins from the newspaper archives.” He handed him the phone. “Is this one of your ghosts?”

David studied the face for a moment. It looked like a driver’s license photo of a youngish man with dark hair and sideburns. “No, not one of mine.”

Lembeck swiped the screen and brought up an old sepia-tone photograph of a man with muttonchops and a thick mustache. “And this one? He was the original owner.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hard to tell when a guy has a mangled face, so maybe?”

“His name was Ambrose Spellman. He was quite the character,” Lembeck said. “He was a collector of satanic texts. Spent time in Paris as a pimp. He went on trial for taking pornographic pictures.”

“And hanged himself in my basement,” David said.

“Seems a likely candidate for your ghost too,” Lembeck said. “Listen, I would like to get my investigative team to check out the house. We would bring in sensing equipment, set up some cameras, things like that.”

David agreed, and they set a date for a week later. “Nothing sooner?” David asked, embarrassed by the fear he heard in his own voice.

“I’m sorry. It takes a while to assemble the team and equipment. In the meantime,” the professor said, “it’s probably best you aren’t alone in the house. The living, the skeptical, can keep them away.”

“I can probably get my friend Gary to spend the night,” David said. “He’s the most skeptical guy I know.”

“Good, good. And whatever you do, David, don’t let them into your mind. If you can, push them away. Shut them out. Don’t be their doorway into this world.”

* * *

David walked through the big double doors of the community center and made his way to a meeting room that smelled of sweat and burned coffee. Dr. Kendrick was already in her seat in the circle, as were four other patients.

“Group, this is David,” Dr. Kendrick said, as he took a seat in the circle.

“Welcome to Hallucinations Anonymous,” a frumpy, dark-haired man next to him said.

“The rules are simple. If you feel like talking, raise your hand,” Dr. Kendrick said to David. “If you don’t want to share and are just here to listen, that’s okay. Please try to be supportive and encouraging, and do not interrupt other group members when it’s their turn to speak.”

“I feel like you looked at me when you said that,” the frumpy man said. “Are you saying I’m not encouraging?”

“It wasn’t directed at you, Carl,” Dr. Kendrick said. “And I think you know that.”

In addition to Carl, there was a young woman in an army jacket, a teen boy, and an older woman, whose blazer and matching slacks made her look like she had just come from the office.

To David, both the young woman and the teen seemed like they were strung out on something. The woman was fidgeting and twisting her long brown hair repeatedly around her fingers.

The teen boy was pale and sweaty and almost too motionless. *Heroin junky*, David thought. *And the woman could be a meth-head. But who am I to judge?*

The businesswoman raised her hand.

Dr. Kendrick acknowledged her. “Yes, Margaret?”

“I saw him again today. The man that wasn’t there.”

“How do you know he wasn’t there?” Carl asked.

“That isn’t helpful, Carl,” Dr. Kendrick said. “And please raise your hand if you would like to speak.”

“Sorry.” He raised his hand. “I just meant how does she know he isn’t a real person following her? The government sends people to follow me all the time.”

“I know he wasn’t really there, Carl,” the woman said, jabbing a finger in his direction, “because he was wearing a suit of armor.”

“That’s good that you’re looking for signs that it’s a hallucination,” the doctor praised.

“He tried talking to me, but I told him to fuck off, pardon my French. He went away after that.”

“That’s also good,” the doctor said. “Have you heard any more voices telling you to hurt yourself?”

“Not since I’ve been taking my meds. But sometimes I forget.”

“Let’s not forget, since they seem to be helping you,” the doctor said. “Maybe set an alarm on your phone. Anyone else experience anything they would like to talk about?”

David sheepishly raised his hand.

“David, what would you like to share?”

He told the group of his most terrifying visions, the mangled-faced man and the melting woman. Then a floodgate of sharing poured out of him. He told them of his tumor and his suicide attempt, buying the house and all the hallucinations he had seen since then.

The group leaned in, captivated by his story, except the strung-out teen, who was still just staring off into space.

Carl raised his hand. “How do you know they aren’t real ghosts?”

“Because ghosts aren’t real,” David said. “Are they?” he asked with doubt in his voice.

“There’s a lot we don’t know about the afterlife,” Margaret said without raising her hand.

The strung-out kid finally chimed in. “So much is unseen,” he said.

“Well, I’m skeptical of their existence,” David said, not adding that he’d already had an exorcism and a meeting with a paranormal investigator. “And the hallucinations started after my brain was zapped, so that seems like the most likely explanation.”

“Maybe you’re dead,” Carl said.

“That isn’t helpful or supportive, Carl,” Dr. Kendrick said.

The young woman in the army jacket, who introduced herself as Doris, shared next. She had schizophrenia. “All my hallucinations are auditory. It must be extra scary for those of you seeing things.” She went on to talk about how medication had helped her get her life back, but she still had trouble maintaining relationships. Her mother thought she was faking her condition for attention, so that didn’t help. She was living in a group home and was holding down a job, which was encouraging to David. If she could maintain something of a normal life, so could he.

Everyone shared except the strung-out kid. They talked about their fears, coping strategies, and short-term goals.

David’s goal for that week was to get back into a routine. He needed to have some normalcy in his life.

As the meeting broke up, Dr. Kendrick smiled at him. “I’m glad you came, David.”

“So am I,” he said, and was surprised to find that he meant it. *Just hedging my bets*, he thought. *Professor Lembeck for if they’re really ghosts, group for if I’m just out of my mind.* “I think it’s helpful to talk about this with other people who are going through it.”

He said goodbye and went out front to wait for his ride share.

The strung-out kid was out front too, seemingly waiting for him.

“Hey, I’m Lenny,” he said, avoiding eye contact. “I see them too. The ghosts, I mean.”

David took a deep breath. *Great*, he thought. *Just what I need*. “Oh, you do?”

“They’re real, David. You shouldn’t be shutting them out.”

“I don’t think I have been,” David said. “I mean, I try to talk to them and ask what they want.”

“Ever try magic mushrooms?” Lenny asked. “They sure opened my mind.”

“No, I had some pot before I came over, but I draw the line at hallucinogens, and you probably should, too, considering we want to get rid of our hallucinations.”

“Who are you talking to, David?” Dr. Kendrick asked from behind him. He turned to look at her, then turned back to Lenny. Lenny was gone.

He turned back to face the doctor. “I was talking to Lenny.”

There was no recognition on her face.

“Lenny, from the group,” David said.

“There is no one named Lenny in the group,” she said gently.

David opened his mouth to protest, but stopped himself. “Damn it. So now ghosts are haunting me during therapy?”

“Hallucinations,” she corrected. “What did this one want?”

“He said the ghosts are real and to stop shutting them out. Wanted me to expand my mind with mushrooms.”

“I see.”

“So now what?”

“Well, don’t start taking psychoactive drugs. That would make things worse.” She put her hand on his shoulder. “You

are doing really well, David. With some more work, we can get your life closer to normal.”

Closer, he thought. But not all the way there.

* * *

David bustled around his kitchen, singing along to his favorite playlist of Seventies R & B while he prepared dinner. Cassy was coming over and would be spending the night. He was already in a good mood. He felt as though he was taking charge of his life. Reaching out for help for his condition, although hard, was just what he needed. The psychiatrist and support group would help him deal with the hallucinations if they were brain-related. The paranormal investigator was there if it turned out to be ghosts. Either way, it was a big step toward normal.

He was still open to the thought that it was all in his head, but he was warming up to the idea that the visions were supernatural. If they were hallucinations, there might not be anything he could do about it. But ghosts, well, ghosts could be dealt with. In the movies, ghosts moved on as soon as their unfinished business was done. Or they could be exorcised. Maybe his dad’s friends could give the house another spirit cleansing.

Cassy arrived with a bigger overnight bag than she had on her first sleepover. This had David wondering if someday he would make space in the closet for her. If, someday, she would be a permanent fixture in his life. He smiled as he poured wine and finished preparing their meal.

“Have the hallucinations stopped like your doctor said they would?” Cassy asked over dinner.

David considered telling her about Professor Lembeck and the possibility that his visions were ghost-related. But he had decided against it, as even explaining it would make him sound mentally unstable.

“Pretty much gone,” he said.

After dinner, they watched *Jacob’s Ladder*.

In the movie, a returning Vietnam vet was having hallucinations. Cassy had warned him about the plotline and said they could watch another movie.

“No, I’ll be okay,” David said.

Throughout the film, the vet, played by Tim Robbins, tried to figure out why he was seeing faceless vibrating figures, demons and the like everywhere he went. He theorized that he and his fellow soldiers were exposed to a toxin like Agent Orange and that the government was covering it up.

In the end, it turned out the vet was really dying and living a shadow life until he was ready to move on. In the final scene, the vet realizes his friend, Louis, is actually an angel ready to take him to heaven. Louis tells the dying man, “The only thing that burns in hell is the part of you that won’t let go of life: your memories, your attachments. They burn them all away. But they’re not punishing you,” he said. “They’re freeing your soul. So, if you’re frightened of dying and...you’re holding on, you’ll see devils tearing your life away. But if you’ve made your peace, then the devils are really angels, freeing you from the earth.”

David recalled Carl from group joking that maybe David was dead. It didn’t seem as funny now.

“Well, what did you think?” Cassy asked.

“Very mind-trippy,” he said, getting up quickly and bringing their wineglasses to the kitchen so she wouldn’t see how much the movie had shaken him.

They went to bed and tried to have sex, but David couldn’t work up an erection. He wasn’t sure if it was one of the side effects of the Xanax or the existential crisis he was trying to tamp down. What was the point of anything if it all ended anyway?

“I’m too tired. Can we try again in the morning?”

“Of course,” she said.

He turned off the bedside light, and they snuggled under the covers.

“You looked a bit freaked out at the end of the movie,” she said. “Are you sure it didn’t trigger something? The hallucinations, I mean.”

“Maybe. It was more about the ending, though. I guess thinking about dying digs up all the turmoil of my religious upbringing. Fire and brimstone are hard to get out of your head. Part of me thinks there is a god and I’m not following the life he picked out for me.”

“I was raised Catholic,” she said. “So, been there, done that. I figure if God has a plan for me, it’s up to him to clearly spell it out for me. What kind of a god isn’t a good communicator?”

“Most of them, if you’ve ever read any mythology,” he said.

He realized they had never talked about religion. He didn’t even know if she went to church or believed in God.

It was like she was reading his mind because she said, “No, I’m not religious anymore. I’m a full-on atheist.”

“Me too,” David confessed. “Still, sometimes I think I don’t believe in God as a way to rebel against my father, like maybe I never actually made the choice for myself.”

“You do call out ‘god’ a lot during sex,” she teased. She started kissing his ear.

“You made me a believer,” he said.

She slid her hand between his legs. “Oh, looks like part of you isn’t too tired after all.”

“Now that you mention it,” he said. He leaned in for a kiss.

She rolled over. “Sorry, now I’m too tired,” and with that, she was asleep in a few minutes.

David wished he could drift off that fast. He tossed and turned and finally found sleep.

The next morning, just as sunshine was filling the room, David awoke, moaning in ecstasy as he was coming out of an erotic dream.

He slowly came fully awake as he felt his penis sliding in and out of a warm mouth until he orgasmed.

He tilted his head up to see Cassy hidden under the blankets. She began crawling up his body toward his head.

“Well, that was a nice way to wake up, although in my dream, you were Princess Leia.”

He then heard plates being banged around in the dining room below and his joy turned to fear.

“Cassy?” He sat up, sliding back toward the headboard in a panic.

The blanket slipped off the figure, and to his relief, her tousled head emerged.

He ran his fingers through her hair. It came off in his hand in clumps and disappeared into wisps of dust.

He drew back even farther and looked at her in horror. She was pale and drawn, her eyes bloodshot. She grinned at him, showing a mouth of bleeding gums and missing teeth. She continued to crawl up his body, and as much as he wanted to jump out of bed and flee the room, he couldn't. His muscles, cramped with fear, held him firmly in place as this thing and its bloody mouth came closer.

“Go away,” he gasped as the apparition dug its sharp fingernails into his skin and leaned in toward his face.

This is only a hallucination, he thought. But then, how am I feeling it?

“I want you so bad,” the succubus Cassy whispered, as blood dripped from its mouth.

David's muscles finally responded, and he rolled out from under her and fell to the floor. He scrambled to his feet, bolted

into the hallway, and dashed down the stairs to the living room.

As he came around to the dining room, he saw plates set out and could hear Cassy humming a song in the kitchen. Confused, he looked back up the stairs, thinking maybe it *had* been a dream.

Cassy swung the door open and came out of the kitchen with a pan of scrambled eggs.

“So, we’re eating naked, are we?”

David sheepishly made his way back up the stairs for some clothes. He cautiously entered the bedroom. The succubus was gone.

Be careful what you wish for, he thought, remembering his conversation with Professor Lembeck. *Now I have one. If it isn’t draining my life force, it’s certainly draining what I have left of my sanity.*

* * *

“You have a cat,” Cassy said, finishing her last bite of egg at the kitchen table. “At least I hope that’s a cat snuggling my ankles.”

“It’s more of a roommate and we just tolerate each other,” David said. He stood and started collecting the breakfast dishes from the small table.

She reached under and scratched the cat’s head. “I had a cat as a little girl. My dad named him ‘Schrödinger’, which made him laugh, but I don’t know why.”

“Schrödinger’s Cat is a famous thought experiment in physics,” David said.

He stopped there.

She returned to her seated position, and sighed. “I know you want to explain it to me, so go ahead.”

“Okay, so, because we can’t measure both the speed and location of a subatomic particle, there is this weird theory that

the particle stays in a superimposed state of all possible locations until we look at it. Schrödinger thought this was stupid.”

“I like this guy already,” she said.

“In his famous thought experiment, he proposed hooking up a device that would release poison when and if a random subatomic particle hit it. If it was hit, the poison would be delivered to a cat in a sealed box. If the superimposed theory were true, the cat is simultaneously both dead and alive until we open the box. The cat would also be tangled up in the superimposed state of the particles, which is absurd and obviously not true.”

“Oh, so that’s where my dad got Schrödinger’s cat. Not sure why I never asked him. What’s this guy’s name?” She picked the cat up from under the table and it snuggled into her shoulder and purred.

“He won’t tell me.”

“Typical cat. Hey, what time is it?” she asked, pointing to the clock on the wall. “I know it isn’t eight thirty.”

“This house breaks clocks for some reason,” David said, taking out his phone. “Nine fifteen.”

“Ah, perfect timing to get me out of cleanup duty. I have to go. I have a meeting with a new client.” She poured the cat onto the floor and stood, grabbing David and giving him a good, long kiss. “That was a fun third date. Wait until you see what I do on the fourth. Stock up on Gatorade. You’ll need to stay hydrated.”

She left him whistling happily over the sink, washing dishes. He heard the cat hissing in the living room. *Now what?*

The cat was stalking something under the sofa. “Not another rat?” The cat didn’t respond, just kept staring.

David got down on the floor and looked under the sofa with him. “What is it?”

A mouse came barreling out past David's head, and the cat gave chase.

David was getting up when he noticed the furnace vent at the base of the wall. There was something inside that looked like a brown paper bag.

He went to the kitchen, returned with a screwdriver, and removed the four screws on the vent. He reached in and pulled out the paper sack. Something heavy was inside.

Knowing this house, it's probably a body part, he thought.

He opened the bag and peered inside. Money. A lot of it. He dumped the bag and four stacks of bills tumbled to the floor.

He fanned through them and estimated it was ten thousand dollars.

"And I thought this day couldn't get any better," he said, as he heard the mouse's death squeal from the kitchen.

David's mind flashed to his suicide attempt and it scared him how close he had come to death. If the paramedics had been a little slower, he would have never had his tumor cured, fixed up the house, met Cassy, or found this money. He forgot how luck can run both cold and hot.

He assumed the money was his now, but wanted to make sure so he took it to the police station and filled out a lost and found report.

The desk sergeant looked over the report and told him, "You can legally keep anything left behind by the previous owners thirty days after closing, so the money is yours, free and clear."

David couldn't keep from grinning. "I was hoping you'd say that. But I can't believe the previous owner left it behind."

The sergeant was still looking over the report. "You live at 2030 Hill Street?"

"Yeah."

“Well, then, I know the previous owner won’t be back. He was shot in a drug raid a couple of years back. A real big bust. We pulled hundreds of kilos of heroin out of the basement. This is probably his stash of drug money. Or part of it, anyway.” The sergeant pushed the bag across the counter to David.

“Yeah, I heard about that,” David said. “And this isn’t evidence?”

The desk sergeant shrugged. “Case is closed.”

David walked to the bank with a smile on his face and a brown paper bag full of free money hidden under his coat.

* * *

David spent the rest of the weekend on chores. When Monday morning came, he wanted to be ready to get back to as normal a routine as a person who suffers from hallucinations could have. His boss had been very accommodating, giving him so much time off to recover, and letting him set his own hours, or work from home, but it couldn’t last forever.

He woke up before his alarm, ready to start his workweek. Freshly showered and dressed, he went out to the porch to check the morning mail and returned inside.

As he was going through his mail, a clinking sound came faintly from the kitchen. It was the sound of a teaspoon stirring a cup. Not normally a scary sound, but when you live alone, it’s not something you want to hear. David had been in the kitchen earlier to eat breakfast and he was very much alone then.

The sound of a chair sliding on the kitchen floor and the rustling of a newspaper reinforced he was not alone now.

He set the mail down on the coffee table, grabbed a fireplace poker, and cautiously made his way to the kitchen.

“Cassy?” he called. He hadn’t given her a key or the combination to the lock. “Gus?”

He pushed open the swinging door. A man in a suit sat at his kitchen table. He was having a cup of tea and a slice of toast, his face obscured by a newspaper. The newspaper was blank except for the numbers 2030 written in big black letters, spanning the back spread of the paper.

“Who are you?” David yelled with the poker raised above his head for defense.

Startled, the man yanked his newspaper down. He had no eyes, just black sockets where they should be.

David’s first instinct was to turn and run, but the psychiatrist had told him to confront the hallucinations and see what they wanted, so he stood his ground.

The ghost stood up and said angrily, “Who are you, and why are you in my kitchen?”

“Uh, this is my kitchen, weirdo,” David said, firmly holding his wrought-iron poker.

Cat pushed its way through the swinging door and hissed at the man. At least Cat had his back in this encounter.

The house started to shake. David was used to earthquakes, but this one felt odd. The sound was muffled and far away. The ghost looked up in horror with his dead eyes as plaster fell from the ceiling.

David ran out into the dining room and made it to the front door before he realized the shaking had stopped when he had stepped out of the kitchen. All was calm and quiet now. He returned to the kitchen to find it empty and the ceiling intact.

Another day, another ghost, he thought. This one had felt different, though. *At least this one was scared of me.*

* * *

David grabbed his bag and fled the house. He ran to his bus stop and just made the eight thirty bus. He did his best to push the eyeless man in the kitchen from his mind. His therapist said to not dwell on the hallucination’s, just let them happen and let them be over.

Of course, Professor Lembeck said his life was in danger. So just ‘letting them happen’ could be the last mistake he’d ever make.

As the crowded bus bounced along the potholed streets, he again thought about buying a car. To get to his office in downtown San Francisco, he had to transfer to another bus midway through his trip. Sometimes he’d miss the next bus and would have to wait half an hour or more. But as inconvenient as it was, parking in the Bay Area was at a premium. Although he had plenty of parking on his street, parking when he got to work would cost him fifty dollars a day. Saving money and the environment were worth the inconvenience of taking two buses.

David shivered at his transfer bus stop. It was a cold day and he was underdressed, with only the heat of a travel mug of coffee to keep him warm.

A man in a suit was sitting on the bus stop bench, reading a newspaper. *Who reads actual newspapers these days?* David thought. *This guy and the ghost in my kitchen, apparently.*

The man lowered the paper to look down the street.

“Late as usual,” David remarked. The man nodded in agreement and turned to look at him.

“It’s never on time,” the man said. “I don’t know why they don’t adjust the schedule to reflect a more realistic time.”

David almost dropped his coffee. It was the man from his kitchen. This man had eyes, but it was the same person in the same style suit.

There was no look of recognition from the man as they made small talk about the transit system and the weather, but David’s heart was pounding. It was all he could do to not turn and run away, but he waited until the bus pulled up and the man got on.

David followed him onto the bus and called, “Fitz, hey, Fitz,” loudly to see if the man would turn to look at him. Then

“Kang?” Neither name caught the man’s attention. He sat down in back and buried his face in his paper again.

They rode the bus into the business district and the man got off in front of a large office building.

David hesitated a moment, but curiosity got the best of him and he ducked out the back bus door as the man disappeared into the building.

David entered in time to see the man walking past a large desk manned by a receptionist and a security guard. They smiled as he sailed by them. “Good morning, Mr. Mullins.”

Mullins? David thought. The same name as the drug dealer killed in my house?

This Mullins went down the hallway and disappeared around a corner.

David tried to nonchalantly hang out in the lobby, not sure what his next move should be. He picked up a catalog from a table and thumbed through it. The catalog said the company made holographic equipment for projecting 3D images. It was cutting edge tech. *Gary would say a little too cutting edge.* David thought. *Could Mullins be projecting ghosts?*

The guard told the receptionist he was going on a bathroom break and left.

David approached the receptionist.

“Can I help you?” she asked, smiling.

“I hope so. This is kind of embarrassing. I had a job interview yesterday with that man, Mr. Mullins. I’d like to write him a thank-you letter, but I forgot his first name. Is it Dan Mullins?”

“No, Mike Mullins.”

“Okay, thanks.”

The phone rang, and she answered it, saving David from more small talk. He took the opportunity to slip past her and

quickly make his way down the hall and around the same corner Mullins had.

He found a door with *Michael Mullins* on the nameplate and knocked. He was too baffled about the connection to be frightened. This was the best lead he'd had.

Mullins looked up from his computer. "Yes?" He seemed confused to see David standing there. "Wait, weren't you at the bus stop this morning?"

David stepped inside the office. "Mr. Mullins. Sorry to burst in on you like this, but have we met before? I mean, before today, this morning."

Mullins looked apprehensive, obviously not used to being followed by a stranger. He stood, and David noticed his hand lingering near his telephone, probably ready to call security if needed. "No, I don't think so."

"I'm David Dusek. Are you related to Dan Mullins?"

Mullins looked uncomfortable. "Yes, Dan was my brother. What's this about?"

"What do you know about a house I just bought, 2030 Hill Street?"

Mullins sighed and sat back down.

"Shut the door, have a seat," he said. "What do you want to know?"

"Just some information about the house. Your family owned it at one time?"

"Yes, I lost the house because my brother was convicted of a crime. The government seized it as one of his assets. Are you here to blackmail me or something? I wasn't charged with anything. I didn't know my brother was selling drugs out of the house."

"Oh, no, nothing like that. I...I've been seeing things in the house. Do you know anyone named K. Fitz or A. Kang?"

"No. Look, I don't know how I can help you."

“Please tell me. Have you ever seen anything strange in that house?”

Mullins hesitated a moment. “You mean like a ghost?”

“Yes!”

Mullins went silent for a moment, clearly uncomfortable at the memory. “I never saw or heard anything, but as a child, my brother swore he did. He had terrible nightmares and said a ghost was after him. ‘The bad man’, as he called him. Dan said he saw him in the bathtub, and for weeks he refused to use the upstairs bathroom.”

David’s thoughts went to the little girl on the door cam, traumatized by the bad man.

“I grew up in that house too,” Mullins said. “And I never saw anything strange as a child. My brother eventually stopped having nightmares.”

“Is there anything else you know about the house? Did anything strange happen there in the past? Built on an ancient Indian burial ground, stuff like that?” David tried to muster a laugh.

“No, nothing out of the ordinary. Unlike my brother, I never felt anything but happiness in that house.”

“Okay, thanks for your time,” David said, and got up to leave. He stopped a moment. “Were you in the house during an earthquake or aftershock?”

“Yes, once, why?”

“Did plaster fall from the ceiling?”

“Yeah, a big piece came down in the kitchen. Had to replaster the whole thing.”

David thought about telling him about the vision he’d had in his kitchen, but decided against it. *So I’m clairvoyant now, seeing the past*, he thought. “Yeah, I noticed the kitchen ceiling was newer than the rest of the house. Thanks again for your time.”

Before he could leave, Mullins said, “Say, David, you wouldn’t be interested in selling the house back to me, would you?”

David turned. *Would I?* he thought.

“I was out of town when they held the auction and missed my chance to bid on it. I’ll give you twenty per cent over what you paid.”

David paused. The house had been nothing but trouble, but selling hadn’t seemed smart, not so soon after he’d bought it when he hadn’t had a chance to build up any equity. But if Mullins could make it worth his while.

“It is something I’m willing to consider,” David said. “I paid two hundred thousand. But I’ve sunk a lot of money into it. I’d need to look at the numbers.”

“Here, take my card and give me a call if you decide you might want to sell. I’m sure we can come to some agreement.”

“Yeah, I just might do that.”

David left feeling like he could unload the house and maybe make the ghosts someone else’s problem.

Chapter Six

A Whiteboard of Mystery

Gary and Shannon arrived late in the afternoon for their sleepover at David's house.

David had told them about some of his ghostly encounters, but now he recounted every vision he had gone through with them and his theories about what was causing them.

"This is all so fascinating," Gary said. "Terrible that it's happening to you, sure, but fascinating. Let's plot this out. Get out your Pictionary whiteboard."

David dug out his whiteboard and dry-erase markers and Gary set it up in the living room. "Let's put all the visions into possible categories," Gary said.

"You know I'm just going to say ghosts across the board," Shannon said, settling onto the couch with a cup of tea. "When my mum died, I heard the cry of a banshee the night before, so I'm sensitive to these things. I really think it's all ghosts."

"We'll see," Gary said.

"And my best guess is brain damage," David said. "That's just my luck."

"Well, my theory is grifters," Gary said.

"Whaaat?" David asked, laughing.

"Yeah, it sounds weird, but then all the theories do. What if someone – or several someones – are making these visions happen? Maybe some visions are dreams, sure, but could there be a logical explanation for these other events?"

He made three columns on the whiteboard: *Dream/Hallucination*, *Coincidence*, and *Grifters*.

“Anything that doesn’t fit under these columns could be a ghost,” he said. “Let’s start with the first ghost, the woman in the bathroom. You were delirious from blood loss, so we will put her under the dream column.” Gary wrote *bathroom woman* on the board.

“Second ghost,” Gary continued. “The homeless man is – for lack of a better term – coincidence. He was a real person who just happened to break into your house.”

“Yeah, but how?” David asked.

“Shush. This is the brainstorming phase. The poking holes in theories phase comes later. Third ghost, the mangled-face guy. Could he be a real person? Not hard to make a mangled face with makeup and prosthetics. But why is he breaking in? Why is he trying to scare you?”

“Gus thinks there might be drugs hidden in the house still,” David said.

“Oh, there could be millions in drug money buried in your basement!” Shannon said. “You already found money, David. Who knows how much more there might be? This Mullins bloke wants you out of the house so he can dig it up.”

“So my life has become an episode of *Scooby Doo*?” David said. “People dressing up as ghosts to scare me out of the house?”

“What about the ghosts at David’s office?” Shannon pointed out. “What do they have to do with it all?”

“They were also hired to scare David,” Gary speculated. “Or worse yet, to kill him. Didn’t you say someone was trying to push you off the roof and when you turned around, the woman and the jumper were there? How do you know they weren’t the ones pushing you?”

“The woman’s face melted down the drain and the guy jumped off the roof unharmed,” David reminded him. “How did they fake that? And how would the woman know I would go up to the roof? I could have just as easily stayed at my desk after seeing her in the restroom.”

Gary thought about it for a moment. “They could have slipped you a hit of LSD,” he said. “It didn’t matter if you went to the roof or went home screaming, the goal was to make you think you were crazy. Or, if it’s Mullins, you said he works for a company that makes high-tech holographic equipment. He could have projected the melting and the jumping.”

“What about David’s girlfriend?” Shannon asked. “Another bad dream? Or good dream, if you like ghost sex. I don’t think they’ve perfected holographic sex technology yet.”

“How well do you know this woman, David?” Gary asked.

David didn’t like this line of questioning. “I don’t think she belongs in the ‘grifter’ column. She’s a great person. How would she be involved?”

“You did just meet her out of the blue and from her pictures she is sort of, well, out of your league,” Shannon said. She put her hand on his shoulder. “No offense.”

Before David could protest that statement, she grabbed him by the hand and pulled him off the couch.

“Let’s go reenact it!”

“Uh, what?”

“It’s for science!”

She dragged him upstairs to the bedroom. “I’ll be the naughty ghost and you be you.”

David obliged and slipped under the covers of his bed as Shannon went under the sheets and crawled in from the other end.

“I want you so bad,” she said.

Gary was leaning in the doorway. “Let’s skip the blow job part, just for the sake of time.”

She crawled up David and popped her head out from under the sheets. “Boo!”

David just laughed.

“Now run! Or I’ll take your soul!” she shouted. When he didn’t move, she added, “No really, run downstairs. Fast as you can.”

He jumped out of bed and Gary leaped aside as he dashed out of the room, down the stairs, and into the dining room. Gary followed right behind him.

As they reached the dining room, Shannon came through the swinging kitchen door holding a frying pan.

“See, it can be done,” she said, a bit breathlessly. “A house with two staircases is a gaslighter’s dream. Didn’t anyone ever tell you that? I’m assuming Cassy is in better shape and would not be wheezing so much.” She bent over and took a few more deep breaths. “But she could be part of the grifter team. Mullins could have hired a whole crew to help drive you crazy.”

“Still, put her in the dream column,” David said. “She would have had to get dressed, take off the pale makeup, rinse the blood out of her mouth, and still make it down here before me.”

Gary wrote *sex ghost* under the dream column.

“I think we are well on our way to solving this mystery!” Shannon said. “Where do you keep your Scooby Snacks?”

“Just for my peace of mind, David, we should meet your new girlfriend,” Gary said.

“Okay, but you have to promise to be nice to her.”

“I’m always nice,” Shannon protested.

“I’m talking to Gary. You have this thing where you scare away my girlfriends before I can.”

“What? I do not.”

“Olivia.”

“Turned out to be a racist,” Gary said.

“Stacy.”

“Really, you’re mad I was right about her? She robbed you.”

“She did not. Her ex-boyfriend did.”

“Anne,” Gary said.

“I’ll give you that one,” David said.

“You have to admit, your judgment in women can be a little off,” Shannon said.

“Cassy is not gaslighting me,” David insisted. “And she has a good job, so she doesn’t need to steal my stereo.”

“Have you been to her work?” Gary asked.

“Well, no. She doesn’t spend much time in an office,” David said.

“What does her flat look like?” Shannon asked. “You can tell a lot about someone by how they decorate their flat.”

“I haven’t been. We mostly hang out here.” He thought for a moment, frowning. “Now that you mention it, she specifically said she doesn’t want me there. Something about it always being a mess because she’s rarely home.”

“Oh, I don’t like that at all,” Shannon said. “She could be married or a cat hoarder or something. I saw a woman on TV that had a hundred cats in her one-room flat.”

“My cat *is* fond of her,” David said.

“Or she could be on a crew of con artists. The ‘roper’, in this case. The person who brings in the mark, usually a beautiful woman or man,” Gary said.

“What’s the long game here, then?” David asked. “The house can’t be worth that much. And she’s had to sleep with me like four times. That seems like a lot of work for whatever the prize is.”

“Shannon’s right, there could be a lot more money hidden in this house somewhere.”

“Or Gus could be right, it could be the drugs,” Shannon said. “There could be millions in heroin in these walls. Have the walls oozed drugs?”

“I did do a little poking around when I found that ten grand in the vent. I checked all the other vents, the attic, under the floorboards. I didn’t find anything except a lot of mouse skeletons, empty rum bottles, and a yo-yo.”

“Did you dig up the cellar?” Gary asked.

“Ground was too hard to dig with a shovel,” David said. “But I did try.”

“You’ll need a pickaxe,” Shannon said. “Or a jackhammer to break up the compact.”

The two men gave her a puzzled look.

“What? I grew up on a farm. I had to do a lot of digging as a girl.”

“With my luck, I’ll put a hole in an ancient septic tank.”

“We can go to the hardware store tomorrow for a pickaxe,” she said. “And we can get one of those cameras on a snake that plumbers use to check inside the walls. We can fish it all the way down from the attic to the cellar.”

“I’ve never seen this handywoman side of you before,” Gary said.

“I can strip a wanker-rotary engine too,” she said. “As for tonight...” She went to her luggage and pulled out a Ouija board. “We try to contact the ghosts. I’m not sure how good this board is because I got it at Target.”

“Oh, I don’t know about this,” David complained.

“We’re doing this, David. We are going to talk to the ghosts.” She peeled off the shrink-wrap. “Do you have any black candles about?”

* * *

David had burned his last candles during his suicide attempt,

so they settled for the light from a single iPhone on the dining room table. The darkness beyond the circle of light cast by the phone was deep and foreboding.

“Where’s the pointy thing?” David asked, shaking the box the board had come in. “You know, the puck.”

“I have it,” said Shannon. “And it’s called a planchette, you heathen.”

“You can’t call me a heathen for not knowing what a planchette is. A heathen would be *more* likely to be well-versed in Ouija vocabulary, wouldn’t he?”

“Whatever. Just settle down and put your fingers on the pointy thing.”

She placed the planchette in the center of the board and the three of them each rested their fingertips on it. Shannon closed her eyes.

“Oh, before we start, does anybody need a beer?” David asked.

Shannon’s eyes snapped open. “This isn’t game night, David. We’re trying to communicate with the dead here.”

“Okay, okay,” he said.

“But now that you mention it, after we’re done, I’ll definitely want a beer. I’ll make popcorn and we can play Taboo.”

“You need at least four people for Taboo,” Gary said.

“I have Splendor,” said David.

“All right, that’s a plan.” Shannon closed her eyes again. “Oh, dark spirits, we call on the ghost of Milton Bradley to connect with you.”

“I think Milton and Bradley were two different people,” David said.

“Shhh, you’re breaking my concentration. And close your eyes, both of you.”

“We can’t read what’s being spelled out if we close our eyes,” Gary pointed out.

“Oh, right. All right, keep them open.”

“Now what?” David asked.

“I think we need to ask the spirits a question,” Gary said.

Shannon asked slowly, “Spirits of the house, who...are...you?”

The planchette began to slide, and Shannon let out a little yelp of joy. They read each letter out loud.

“W.”

“E.”

“A.”

“R.”

“E.”

“Weare?” Shannon said. “That doesn’t make...oh, wait, it’s probably ‘We are’.”

The planchette started sliding more quickly, so fast they had trouble keeping their fingers on it.

“M.”

“A.”

“N.”

“Y.”

“We are many! Oh, I felt a shiver up me spine!” she said.
“Are you two moving it?”

“I’m not,” Gary said. “Are you moving it, David?”

“Nope,” David said. But the phrase rang a bell in the part of his brain where he had stuffed his years of Bible indoctrination. “I am Legion, for we are many,” he said to the rest of the circle in his best creepy voice.

They glanced over at him.

“It’s from the Bible, book of Mark. Jesus casts demons out of a possessed man into some pigs, then drowns the pigs,” David explained.

“That is some scary shite,” Shannon said.

“Are you moving it, Shannon?” Gary asked.

“Of course not. Cheating at Ouija will give you a curse or something.”

She refocused on the board.

“What...do...you...want?” Shannon called out into the ether. She paused and added, “Mr. Legion?”

The planchette came back to life, sliding once more over the letters.

“K.”

“I.”

“L.”

“L.”

The spelling paused.

“The spirits want to play Fuck, Marry, Kill,” Gary quipped. Shannon shushed him.

“I don’t like where this is going,” David said. The planchette started again with a quick jerk to the letter *F*.

“I.”

“T.”

“Z.”

“Kill Fitz!” Shannon squealed. She quickly reset the planchette. “Why do you want to kill Fitz?” she called out into the darkness.

“Okay, not funny, guys,” David said.

The planchette started to jerk around so quickly, Shannon’s and Gary’s hands slipped off. David was trying to rip his

hands away and could not.

Shannon kept up shouting out the letters as the pointer stopped briefly on each one. “H...E...D...E...S...T...R...O...Y...S....” She jumped up from her chair. “He destroys!”

David fought the force controlling his hands, briefly stopping the planchette’s movement. When he did, he saw two hands attached to arms that didn’t belong to him that extended back into the darkness beyond the iPhone’s glow, across the table from him.

“Jesus!” David yelled, jumping up from his chair. The disembodied fingers lifted from the planchette as the hands pulled them back into the darkness.

“Tell me you saw that,” David said, looking wildly between Gary and Shannon.

“What?” Gary asked.

“The extra hands on the puck!” He grabbed the phone and shone its light around the room. There was nobody there but the three of them.

“No, I didn’t see that,” Shannon said, disappointed. “I want to see a ghost!”

“All I saw were your hands,” Gary said.

David set the phone back on the table and sat down.

“This Fitz guy sounds like trouble,” Shannon said. “Is he the ghost the little girl told you not to let in?”

“If he is a ghost, you wouldn’t need to kill him,” Gary pointed out. “Do you owe this Fitz guy money, David? Did you have an affair with his wife?”

David knew Gary was joking and thought it was David controlling the pointer, but again, David searched his memory for anyone he might have wronged in the past.

“I never hurt anyone in my life, at least not so bad ghosts would have to warn me about it.”

“What about the kid you stuffed in a locker senior year?” Gary asked. “What was his name?”

“Drew Frakes, and he tied my shoelaces together in chemistry class, so he had it coming. I don’t know anyone named Fitz.”

David’s phone on the table began to buzz in vibration mode. The three of them just stared at it as the vibrations caused it to spin slightly on the table.

The phone made a full circle before Gary asked, “Are you going to answer that?”

The display read, *Unknown number, 2030 area code.*

“That’s not even a real area code, is it?” Shannon asked.

“It’s the house address,” David said. They all looked around as if the caller might be in the room.

David picked up the phone.

“Don’t answer it!” Shannon yelled. “That’s how everyone in those *Scream* movies dies!”

David pressed the speakerphone icon on the display.

“Kill Fitz and Kang,” a chorus of voices said as the phone hung up and the display went off, plunging them into darkness.

Shannon let out a delighted scream as Gary found the light switch on the wall and turned on the chandelier.

“Feck, that was craic ninety!” Shannon said, which David knew was Dublinese for ‘hell of a lot of fun’. He was feeling more like craic negative twenty.

“Come on though, one of you wankers was moving it,” she said.

“Of course one of us was moving it,” Gary said. “Even if we didn’t consciously realize it.”

“And had someone call the phone?” Shannon added.

“Explain the phone, Gary,” David said. “How would grifters know we were doing the Ouija board?”

“They could have the house bugged,” he whispered.

David tried to shake off what he had seen, but could not. He could feel those hands in the dark take control of the planchette.

“Are you all right, David?” Shannon asked. “You’re shaking. I’m sorry, it was all supposed to be just a bit of fun.”

“I think that’s enough fun and games for one night,” Gary said.

“Yeah, long day. I’m just tired,” David said. “I think I’ll turn in.”

As David lay in bed, he thought about the writing on the mirror. So it wasn’t ‘K. Fitz’ and ‘A. Kang’. The ghosts were trying to write ‘Kill Fitz and Kang’.

Who were these ghosts? Did they really want him to kill two people? Or was he just going insane? *Is this how a person with a brain disorder descends into madness?* he wondered.

* * *

David felt better knowing Gary and Shannon were sleeping down the hall, but the Ouija session still had him agitated and he couldn’t fall asleep. After an hour of tossing and turning, he gave up trying and went downstairs for a snack.

He went down the back stairs that led directly into the kitchen and as he reached the bottom, he saw the light over the sink was on. Shannon was standing at the swinging door that led into the dining room.

She put a finger to her lips to silence him, then whispered, “There’s someone in the dining room.”

David quietly went to her side and listened with her at the door. Light from the dining room filtered through the slats in the door, and they heard a chair being moved and something

being put down on the table. Then someone was quietly humming a song.

David and Shannon strained to hear what the tune was. The humming became louder until they could make out that it was 'Mary Had a Little Lamb'.

David pushed the door open a crack. They could only see the back of her head, but a little girl in flowered pajamas was playing with two plastic My Little Ponies at the dining room table. They were the same pajamas David had seen the little girl on his security camera wearing.

She stopped humming and then spoke for one of the ponies. "Let's run fast so the bad man doesn't get us." She got off her chair and galloped the ponies around the table.

Shannon and David looked at each other and Shannon whispered, "Should we call the police or something?"

Despite her whispering, the little girl heard her and looked toward the door. Her face was pale and her eyes cloudy, like she had cataracts. "Mom, Dad, is that you? I've been good. I haven't left the house." Still gripping her ponies, she ran to the kitchen door. David and Shannon stepped back in fear, neither one really sure why they should be scared of a little girl.

The door swung open, and she stopped just inside the kitchen.

"Did you bring food? I'm hungry," she said, coming toward them as they backed away in the dimly lit kitchen. She smiled as she came toward them and they could see she was missing most of her teeth. Blood dripped from her mouth as she held out one of her My Little Ponies toward them. "Want to play ponies?"

Frozen in fear and confusion, Shannon just stared at the girl.

David worked up his courage to engage with the ghost.

"That would be fun," he said, crouching down to her level. "I'm David. I remember seeing you on my front porch. What's your name?"

She stopped and this time it was she who backed away. “David?” She backed up until she was standing next to the swinging door. “The bad man doesn’t like you.”

“What are you two looking at?” Gary asked. He was standing at the bottom of the stairs wearing a t-shirt and flannel pajama pants.

In the second that Shannon and David looked over at Gary, the girl vanished.

They excitedly told Gary what they had seen.

“And blood dripped from her gaping mouth!” Shannon said. She opened her own mouth and bared her teeth as a demonstration.

“And Shannon saw her first,” David said. “So that puts it firmly in the ghost column.”

“Or at least out of the hallucination column,” Gary mused.

They all went to the dining room, which was empty of ghosts, and then searched the house. When they were satisfied that they were alone in the house, David poured them each a healthy shot of whiskey and they sat down in the living room. Gary and Shannon sat snuggled together on the couch and David wrapped himself in a throw blanket to ward off the chill of the night.

Gary had not seen the girl, despite having a clear view of the two of them and the kitchen.

“There was nothing there,” he said. “Shannon was backed up to the sink in terror. And you were crouched down on the floor talking to yourself.”

“Don’t you dare tell me it was some sort of shared dream or something,” Shannon said. “I know what I saw and heard.”

“I believe you. You saw something. So, this is a new ghost?”

“No,” David said. “I think she’s the little girl I saw on my doorbell camera.”

“She said the bad man was out to get David,” Shannon said. “Oh, I just gave myself gooseflesh.”

“She looked sick, like that vision I saw of Cassy,” David said. “Pale skin, bloody mouth.”

“So, a ghost that died during the flu pandemic of 1918?” Gary pondered.

“No,” Shannon said. “I mean, she was playing with those My Little Pony toys and dressed in modern pajamas.”

They sipped their whiskey and sat with their own thoughts for a while. Gary kept looking at the whiteboard and would occasionally mutter something to himself, trying to work out how this sighting could have been anything but supernatural.

Eventually, they all returned to their beds and David fell asleep quite easily, with a shot of whiskey in his system and what he considered solid confirmation that his visions were ghosts. No matter how strange that was, it meant he wasn't insane.

However, it was a troubled sleep. He dreamed he was in the hospital again, strapped to the table that zapped his tumor. Clamps on the sides of his head kept him immobilized. Another pair of clamps on his lids kept his eyes open.

He struggled to move. “What is this!”

A technician came into view, holding a syringe with a very long needle. The melting woman from the office approached him from the other side. She had her skin back and was dressed in a white lab coat.

“He's awake,” she said to the technician.

“He won't remember anything. He'll think it was a dream,” the technician said, clearing the syringe of air.

Gary appeared at David's feet.

“Gary, help me!”

Gary asked the technician, “What are you doing to him?”

“Helping him see,” he replied as he plunged the needle deep into David’s eyeball.

David screamed and went limp.

“I think you killed him,” Gary said calmly.

“He’s already dead,” the technician said, pulling the needle back out of David’s eye.

The woman said, “He still can’t see the truth. You had better do the other eye.”

“No!” David screamed.

“Open your eyes, David!” the woman shouted. “See us!”

David gasped awake, finding himself alone in his dark bedroom. *It was a nightmare, all in my head*, he thought. He remembered his therapist saying if the dream state is strong enough, it can carry over into the waking world. *Is it all just waking nightmares? Did Shannon and I both see the little girl because of a shared hysteria brought on by the spooky activities earlier in the night? Or is she sensitive to ghosts like she said?*

He stared at the ceiling, afraid to go to sleep, and stayed awake the rest of the night in his bed of fears.

* * *

Keeping busy helped take David’s mind off the ghosts, so he set to work getting the rest of the yard in shape. He cleared the weeds, kept the grass trimmed, and planted some shrubs. He bought a gas grill and a new patio set to replace the old picnic table and put up a bird feeder to keep Cat entertained.

Once he had things the way he wanted them, he threw his first barbecue, a rite of passage for all adult men.

Cassy was busy with work, but Gary, Shannon, and Gus joined him for grilled steaks and trendy microbrews.

David grilled while the others sat in wicker chairs around the patio table with a built-in fire pit. They munched from a veggie tray and a bowl of chips, and it all felt super normal to

David. This was the kind of day he'd envisioned while he first toured the house, before he became either crazy or haunted.

David served the steaks and potato salad and joined them at the table. While the fire pit in the center seemed like a good idea when he bought the table, it was getting too hot and he turned off the gas.

Shannon had already moved on to more ghost talk, dashing all hopes of avoiding the paranormal for a day.

"Have you seen a ghost in David's house yet?" she asked Gus while she shoveled in a mouthful of potato salad.

"Not yet, but we may have chased one out of his basement," he said. He told them about the night the homeless man got in and out of the house with all the doors locked.

"I saw one," she said excitedly. "We did, me and David." She put down her fork and said in a quiet spooky voice, "A little girl in the dining room. She had bloody teeth and a creepy voice."

"She talked to you?" Gus asked.

"She asked us if we wanted to play," Shannon said, wide-eyed. "Called us her mum and dad and then told us she was hungry and wanted to eat our souls."

"She didn't say that," David corrected. "She just said she was hungry."

"It was implied," Shannon said. "So there you have it. A real, genuine ghost visitation!"

"Or she was just some neglected neighbor kid sleepwalking," Gary said.

She playfully punched him in the arm. "Do not take away my one ghost story. It's very rude."

Gus asked David if there had been anything new written on his mirror or if he had investigated Fitz and Kang further.

"No. I tried to find a Fitz or Kang who had a connection to the house, but I haven't come up with anything."

“Fitz and Kang,” Gary repeated. “Fitz and Kang. Sounds like an old vaudeville comedy duo. Or a ventriloquist and his dummy. ‘I’m Fitz,’ the dummy would say. ‘And this here dummy is Kang. Watch his lips move whenever I talk.’”

A large flame shot up from the fire pit, startling everyone. In a second, it had snuffed itself out.

“Scared the crap out of me,” David said, checking the valve under the table. “The gas is off.”

“Must be faulty,” Gus said. “I’d take it back. It’s a fire hazard.”

“It’s the ghosts. They don’t like Gary making fun of them,” Shannon said, cutting into her steak.

David held up his beer for a toast. “Well, Fitz and Kang can just go to hell and stop bothering me.”

As they all clinked their beer bottles together to seal the toast, the big walnut tree they were sitting under creaked and groaned. They all looked up as the branches shook.

A walnut in its green casing fell and hit the table with a loud plonk. Another followed, landing in Gary’s potato salad. Then another nut fell, and another, and they all fled the table as it became a downpour of nuts pelting the table. In less than a minute, the tree stopped shaking, but by then the table was completely buried in walnuts.

They stared at each other in shock. “Nut harvest is in,” Gary quipped.

Without warning, the flame at the center of the table ignited itself once more, sending an explosion of hot, flaming walnuts into the air. They fled even farther back, sheltering around the corner of the house until the gas flame sputtered out.

Gus grabbed the hose and sprayed down the flaming nuts before they could catch anything else on fire.

“Stop making fun of the ghost!” Shannon yelled.

For some reason, everyone looked at Gary, who said, “Well, I’ll admit something is going on here.”

“That was some biblical shit, right there,” Gus said. “But at least you don’t have to pick the walnuts now. I have some boxes at home. We might as well pack up the nuts, not let them go to waste. At least the ones that aren’t burned.”

“Yeah, these nuts are just going to attract an army of squirrels,” Shannon said. “We’ll help you pick them up, David.”

She brought the remains of the food indoors while Gus returned home to retrieve the boxes and Gary went to inspect the fire pit.

David went to the shed and pulled out a rake.

“The gas line looks cut,” Gary said.

“Okay, probably not ghost-related,” David said. He came over to the table and began raking off the walnuts. “How do you explain the tree, Mr. Skeptic?”

Gary took a few steps back and looked up into the tree’s canopy. “There’s a wire up there,” he said.

David took a few steps back and looked up. “Looks like a guide wire, the kind they use to make trees grow straight,” David said.

Gary followed the wire and saw it went over to the yard next door. He went over to the fence and stood on his tippy toes to look over it. “It’s attached to a tree in Gus’s yard. Maybe someone used it to shake the tree,” Gary speculated.

“I don’t see how a thin wire like that could shake the entire tree,” David said. He stood on the picnic table and reached as high into the tree as he could with his rake, shaking the branches. The wire made a loud *twang* sound and wiggled a bit, but not enough to transfer its energy to shake the tree.

“Now I’m the one who’s skeptical,” David said. “The nuts had to be the work of ghosts or an army of squirrels.”

“Still, pretty odd that there’s a wire to your tree from Gus’s yard.”

“Are you back to thinking Gus is part of the grifter....”

David stopped talking as Gus came out of David’s back door with two cardboard boxes and a roll of trash bags under his arm.

“Hope this is enough to hold them all,” he said. “With walnuts, you have to store them for a few months until the green part dries out and the nut casing hardens.”

Shannon came out of the house behind him and the four of them began picking up nuts and putting them in the boxes.

“Life has sure gotten more interesting since you moved next door,” Gus said.

* * *

David, Shannon, and Gary waited for Cassy at a table in David’s favorite bar, an Irish pub called the Happy Leprechaun. Shannon hated the place, since it was not an authentic Irish pub. “It’s like the Disneyland version of an Irish pub. It is borderline offensive with its banality. At least call it the ‘Drunken Leprechaun’, and lean into the stereotype.” But David had been going there since he first moved to the Bay Area. He liked the beer selection and the happy hour deals, and the kitschiness was a feature, not a bug, for him.

“Have you told Cassy about your ghostly visitors?” Gary asked. He dropped his cocktail napkin and bent down to get it.

“Sort of. I told her the day I met her I might have a haunted house. And I told her of the hallucinations and my brain problems.”

“And she didn’t run away. That’s good,” Shannon said.

Gary retrieved his napkin and sat back up. His eyes were missing, just black sockets.

“Jesus!” David yelled, almost dropping his pint glass.

“Gary!” Shannon scolded. “David’s sanity is hanging on by a thread as it is. Sorry, David.”

Gary popped the black contacts out of his eyes. “I’m just trying to show how easy it would be to fake a ghost with no eyes.”

Cassy entered the pseudo pub and David waved her over. “Here she is. Let’s stop talking about my sanity now.”

“Damn, David, I’m not gay, but if I were…” Shannon said as Cassy sailed over to the table.

David made introductions and Gary pulled a chair out for her.

“Oh, such a gentleman,” Cassy said, taking her place at the table.

“Careful, he might make the chair disappear,” Shannon warned.

“I would never make a lady’s chair disappear. But I did steal your watch.” He dangled it in front of her and she snatched it back.

“How did you do that?” she laughed, re-clasping it to her wrist.

Gary sat down. “It’s all about misdirection. Oh, and I’m really magic. So, David tells me you’re in public relations?”

“First, give her back her wallet,” David ordered.

“I just needed her driver’s license to run a background check,” Gary teased. He handed it back.

“How did you get it out of my handbag? I even have trouble opening the clasp. It’s been broken for a while now.”

“I can’t reveal my secrets or I’d be out of a job.”

“I pulled the bag to me under the table with my foot while you were dealing with the watch, then nicked the wallet and slipped it to Gary,” Shannon said. “Sorry to reveal your secret, Gary, but there should be no secrets among friends.”

Drinks led to dinner, then Cassy said she had to make it an early night, as she had a breakfast meeting the next morning.

The other three sat finishing their drinks.

“I really like her,” Shannon said. “Doesn’t seem like a con artist to me.”

“Well, she wouldn’t, would she?” Gary said. “But I have to admit, she seems like a nice person and is genuinely interested in David. We will leave her bed haunting in the dream column for now.” He pulled a card out of thin air with his magician’s flourish. It was her driver’s license. “Still, wouldn’t hurt to do a background check.”

David snatched the license away from him. “No! We won’t be doing that. If she is part of this, maybe I don’t want to know.”

“How serious are you two getting?” Shannon asked.

“Not sure where we are, but we’re going away for the weekend.”

“A good test of any relationship,” Gary said. He took Shannon’s hand. “Our first away trip was Paris.”

“Where you left me in the hotel every night to perform.” She took her hand back and told David, “I almost had an affair with the doorman.”

“We aren’t ready for Paris,” David said. “Just a weekend at Gus’s cabin.”

“Glad you told us. We can direct the police to the woods if you go missing,” Gary said.

“So, a good test then,” David said. “If I come back alive, will that convince you she’s not a grifter after my buried treasure?”

“Nope. But it will be a point in her favor,” Gary said, raising his glass. “To David and Cassy’s future happiness.”

They toasted and left the Happy Leprechaun with David feeling the best he had in a while.

* * *

“Thanks for this,” David said as Gus handed him a key. “I really need a getaway.”

“No problem at all,” Gus said. “I should probably sell that cabin. I hardly use it anymore. But in the meantime, someone might as well get some use out of it.”

The cabin was north of Diablo, a small town twenty-five miles outside of Oakland. When Gus had offered it to him, David wasn't sure if a city girl like Cassy would be interested in staying somewhere without room service. But she said yes, and the two of them rented a car for the short drive into the woods.

Even with Oakland traffic, they were there in less than an hour. The three-bedroom cabin stood by itself on a hill overlooking a small lake and surrounded by a stunning mountain view.

“Nice,” Cassy said, pulling groceries from the trunk of the car. “Here's hoping for an indoor bathroom and electricity.”

“Yeah, has both,” David said. He grabbed their two suitcases and headed for the door. “And it's only ten miles into town if we want to go out to dinner tonight.”

“I brought some pork chops,” Cassy said. “Let's eat in tonight.”

The cabin was a little musty from being locked up for so long, but well-maintained and tidy. The first floor was mainly taken up by an open floor plan living/dining room and kitchen. A fireplace was set into one wall, surrounded by built-in shelves holding books and board games.

“Not bad,” David said. “Let's open a couple windows, air the place out.”

They settled in, putting away groceries and getting a fire going in the fireplace. It felt good to be playing house with Cassy. It seemed relaxed and natural. All the ghosts seemed far away.

Once they'd unpacked, they took a walk down by the lake to watch the sun set over the trees.

"It's so quiet," Cassy said.

"Yeah, and I forgot what fresh air smelled like," David said.

Cassy took off her sweater and unbuttoned her shirt. "Let's go for a swim."

"It's sixty degrees out. That water must be freezing," David protested.

"Just in and out," she said. "It's been ages since I've skinny-dipped."

She was already naked by the time he was pulling off his sweatshirt.

He once again marveled at her beauty, her naked skin now colored by the red and golden light of the sunset. *How ever did I get a woman so beautiful?* he thought. *Don't question it or overthink it like you do everything else in your life. Just be in the moment.*

"Stop staring at me, you perv," she teased. "If you want me, you'll have to come in."

She ran to the end of the dock and dove in; none of that wading in slowly for her.

"It's not bad at all. Kind of warm, in fact."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Just jump in. Must be a hot spring or something."

He stripped, dove in, and then surfaced, cursing at her, "Fuck! You liar! This is almost ice!"

She laughed, then swam over to him. "Poor baby, let me warm you up." She wrapped her arms and legs around him and gave him a long kiss.

She stopped. "Okay, this isn't as romantic as I thought. I'm freezing my ass off." She swam back to the dock and climbed out.

* * *

Later, David was busy stoking the fire when she called from the bathroom. “You have to see this!”

He went around the corner to the bathroom, where Cassy had discovered a trapdoor under the bath mat. A ladder led down into a basement.

“He’s got like a thousand pounds of food down there,” she said. “Is he a doomsday prepper?”

“Not that I know of,” David said. “But I only met him a few months ago.”

They both climbed down. The walls were lined with shelves of canned and dry goods. In a corner were barrels of water and a crate of ammunition.

“Okay, yeah, I guess he is a prepper,” David said. “You have to admire his organizational skills.”

David suddenly felt like he was invading Gus’s privacy. “Let’s go. We shouldn’t be poking around down here.” They went back up, shut the trapdoor, and re-covered it with the bath mat.

Cassy fried up the chops and baked some potatoes while David made a salad. They chatted and laughed and drank wine while they cooked, sometimes singing along with music playing from a Bluetooth speaker David had brought.

It was in moments like this that David realized how lonely he had been since Anne had left him. Hell, he’d sometimes felt almost as lonely when he’d been with Anne. Things felt so much easier with Cassy and he couldn’t help thinking about the future they could have.

They went to bed early in an upstairs bedroom, both agreeing they were too tired for sex. He took it as a good relationship sign that they were both comfortable enough to just sleep together.

A clap of thunder startled David awake. The sound of rain on the roof was comforting, as was Cassy’s soft breathing on his

neck.

Then he heard what he first thought was another clap of thunder, but the way it reverberated made it sound like a gunshot. *Hunters*, he thought. *But in the middle of the night?*

He decided to go downstairs and make sure the door was locked, just in case.

As he entered the living room, he stopped short. A shadowy figure was in the rocking chair. His heart raced as he racked his brain for what was in the room that he could grab to use as a weapon.

A moment later, a flash of lightning lit up the room. It was Gus in the chair. David sighed in relief and hit the light switch to turn on the overhead antler chandelier.

“Hey, Gus, you scared the— Shit!” David yelled, recoiling again. Gus was missing part of his left leg below the knee. A pool of blood had formed on the floor beneath the severed limb. He was clutching a rifle to his chest.

“I think I scared him off,” Gus said. “Back at my house, there’s a secret room behind the furnace. You’ll be safe there.”

“What?” David asked. “Scared who off?” But he knew the questions were useless. This was another vision.

There was a second bright flash of lightning, and the room was plunged into darkness. A rumble of thunder followed. Then the lights flickered back on as David heard an emergency generator starting up. The vision of Gus was gone. So was the pool of blood on the floor.

Cassy was suddenly behind him. “What’s going on?”

“Power failure,” David said. “Sounds like Gus has an automatic generator connected.”

“It’s really loud,” she said.

“Yeah, I’ll find it and turn it off. We can do without power until the morning.”

She shuffled off back to bed, and David was left alone with his thoughts. He was relatively calm and felt more curious than frightened. Obviously, it had all been a dream or one of his hallucinations. But did it mean something? It had seemed so real.

The rain had stopped, and he went outside into the damp mist.

David found the generator out back and turned it off. It sputtered, leaving the smell of exhaust in the air.

The sound of crickets returned as he went back into the cabin.

Gary's theory that a bunch of people were trying to drive David crazy because his house held hidden treasure would not hold water with this vision. He saw Gus with part of his leg blown off one moment, then watched him vanish in the blink of an eye. David was sure Gary could explain how to do something like that with holographic projection, or something, but David was convinced more than ever it was a hallucination and not some elaborate con job.

But then, how well did he know Gus? As he'd said to Cassy earlier, he'd really only known him for a few months. Someone next door who knew the house's history might be persuaded to join a crew of con men bent on getting their hands on the house. And sending David up to this remote cabin would be a perfect opportunity to pull another hoax. David was already on the edge of selling his house back to Mullins. Something like this could push him over the edge.

He pushed away the thought. It was bad enough Gary put doubts about Cassy in his mind. Now David was doing it himself because he so desperately wanted to not be crazy.

He sat in the rocking chair that faux Gus had been in only moments before.

This is my life now, he thought as he gently rocked in the chair. *The price for my new lease on life is a hole in my brain that lets in the crazy.*

* * *

David popped a Xanax his neurologist had prescribed and settled back into his bed. He had been in the house alone the night before and there had been no visions. *Maybe it's run its course*, he thought.

He was fast-forwarding the *Tonight Show* on his laptop. It featured an episode Gary was on. He was doing a trick where he sawed off his own fingers and put them back on. Gary dialed back the amount of blood for network TV, but it was still impressive – sleight of hand using his own hand.

David's phone rang; the display said it was *Gary the Gory*.

"Speak of the devil," David answered. "I'm watching you on streaming right now."

"I did okay, could have been better. I didn't get called over to the couch."

"Your act is too edgy for network TV. You guys back in town?"

"Yeah, we just got back in. We found an apartment when we were in Vegas. Just a small one-bedroom, but it's temporary until a space opens up at the Rio."

He heard Shannon yell, "Hello, David!"

"Shannon says hi."

"Tell her hi back. Are you two married now?"

"No, we can't get married without my best man. We'll probably do it next spring."

"Or this winter!" he heard Shannon yell.

"You back for long?"

"No, I'm leaving again for a gig in Denver. I'll be back in a couple of days. Then I'm in San Francisco for a month in the Hocus-Pocus Room. I'll send you tickets."

"Okay, good seats this time, nothing behind a pillar."

“How’d your weekend with Cassy at the cabin go?” Gary asked.

David’s mind returned to the horrible image of Gus with his leg shot off, but he didn’t want to tell Gary about it over the phone. “We had a great time.”

“I had the cadaver dogs ready to find you if she killed you and buried you in the woods,” Gary said. “Maybe she’s not a grifter, or maybe just one who’s squeamish about killing. Still, Shannon thinks she’s after your money.”

“I did not say that, David!” Shannon said. David heard her grabbing the phone out of Gary’s hand. “He’s a liar, David, a filthy wanker, but you know this about him.” She handed the phone back to Gary.

“If I had money, I would be worried,” David said.

“I bought a bunch of surveillance cameras in Vegas,” Gary said. “I thought we would plant them all over your house so we can catch the grifters red-handed. These are super tiny. We can hide them in anything.”

David wondered why he hadn’t thought of that himself. “That’s a great idea!”

“I’m free next Friday,” Gary said. “I’ll come for a sleepover.”

“Sounds like a plan. Give Shannon a kiss from me,” David said, and ended the call. He restarted his paused screen.

After reattaching his fingers to a round of gasps and applause, Gary took a top hat from a trunk he had next to him and popped it on his head. “Yes, I’m a little old-school,” he said. “I like to look the part.” He removed the top hat to reveal another top hat beneath it. “And I always travel with a spare. ‘Be prepared’ is part of the magician’s code.”

He set both top hats on a table in front of him with a flourish. “Now for that classic trick, pulling a rabbit out of a hat.” As his background music swelled, he reached into the first hat and pulled out a big rat. “Close enough.”

The audience laughed, and Gary put the rat into the second hat. Then, from out of the first hat, he produced a cat and stuffed it into the second hat. The audience laughed again. Then he took out a small dog and got a bigger laugh as he made the dog also disappear into the second hat.

The phone rang again and David paused the screen.

The display said it was an unknown number. "Hello," David answered. All he could hear on the other end was a buzzing sound.

Then a voice full of static. "I keep losing you...." Despite the interference, it sounded like Cassy. "Why are you so far away?"

"Cassy?"

A static-filled angry male voice said, "Stay in the house," before the phone went dead. *Well, at least I had one night off from the ghosts*, he thought. He looked down at the screen and the clock said 8:30. The low-battery alert popped on, but only for a second before the phone died.

He plugged it into the charger on his nightstand and resumed his stream of the *Tonight Show*, but it became lost in a snow of static, like the kind you would see on old cathode ray tube TVs back in the day, with the accompanying static hiss. From the snow emerged the image of a man engulfed in flames. He appeared to be reaching toward David, but whether it was for help or to pull him into the fire was impossible to say. The closed captioning was on and showing *Fitz, Fitz, Fitz*.

David slammed the lid of his laptop shut. The same loud static buzz was coming from downstairs. His restful night went into full panic mode as he realized he was not alone.

He grabbed his softball bat and made his way down the stairs. He could see the glow of the TV set coming from the living room, and when the room came into view, he saw a family sitting on his couch watching TV. A father, mother, a young boy, and young girl just sitting there like it was *their* living room.

“Can I help you?” David said with a mix of anger and bewilderment.

In unison, the entire family turned and looked at him, yet said nothing. They turned back to the TV as if what they were watching was too hard to look away from.

“Listen, I hate to be unneighborly but this isn’t a motel...” He knew it was another hallucination, but this one was more irritating than scary. *Now they’re coming in packs of four.*

The family pointed to the TV screen with horrified looks on their faces. The father and mother covered the eyes of the children. This was all done in eerie silence. The only sound was the static from the TV, which seemed to grow louder, the buzzing filling the room. David hadn’t seen static on a TV in years, especially a flat-screen TV.

He cautiously made his way farther into the room, where he could see the screen. If these visions were coming from his subconscious, this might be one of the things it wanted him to see.

The man in flames was on this screen, just as he had been on the laptop upstairs.

The family turned and frantically pointed to something behind David.

He turned to see the burning man marching toward him like a Frankenstein monster, arms out and saying, “Fitz, Fitz, Fitz.”

“This is a hallucination. It isn’t real,” David muttered to himself, but he still backed away from the man. He stumbled over the coffee table and hit his head hard on the floor. The world went black.

David awoke to find himself in bed. *Was that a dream?* But the lump on his head said he had at least been sleepwalking.

He went downstairs, glad to find the Addams Family was no longer haunting his living room.

The cat wandered in and meowed for its breakfast.

“Why these visions?” he asked the cat as it led him into the kitchen. “If they’re being produced by my mind, why? If they’re ghosts, which I’m not ruling out, why haunt me?”

The cat meowed again, pacing around its empty food bowl.

“More importantly, why am I asking a cat?”

The cat did not answer him, just watched patiently as David opened a can of cat food and dumped it into its bowl.

I’ve got to find this Fitz or Kang guy, he thought. There has to be a connection to what’s in my brain or to the ghosts.

The flame ghost was new. He was much shorter than the mangled-face guy. Again, David speculated on why his subconscious would create these images specifically. There was a theme. An angry man with a mangled face. A homeless man with a burned face. A sick little girl and a vision of a sickly Cassy. And now, a man totally in flames. All these were images of death and decay. Of hell. Was this just his mind’s way of processing the trauma of what he had put himself through? A punishment for the suicide attempt?

Deep down he knew, thinking of these hallucinations as ghosts was a way of avoiding the soul-searching he would have to do to get his mental health back. This old, creepy house wasn’t helping either. David made the decision to get out of the house for a night. Whether the house was haunted, or he was only using it as an excuse for his paranoid delusions, it would be good to sleep somewhere else tonight.

* * *

“Just one night?” the hotel clerk asked.

“Yeah,” David said, though the truth was he wasn’t sure when – or if – he’d be ready to spend another night in his house. He hadn’t run into a ghost that day at work, so maybe it was the house that was triggering things now.

The clerk slid a key card across the counter. Its paper sleeve said, *Room 2030*. David slid it back. “Can I get another room? This number is bad luck for me.”

The clerk obliged, and moments later, David had the key to room 2034.

David punched the button for the elevator. The doors slid open, and he was confronted with an elevator full of horror: a zombie, a woman with an axe in her skull, a man with a purple face and a noose around his neck.

David stepped back, gasping, and was about to flee when a voice called out from behind him, "About time! You guys look great."

"Thanks, you too," the axe woman called. He turned to see a woman dressed as a vampire, smiling and waving. The drunken monsters pushed their way past him to join their friend and the four of them disappeared down a hallway, past an easel holding a sign that read, *Halloween Ball, Pacific Ballroom*.

Feeling silly, David boarded the elevator and pushed the button for his floor.

Once safely in the room, he ordered room service. After a steak dinner and a few beers, he drew himself a warm bath and heated water for more of his pot-spiked herbal tea. As he settled into the tub, he thought, *Why didn't I think of this before?*

He soaked and sipped his tea, and the tension and anxiety of the day melted away.

After his restless night, the warm water and tea made him sleepy. He felt like he could drift off right there in the water. *Probably should get out*, he thought. *In a minute.*

His half-closed eyes suddenly opened wide as he felt icy fingers sliding through the hair on the back of his head. Instinctively, his hand shot up out of the water, trying to swat away or grab whatever was in his hair, but with a sudden and violent force, his head was shoved beneath the water.

He fought to sit up, but invisible hands pushed hard against his face and chest, keeping him firmly underwater. The more

he panicked, the more forcefully the hands held him. Through his water-blurred vision, an image of a man appeared.

David thrashed his head from side to side and then lurched his neck forward, momentarily breaking the surface for a desperate gasp of air. He saw the man's face clearly. His tormentor was the mangled-faced man.

The shock of seeing him again broke David's concentration, and the horrible thing pushed him under again.

David grabbed hold of his attacker's wrists and countered the downward force enough to surface one more time for another desperate gasp of air.

The evil specter dug its sharp fingernails into David's collarbones and pushed him under again.

David stopped his struggling and random thrashing and transferred his strength to what was free, his legs. He frantically felt around with his feet until his toes found the lever on the bathtub stopper. He kicked and kicked until he felt it snap up.

Under the water, his lungs were burning as he used up the last of his oxygen. The sound of the tub draining gave him hope, and he forced himself not to exhale.

His nose broke free of the waterline as it drained, and he exhaled and gasped in a big gulp of air.

With that, the force holding him down stopped. The ghost was gone.

David stayed there for a few minutes, catching his breath while the tub fully drained.

He got to shaky feet and climbed out of the tub, clutching the towel rack for support. It felt like a dream, yet when he looked in the mirror, he saw the physical damage to his body was real. There were two large bruises on his chest. He looked down to see his toes were cut from where he had kicked at the stopper's lever.

A blurry image appeared in the mirror behind his own reflection. The woman with blond hair in the blue dress. David spun around to confront her, but she wasn't there. She was gone from the mirror when David returned his gaze to the glass.

He staggered into the bedroom and collapsed onto the bed just as his phone rang. He pressed the button to take the call, but was too out of breath to talk.

There was a buzzing sound at the other end and a woman's voice said, "We are...(static)...keep...(static)...losing you...."

A male voice came through the static and said, "...I think I scared him off...."

The woman's voice added, "You will be safe tonight...." Then the line went dead.

My march to insanity continues, he thought. Nothing he did seemed to stop the disturbing visions.

No, not visions, he thought, looking down at his bruised chest. A vision couldn't hold him underwater. *It might be time to lean into pseudo-science and start believing in ghosts before it tries to kill me again*, he thought. "I'm not going down without a fight!" he shouted.

Chapter Seven

A Pill That Makes You Smaller

David barely slept that night. He checked out of the hotel before sunrise and returned home.

If these horrible visions are coming from my mind, he thought, I was stupid to think I could get away from them by changing locations. And, if I'm haunted, I'll have to deal with that too.

In bad horror movies, people always went back into haunted houses instead of leaving. Now, here he was doing the same thing. But if there were any answers to his problems, they were inside. It was something he would have to face.

How exactly was he going to find those answers? He had no idea. But as the sun came up, he was determined to at least get on with his life as he tried to figure it out.

David went to work and had an uneventful day, at least as far as hallucinations went. But on the bus ride home, his mind began to race again. He had a hard time sitting still and was grateful when he finally got to his stop.

Instead of going home, he decided to just walk around for a while. Maybe that would burn off his nervous energy. He was out of Xanax so it probably was just a side effect of coming down off of the drug. It was a onetime prescription, and he hadn't asked his doctor for a refill yet.

David stopped to watch some kids playing basketball in a small park. Then he felt like a creep just staring at them, so he walked on.

Between the lack of sleep and the Xanax withdrawal, David felt very strange. He became breathless and sweaty and felt like he was going to faint, so he sat down on a park bench to

rest. He put his head between his legs because that was what he heard you should do to avoid fainting.

“You okay, man?” an unfamiliar voice asked.

David sat up and saw the kid he had seen at the bus stop a few weeks back. The drug dealer. David had seen him around the neighborhood a few times after that day, so figured the kid lived nearby.

“Just got a little dizzy,” he said. “Just went off my Xanax.” David had no idea why he told him that. The kid was a drug dealer, not a pharmacist.

“I got some if you need it,” the kid said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Whatever you need. Xanax, Molly, Ritalin, Adderall, Viagra. Not that I think you need Viagra, man, but, you know, for recreational use. I don’t sell crack or horse, those are nasty. But I can get just about anything else.”

“How much for some Xanax?”

“Fifty for five.”

“Okay,” David said. He figured that would hold him until he could get a new prescription from his doctor. He took two twenties and a ten from his wallet and handed it to the kid. A baggie of pills went into the palm of David’s hand as the cash came out.

“You got anything for a scattered brain?” David asked.

“Yeah, Adderall. Helps you focus. I sell a lot to college kids studying for tests.”

“Interesting,” David said.

He slipped David another bag of pills.

“I’m tapped out of cash,” David said.

“It’s okay. I’ve seen you around the neighborhood. I’m guessing you’re good for it. I’m D’Angelo, by the way.”

“David. I live over on Hill Street.”

“You the guy that bought the creepy-ass house?”

David laughed. “That’s me. And you have no idea.”

“Well, wave me down if you need some more medication,” D’Angelo said.

With that, he continued on his way, leaving David on the bench.

The irony that David was now part of the problem had not escaped him. He felt bad that he was encouraging the kid to continue to deal drugs, but that feeling went away after he popped a Xanax and went home.

* * *

After a good night’s sleep, David woke, showered, and shaved, and was ready to face his day.

He caught his bus and realized he was a good half an hour early for work. Fearing seeing visions in an empty office, he went to his favorite coffee shop and bought a pastry and a large dark roast and settled down at a table by the fireplace.

He tried to read the news on his phone while he ate his pastry, but his mind was racing again. Thought to thought, with nothing connecting them in between. He remembered his grandfather at the start of his Alzheimer’s when he would ramble on and on about nothing. That’s what it was like; words just ping-ponging in his brain.

Not being able to concentrate was never something he had suffered from before, not even with his depression. He found solace in disappearing into a novel, or going deep into computer code.

He took an Adderall from his pocket and looked at it in his hand.

“No, David, don’t!”

He turned to see a woman in a lab coat standing by his table. He recognized her as the pharmacist from his local drugstore. Her name tag read *Rachael*.

“Dr. Kendrick warned you not to self-medicate.”

“Uh,” was all David could manage to say before she continued her scolding.

“Those pills will make it hard for us to find you.”

“Oh, you’re one of them.”

He stood from the table, popped the pill into his mouth, and swallowed it defiantly. He marched out of the coffee shop and into the sunlight, leaving the vision behind him.

At work, David felt fantastic. His mind was clear and sharp. He suffered no intrusive thoughts or spectral visions. Maybe he could get through this. Maybe he had found a way to keep the ghosts away.

* * *

“That should do it,” Gary said. He was standing on a step stool, adjusting a camera he’d hidden on top of one of David’s kitchen cabinets.

“Not that I don’t appreciate this,” said David, “but it seems like overkill. The ghost hunters will be here in a few days, and I’m sure they’ll have cameras.”

“They’re looking for ghosts. I’m still not convinced this isn’t someone trying to scare you out of the house,” said Gary. “We need our own cameras. We can keep an eye on the ghost hunters, in case they’re in on it, and catch any humans that might be sneaking around.”

David had kept Gary up to date on all the recent ghost sightings, which Gary quickly categorized with his skeptic mind.

David told him about seeing the vision of Gus at the cabin. “How could someone fake something like that?” David asked.

“You would be surprised what you can do with mirrors,” Gary said. “It’s how I make that corpse disappear in my act. Everything happens offstage and is bounced off a few mirrors to make it look like the action is happening onstage.”

David liked when Gary revealed secrets. It made him feel like he was part of the magic community.

“Okay,” David said, “the ghost family could have been hired to sit on my couch, but what about the flaming ghost?”

“Could have been a dream. You said yourself you woke up in bed and don’t remember how you got there.”

“It seemed so real,” David said.

“A skilled stuntman could pull off the burning suit trick,” Gary said. “It’s complicated, but can be done.”

David reminded him that Shannon had seen a ghost too.

“I know you think I have a closed mind about the ghost theory, but I really don’t,” Gary said. “But we know Gus isn’t a ghost, don’t we? When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Your ghost hunters are going to see ghosts. I’m going to see tricksters. Your shrink is going to explain it all as brain damage. Let’s just entertain my idea for a while that it’s people doing this. It’s as good a theory as any.”

He was fiddling with a nanny cam he had implanted in a *Star Wars* stormtrooper toy.

“And as much as I still think Cassy’s sexcapades could be a wet dream, we can’t rule out human trickery on that one either.”

Gary placed the one-foot-high stormtrooper action figure on a bookcase that gave it a view of the living room and front door.

The camera in the kitchen would cover the back door and the door leading down to the basement.

“No one is getting in here without us seeing them, and I think even ghosts show up on video,” Gary speculated.

“Do they though?” David asked.

“Did you see *Paranormal Activity*? They love to be in front of the camera. I’ve hooked it into your TiVo, so we should get a full eight hours of video.”

“Thanks for spending the night again,” David said.

They had dinner, played some video games, then turned in for the night.

David was brushing his teeth in the upstairs bathroom when he heard dripping coming from the tub. The plumber had been out twice to fix it so he was more than a little perturbed it was dripping again.

He bent down over the sink to rinse and spit. He straightened up, looked in the mirror, and saw the shower curtain move in its reflection.

“Gary?”

There was no response, but there was a faint splashing sound.

“If you’re trying to scare me, stop! It isn’t funny.”

He marched over to the tub and angrily pulled back the curtain. It wasn’t Gary in the tub. It was David himself. Horrified, he looked at himself naked with his wrists slit. Unlike his failed suicide attempt, the cuts were deep and gushing blood out into the water with every heartbeat. On the wall, written in blood, was *Kill Fitz*. His ghostly doppelgänger looked up at him with pleading eyes and said, “Open your eyes, David.”

He yelled for Gary, but in a flash the vision was gone, the tub dry and free of bloody texts.

Gary appeared in the doorway. “Another one?”

David was trembling. “It was me this time.” He could barely get the words out. “Explain that!”

“CGI video projected onto the shower curtain,” Gary said. “Sneaky bastards. I never thought to put a camera up here.”

David took a few deep breaths. Gary put a steadying hand on his shoulder.

After a moment, David said, “I like the fact you have answers for every ghost situation, even if they are preposterous.”

“I’ll admit, without some sort of proof, my theories are just as out there as ghosts,” Gary said. “Want me to sleep in your room in case it comes back?”

“No,” David said. “This isn’t like that time camping when the bear was wandering through our camp.”

“It was a raccoon.”

“It was a bear. We saw the footprints the next day!”

“Not how I remember it,” Gary said. His smile and teasing made David feel better, and they both went back to their rooms.

* * *

After a restless night, Gary and David sat down to review the video. They fast-forwarded through hours of empty rooms, stopping occasionally when there was a blur, which turned out to be the cat wandering through or jumping onto the couch to sleep.

Then, around 2:00 a.m. according to the time code, they heard a buzz on the tape and saw a glitch in the video. Gary stopped it and backed up frame by frame.

In a single, clear frame, they saw a family sitting on the couch. The ghost dad was looking straight into the camera with a look of terror on his face.

“That’s them!” David shouted. He should have been terrified, but he was gleeful to finally have proof.

“Who the fuck are they?” Gary asked, as he checked the frame before and after. Each of those was of an empty couch.

“That’s the ghost family. I thought it was all a dream, but here it is!”

“We could have picked up something from the TiVo that didn’t get erased,” Gary said.

“Funny, I don’t remember recording a show that takes place in *my* living room!”

“Okay, I admit this is really, really weird,” Gary said. “I know it still could be humans doing this. I mean, all they had to do was sneak in here and mess with the recording, but I don’t know how they could have done it.”

“And if they did,” David said, “how did they get in without showing up on the recording or making any noise that would wake us up?”

“I’m baffled,” Gary said. “If this is a con, I don’t see the point of it. The family on the couch didn’t scare you out of the house. I mean, it hadn’t before, so why do it again?”

David pointed to the screen. “At least these are the nice ghosts. They warned me about the ghost in flames.”

“Then again, if it is ghosts, why are there so many in one house? And why did you see ghosts at your office and a hotel?”

David reminded Gary about what Professor Lembeck had said about David being haunted and not the house.

“Still, doesn’t answer any of the ‘why’ questions, though, does it?” Gary said.

“Are you at least willing to entertain the idea it’s ghosts?” David asked.

“Yeah, I guess so. It is all very weird. When you rule out the possible, you must consider the impossible.”

“I’ve got the ghost hunters coming this week. Maybe I can get some answers from the experts.”

* * *

David had met his dealer, D’Angelo, once during the last week to re-up his Adderall. He had gotten a legitimate prescription for Xanax from his physician, so he was good there.

David’s medical regimen was simple: a couple of Adderalls during the day to keep the visions away, and a Xanax at night to bring him down so he could sleep.

He still had hallucinations, but upping his dose of Adderall seemed to be working. He hadn't seen a 'ghost' since the vision of himself in the bathtub. But he knew he couldn't stay on the drug forever. He would become addicted, if he wasn't already. And the side effects weren't pleasant: an irregular heartbeat, sweating, and depression when he came down. So what he needed was something stronger. Something that turned off the hallucinations directly, not just something to refocus his mind, which was all the Adderall was doing.

David and D'Angelo chatted a bit every time they met up, and David had learned that D'Angelo wasn't from the neighborhood at all. In fact, he lived in a nearby suburb and his parents were both doctors.

D'Angelo would steal their prescription pads and, with the help of some friends, he could get just about any prescribed drug.

"If your parents are rich, why risk your future selling drugs?" David had asked him.

"We aren't that rich. They work in free clinics and at the VA. Besides, I mostly sell to college kids. The risk is pretty low. I'm saving up money to start my own recording studio. I want to produce tracks. Anyway, I don't need you to be looking out for me."

"Fair enough," David said.

That day, on their usual park bench, David paid for his regular Adderall order via electronic payment and asked, "So, you can get any prescription drug?"

"Yeah. I mean, Oxy would be hard. They track that stuff now. I won't get you fentanyl. That drug is nasty. It's what killed Michael Jackson and Prince. But I can get you just about anything else. Why, what do you need?"

"I need to get my hands on some Nuplazid, generic name 'pimavanserin'," David said, handing him a slip of paper with the name written on it.

"What's it do?"

David lied, telling him it was an anti-seizure medicine. In reality, it was a drug Parkinson's patients took to ward off hallucinations. Maybe this was what could wean David off Adderall.

"Why not just get it from your doctor?"

"It's complicated."

"Okay, didn't mean to pry," D'Angelo said. He tucked the piece of paper into his shirt pocket and left the bench.

David popped an Adderall and went home.

* * *

Gary pulled up in front of David's house and honked his horn. Shannon waved excitedly from the passenger seat as David pulled the front door shut and made sure it was locked. He needed to get out of the house and was tagging along on some wedding planning errands.

"I found him!" Gary said excitedly as David climbed into the back seat.

"Who?"

"He found the ghooooost dad!" Shannon said in her best spooky voice. She twisted around in her seat as Gary pulled away from the curb and held up her phone, displaying a fuzzy screenshot of the ghostly man they'd captured on video with his family.

"And he's no ghost," Gary said.

"Who is he? How did you find him?"

They merged onto the highway, where traffic was moving at a glacial pace.

"I have a friend on the police force who ran the picture we got from the video camera," Gary said. "The guy's got a record. His name is Jesús Mendes, and get this, he did ninety days for selling real estate without a license. Fraud, David. Just the kind of guy who might be willing to help some grifters get their hands on your house."

“Or maybe he just let his real estate license expire,” David said. “But I guess the ghost family could be one for the ‘grifter’ column.”

Traffic was at a complete standstill.

“What is going on here? I should have never got on the highway,” Gary said.

“It’s only two miles to the exit,” Shannon said. She turned back to David. “Maybe we should pull a reverse con on these grifters, like they do in the movies.”

“Sure,” David said. “You’re the mastermind of the group, Shannon. You work out the plan.”

“I can hear the sarcasm in your voice, David. I know you’re slagging me. But we could figure out why they want you out of the house and foil their diabolical plot.”

“Well, I have ghost hunters coming over tomorrow to check out the house, so if they don’t find anything, we’ll refocus our efforts on setting up an elaborate sting.”

“Or finding the buried treasure,” she added. “We still haven’t snaked the walls with that camera we bought. Or dug a hole in the cellar.”

She turned her head back to the highway. “Gary, we’re going to be late for the cake tasting. Drive on the shoulder.”

“I’ll get a ticket.”

“Oh, live life on the edge, Gary. I’m not marrying you if you can’t take a risk now and then.”

Gary took this as a challenge, pulled into the shoulder lane, and floored it to the exit.

They made it to the bakery with plenty of time to spare.

“This is amazing,” Gary said, stuffing a forkful of caramel cream vanilla cake into his mouth. “I’m getting fat. This is the third place we’ve tried out this week.”

Shannon was on her phone talking to the bridal shop.

David nodded in agreement, his mouth full of chocolate hazelnut cake with cream cheese frosting.

“This is the fun part of the errands. Unfortunately, now we have to look at bridesmaid dresses. She only has two bridesmaids coming, but apparently one is an autumn and one is a summer, so there is a whole color palette problem.”

Gary took a bite of the lemon chiffon, then added, “And then there are the tuxes. We have to squeeze my fat brother into one and he isn’t happy about it, even though I offered to pay for it. You’ll look pretty dapper, though.”

“Let’s go,” Shannon ordered. “The seamstress called. My dress is ready. The shop is just down the street.”

Gary snuck in another taste of cake as they got up from the table. They told the baker they’d let her know their decision in a few days and left for the dress shop.

“I thought it was bad luck for me to see you in your dress,” Gary said.

“It is, so you’ll wait in the car and David can be stunned by my bridal beauty.”

David sighed and said, “Don’t you have a woman friend who can....”

“No, you will be honest with me. They wouldn’t. You have to tell me if I look like an off-white cow in the dress.”

He agreed he would be honest, but he wasn’t looking forward to it.

Gary chose to wait in the bar across the street, and David and Shannon went into the bridal shop.

“Oh, this must be the groom,” the seamstress said, grabbing David’s hand.

“God, no!” Shannon said, then walked it back. “Not that you couldn’t be. Sorry, David, you most certainly could be a husband to someone. Just not me.”

It took nearly half an hour to get her into the dress behind the screen. David sat in a pink-upholstered chair, sipping complimentary champagne and scrolling through social media while he waited.

She emerged in a satin-and-lace cloud, her hair swept back into a messy bun so the focus would be entirely on the dress. It was formfitting through the bodice and waist, then poofed out into a full skirt and short train.

David had been running through appropriate responses in his mind as she changed, but found he didn't need any of them. "Wow," was all he could start with. Then, "You look like a princess."

Shannon smiled shyly, then gathered up the train and excess material and walked over to look in the full-length mirror.

"I do, a bit, don't I?" She put her hands to her face, smiling in delight, then gathered herself for a more critical look. "Front looks good. What about the back? David? Do I look like a fat dollop of whipped cream from behind?"

"Nope. More like a meringue."

She whipped around – as much as she could, considering the sheer volume of fabric she was draped in – to glare at him, then craned her neck to see her backside in the mirror.

"I was kidding!" David said.

"Well, now I can't unsee it."

"Here," the seamstress said, adjusting the skirt and train so they draped properly. "That's better."

"It really is gorgeous, Shan," David said.

She couldn't take her eyes off her own reflection. "It is, isn't it?" She sighed happily. "Okay, we're good," she told the seamstress. They went off behind the screen again to start the lengthy process of getting her out of the dress.

David sat back down and started flipping through a bridal magazine, which had a surprising amount of nudity in the ads.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned to look. Shannon was standing there in the wedding dress. His confusion gave way to a feeling of dread, as she did not look 'right'. The dress was a dingy yellow. Her hair was cut short, her face pale and sullen. The faint buzzing in his left ear told him it had to be a hallucination.

David got up and slowly approached the apparition. He wondered if he should call out to the real Shannon. Maybe she would see it too, but before he could, the ghost took another step toward him and said, "I always knew you wanted me."

To his surprise, she put her arms around him and kissed him. He felt a physical touch, but it was like a warm breeze of summer air, as light as the satin she was wearing. David closed his eyes and felt a surge of energy spread from her lips throughout his body.

Another succubus, he thought. David had never thought of Shannon in that way, never lusted after her. She was pretty, but there had never been any flirting or chemistry between them. They were pals. This ghost, however, had given him an erection.

"Okay, on to the flowers," a voice said behind him.

He opened his eyes, and fake Shannon was gone. He turned to see the real one in her street clothes already heading out the door.

He remained a moment until he could walk normally, then left the shop.

Gary wouldn't be able to put this one in the 'grifter' column unless Shannon was in on it. Of course, Gary could be as well, if David turned his brain to full paranoid.

Shannon was already at the bar across the street, retrieving Gary from his stool.

The little girl from his dining room was standing on the sidewalk across the street, looking as pale and ghostly as she had that night. A car passed, and she was gone.

The hallucinations were getting longer and more frequent, and he told himself to hang on until D'Angelo came through with those antipsychotic meds.

* * *

“We have to set up our gear, and then we’ll get going,” Professor Lembeck told David as Bill, one of his assistants, moved past them carrying a pair of equipment cases. Christina, the other assistant, was already setting up what looked like a sound-mixing board on the dining room table. Both looked rather young to David; he thought maybe they were sophomores or even freshmen.

They hauled in a lot of equipment, which made David feel better because there seemed to be real science behind it.

As the assistants set up, David talked with Professor Lembeck and found that he had a degree in parapsychology from the University of Edinburgh, one of the few schools that offered an accredited course of study. David also discovered it was pronounced Eddin-Burra, not Eddin-burg like he had always thought.

Furthermore, Lembeck had written several books on the subject and had some interesting experiences investigating the paranormal. This included a full investigation of a brownstone on West Tenth Street in New York known as ‘The House of Death’.

“It’s said to be haunted by the ghosts of at least twenty-two people,” Lembeck explained. “Including a six-year-old girl who was beaten to death by her adopted father.”

Lembeck produced snapshots from his wallet, like a grandfather showing off his grandchildren, but these all were blurry images of ghosts. “We managed to get some decent photographs using high-speed cameras.”

He handed the pictures to David. To him, they all looked like lens flares or other photographic artifacts. Except for the picture of the little girl. There was a face there in the smudge of light. A sad, lonely face. It disturbed David to look at it. It

reminded him of his own little-girl ghost from the doorbell camera, and he wondered how she had died, if she were, in fact, a ghost.

David handed the pictures back to Lembeck, who filed them back into his overstuffed wallet. “Some houses just don’t let the dead go,” he said.

The assistants continued hooking up sensors throughout the house, using the dining room as the command center. Bill carried what looked like an antenna and Christina was wearing headphones and carrying what appeared to be a large boom mic.

“We’ll start with some initial readings. Bill is monitoring for electromagnetism, and Christina is listening for sub-aural sound. Then we’ll go through the house looking for anything not normal,” Lembeck said.

Bill was waving his antenna over a dining room chair and remarked, “Wow, big spike here.”

“There was a ghost there,” David said. “A little girl playing with My Little Ponies.”

Lembeck made a note of it. He then picked up another device that looked like a steel stick and waved it over the chair. “This is really odd,” he said. “It’s ten degrees warmer than the rest of the room.” He looked at David and explained, “Usually ghosts leave a cold spot.”

The chair suddenly moved on its own, sliding away from the table.

“Someone is here,” Lembeck said. “Fascinating.”

David didn’t see a ghost there, but was encouraged that others had seen the chair move.

“I’m picking up scratching sounds,” Christina said, adjusting her headphones.

“The basement,” David said. “I hear scratching sounds from there sometimes.”

Bill had wandered into the living room. “This couch is off the charts with magnetic energy.”

“That’s where the ghost family sits and watches TV,” David explained.

Christina ripped off her headphones. “The scratching noise just got super loud.”

“I think a trip to the basement is in order,” Lembeck said.

David led them into the kitchen and down the stairs.

“I have a hard time keeping the lights on down here,” he explained. “Lightbulbs burn out constantly.”

Lembeck and his assistants waved their instruments around.

“Jesus,” Bill said. “It’s like we’re standing on an electromagnet. The readings are going crazy.”

Lembeck waved his wand over the ground near the coal bin. “Twenty degrees warmer than the rest of the room. I’ve never seen any readings like this. Why hot?”

“The scratching sound is located there,” Christina said, pulling off her headphones again. “It’s so loud, it sounds like...well, something alive.”

The pickaxe and shovel David bought at the hardware store on Shannon’s recommendation leaned against the wall near the furnace. He hadn’t had the time to do any digging and the price tag was still dangling from the pickaxe.

“Let’s see what’s buried here,” David said, picking up the pickaxe.

It took a few strikes to get the dirt floor to break. What was once like concrete turned to soft powder. *Shannon really knows her stuff*, he thought.

He switched over to the shovel and the scratching sound became louder and more frenzied.

He lifted out shovelfuls of dirt until he hit what sounded like metal.

“Septic tank?” he asked Lembeck.

“Probably an old cistern,” Lembeck said. “Houses of this time had them to store rainwater that was hand-pumped up for washing and flushing toilets.”

David ran his hand over the metal. “Feels really rusted.”

“There’s something in there,” Christina warned. But they all knew that, for the sound was echoing against the metal container.

David switched out the shovel for the pickaxe and gave the metal a good thwack. It busted through with ease, sending a three-foot piece of rusty metal tumbling into the abyss below.

The sound went silent for a moment, as if opening the hole had disturbed what was down there enough to get its attention. Then, up from the dark hole, the horrible scratching sound resumed, along with a cacophony of squeaks and hissing.

A terrible, strong smell of rot and decay wafted up from the hole, sending them all backing away.

“My god, what is that?” David asked, pinching his nose closed.

“Shit!” Bill yelled. He dropped his device and backed away. “Ghost!”

The others looked toward where he was pointing and saw him. The tall man with the mangled face in the corner of the basement.

Christina dropped her mic, pulled out her cell phone, and activated the video camera, but as she did, the ghost vanished.

An unnatural rumbling sound emanated from the hole.

Then, in an eruption of brown and gray, a torrent of rats poured out of the hole as if they were being led out by some invisible Pied Piper. Hundreds of them filled up the basement space with such a force they looked like a river of fur swirling around the humans’ legs.

As the four of them kicked and fought their way to the stairs, the rats started to bite at their feet and ankles.

David smashed them wildly with his shovel. Then he found that scooping them up in shovelfuls and flinging them was more efficient, and started clearing a path to the stairs.

The humans jumped up onto the stairs, leaving the sea of snapping rodents behind them.

The rats regrouped and created a stream that chased the humans up the steps. The four of them pushed their way into the kitchen, now carried on a tide of rats. There seemed to be more of them now and they just kept coming, a nightmare of fur and teeth.

Bill managed to open the back door and flee into the backyard.

Some rats followed him out into the yard as another stream of vermin cut off the other three from the backyard door, forcing them into the dining room. The rats followed, only to be turned back by the snarling and hissing of the cat.

The rats could have easily attacked the cat as they had the humans, but the cat held its ground, not letting any of them take that route into the rest of the house.

That stream of rats backtracked through the swinging kitchen door and joined their brothers and sisters, making for the outside.

Bill was standing on top of the picnic table as they swirled around him.

The other humans continued on into the living room and climbed onto the sofa. David held his shovel at the ready to fend off any rat that made it past Cat, but none did. Soon the kitchen went quiet as the last of the vermin left out the back door.

The three of them stood on the couch trying to catch their breath as the cat calmly jumped onto a chair and started to clean itself, as if this was just an ordinary day of rat herding.

“Good kitty,” David said.

Bill came in through the kitchen, wielding a rake as a rat weapon.

“Everyone okay?” he asked.

Everyone checked themselves. Lembeck had bleeding bites on his ankles and up his calf where they had managed to bite through his clothing. Bill and Christina had bites on their ankles and hands. David was surprisingly unscathed.

David went upstairs and returned with rubbing alcohol and a first aid kit and helped the others tend to their wounds.

“You all saw him, right?” Christina asked. “The tall man with the messed-up face?”

“I did. I think he turned the rats on us,” Lembeck said, as he swabbed his wounds with a cotton ball soaked in alcohol.

“I’ve seen him down there before,” David said. “And he’s the one who tried to drown me in a hotel tub.”

After they cleaned and bandaged their bites, Lembeck and Christina started checking their equipment while David and Bill went outside to see if the rats were still around. There was no sign of them now.

They returned to the house, closing the back door behind them.

“They’re gone,” David said. “Is this something ghosts do? Send a plague of rats?”

“Animal infestations aren’t unheard of,” Lembeck said. “There have been reports they amass flies or birds in haunted houses. This is the first time I’ve seen rats.”

“Hopefully the last too,” said Christina.

Lembeck opened his laptop computer on the coffee table. “Somehow this house is drawing ghosts who don’t have an apparent connection to it. There is an incredible amount of electromagnetic energy here. Maybe that’s the key.”

“But what about ghosts he’s seen outside the house?” Christina asked. “That would indicate *he’s* the one haunted and not the house.”

“I see more in the house, though,” David pointed out.

“I still think the two are tied together somehow,” Lembeck said. “All his troubles began when he bought the house. I think this place is a thin spot between worlds. Throw in someone who is sensitive to the paranormal and you have a recipe for disaster.”

“I’d never describe myself as being ‘sensitive to the paranormal,’” David said. “I’ve never had any experience like this before.”

“You did have a brain tumor, though,” said Lembeck. “It’s possible that has increased your sensitivity to the spirits. I’ve never heard of that happening before, but there’s always a first time.”

“So he’s picking up the ghosts here and dragging them outside of the house,” Bill speculated.

“Possibly. David, if you don’t mind, I’d like to leave the infrared cameras we set up,” Lembeck said. “See what we get after a few days.”

“No, not at all. Knock yourselves out,” David said. “My friend Gary and I set up video cameras. We didn’t get much, just a single frame of ghosts.”

“These cameras work in the infrared spectrum,” Christina explained. “With as warm as they are, we should get something.”

Lembeck and his crew finished installing their cameras in the downstairs, basement, and upstairs. Lembeck said they would be monitoring remotely.

“I’ll try to remember not to walk around naked,” David said.

Bill returned from the basement with two rats in a plastic bag. “We should have these tested for rabies,” he said.

“I’m so sorry I got you guys into this,” David said. The thought of them having to go through painful rabies treatments was almost too much guilt for him to bear. “Maybe this isn’t something we should be investigating.”

Professor Lembeck put his hand on David’s shoulder. “We should and will get to the bottom of this. For you and for science. I’ve been doing this work for years now and this just might be the closest I have ever gotten to proof.”

After they left, David burst into tears. He wasn’t sure if it was because he was coming down from an adrenaline rush, or that he was relieved that all these visions had an explanation. It was a crazy explanation, but it meant he himself was sane. It was fucking ghosts all along.

Ghosts were something he could get rid of. At least he hoped so. *Maybe if I transfer ownership of the house, the ghosts will latch on to someone else*, he thought. But would he feel guilty inflicting the ghosts on some other person?

On the other hand, he did tell Mullins about the ghosts and he still wanted to buy the house. So why shouldn’t he sell it to him? Maybe David was just more sensitive to haunting and Mullins would be fine with owning the house. At the very least, a rich guy could afford to walk away from the house, burn it down if he had to.

“I’m done,” David said, out loud to the ghosts. “It doesn’t matter if the river of rats is part of a con scaring me out of the house, or if it is ghosts trying to kill me. I give up.”

I’m calling Mullins in the morning and accepting his offer. The house and the ghosts can be his problem, he thought.

* * *

David saw no signs of rats the next day, or the cat, for that matter. The cat was always coming and going without David ever opening a door for it. There were times he wondered if the cat was a ghost, but other people had seen and petted it, so it probably was a real cat. At least a Schrödinger’s cat, both alive and dead at the same time.

David called the exterminator again. *Let's see how good their warranty is*, he thought.

The exterminator was very apologetic when he came and promised David a second round of traps and poison would do it.

“There’s no sign of them,” he said, coming up from the basement. “I dropped some poison down that hole and I’ll put some more bait traps around the yard. At least we know how they got into the house – a drainpipe on the roof that used to funnel water into the cistern. I think you mentioned that a new roof is on your project list. If I were you, I’d get the roofer to cap that pipe off while they’re up there.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that, thanks.”

But really, he was hoping to make the whole thing someone else’s problem. The rats made him want to sell the house more than ever.

He’d called Mullins first thing that morning, and left a message with his assistant. It was hours later now, and Mullins still hadn’t called him back.

He called again.

“Glad you called,” Mullins said. “My real estate agent just finished drawing up the offer. Why don’t we meet for drinks to discuss it? Say, Flannigan’s on the first floor of my office building, five thirty?”

David agreed and hung up the phone.

He was feeling tired and depressed. He had stopped taking Adderall the morning the ghost hunters came. If the drug was closing the doorway to the afterlife in his brain, he didn’t want anything stopping the ghosts from manifesting themselves in front of them. He wanted scientific proof that these were ghosts, and he had gotten it.

He was working from home that day so he could let in the exterminator, but was having a hard time focusing. Every

noise in the house made him jump. He finally gave up, marked himself out, and left the house.

David arrived early at Flannigan's and was seated in a corner booth. A server stopped by and he ordered a Coke. When she left, he glanced at the TV over the bar for a moment, then jumped. A man was suddenly sitting across from him in the booth. He was wearing a nice suit, so at first glance he thought it was Mullins's real estate agent. But David hadn't seen him sit down, and the server didn't ask for his order, so from that and a faint buzzing in his ears, David deduced he had a ghost situation.

"Don't do this. Not yet," the man said. "It's not part of our plan."

"Don't do what?"

"Don't sell him the house!"

"Listen, I'm tired of the cryptic shit from you ghosts. Just tell me what this is all about. Why are you haunting me?"

The bartender and server looked over at him; he'd spoken louder than he intended. He lowered his voice, "Obviously you can talk in complete sentences and don't need to leave me vague ghost messages on my mirror."

"We are stronger now. But we can't always find you. And she told me not to tell you yet. You are not ready."

"Who is she?"

"We need you in the house," the man said. "You have to stop Fitz."

"Who's Fitz!?"

The server came over with his Coke.

"Everything okay?" she asked, setting it in front of him. The bartender was watching them closely, probably ready to rush to her aid if the crazy man in the booth did anything weird.

"Yes, sorry," David said. "Just talking to myself about a...big presentation I have to give."

“Oh, well, good luck with that,” the waitress said, smiling. She walked away.

The ghost was gone. A moment later, Mullins entered, and David waved him over. The server returned and took his order, so at least David knew he was real.

“I’m glad you changed your mind,” Mullins said. “The house belonged to my parents at one time. They gave it to me and my brother. If his name wasn’t on the deed, the government would have never seized it in the drug raid.”

David turned his attention away from Mullins when the server came with the drink. When he looked back, the two of them were not alone in the booth.

The older man ghost from David’s office, the one who had jumped off the roof, was sitting next to Mullins.

Mullins seemed unaware there was a ghost next to him and continued to talk over the specter.

“I know the house needs some work, but I have a lot of fond memories...” Mullins rambled on.

David tried to ignore the ghost. His head was swimming, and he felt faint.

David steadied himself and focused on Mullins. “...and then there’s the fact that was the last place I saw my brother happy. Seems silly considering how he died in the house, but he had a few good stable years there.”

The ghost did not like being ignored and angrily shoved his fist into Mullins’s side. The fist disappeared into Mullins’s body.

Mullins continued to talk about his childhood, but then grimaced and put a hand to his chest. “Oh, shit. My pacemaker seems to be acting up again.”

“Stop it!” David said to the ghost in an angry whisper.

“Don’t sell or we will kill him,” the ghost said calmly.

Mullins didn't seem scared, like this was something that had happened before. But then he became short of breath and started sweating. "Oh, my, this isn't good."

"Should I call 911?" David asked himself, starting to panic.

"Yeah, I think so." Mullins slumped over the table and went unconscious.

"Stop it! I won't sell!" David said, frantically sliding out of the booth to reach Mullins. "Call 911!" he yelled toward the bar. "He's having a heart attack."

The ghost vanished, but David feared it was too late for Mike Mullins.

Then Mullins gasped in a big breath of air and David helped him sit up.

"Oh, my, this is bad."

"Help is on the way," David said.

The paramedics arrived in short order, but it was too late. Mike Mullins was dead.

David thought about dashing out, but then police came in. A plainclothes detective flashed David a badge.

"I'm Detective Chen," he said.

David told Chen that Mullins had said something about his pacemaker before he died.

"The waitress said you were agitated," the cop told David. "Did you two have an argument?"

"No. I wasn't agitated. Not with him. I mean, earlier I was having a bit of a panic attack about some upcoming stuff, but Mr. Mullins and I were on friendly terms. He was buying my house."

The cop checked his notes. "According to the server, you yelled at him, 'Stop it. I'm not going to sell.' That sounds like you were arguing with him."

David squirmed in his seat. “Oh, I mean he did try to lowball me, but we came to a price we both could agree on. Maybe it was a more heated argument than I remembered, but we were both happy in the end.”

“Mr. Mullins wasn’t,” the cop mumbled.

The server was giving David an accusatory look from behind the bar, like it was David who had brought on the heart attack.

Which, in a way, it was.

Detective Chen took down David’s information and then left, much to David’s relief.

The paramedics took Mullins away on a stretcher.

They’re killing people now? David thought. If they can kill, why do they need me? Then he remembered the majority of the ghosts could manipulate electronics, but not physical matter the way the mangled-face ghost could. If they could screw up a phone, they could mess with a pacemaker.

The ghosts didn’t want David selling the house. The ghosts got what they wanted.

Why do they need me in the house? he wondered. He thought again about Fitz and Kang. They were the key to everything, but who were they? Why not tell him directly now who they were? *Give me a last name, an address, anything more than cryptic messages,* David thought. The ghosts would have to get better at communicating with him if they wanted his help.

Chapter Eight

A Troubled Mind

David was waiting for D'Angelo on the usual park bench when his phone rang. It was Professor Lembeck.

Before he even finished saying hello, Lembeck was talking excitedly. "We checked all the infrared footage. We're seeing at least a dozen ghosts. I've never seen a house this haunted before."

It felt like a fist was squeezing David's heart. To stave off a panic attack, he fell back on humor.

"You're saying I should be charging rent?"

Lembeck didn't acknowledge the joke. "The odd thing is, whenever you leave the house, the ghosts disappear. So there has to be a connection between you and the house we haven't discovered yet. If we can figure that out, maybe we can sever the connection somehow."

Then the professor started going on about a research paper he would write about the house, one that would hopefully prove the existence of ghosts. David suddenly knew how a lab rat must feel.

They made plans for Lembeck to come back to the house later that week and ended the call.

Consumed by his own thoughts, David didn't notice D'Angelo approaching the bench.

"Hey, man. You don't look so good," D'Angelo observed. David was pale and sweaty, and his right knee was bouncing up and down nervously.

"I'm fine. I've gone cold turkey off the Adderall," David said. "You got them? The Nuplazid?"

“Yeah. One a day to chase the boogeyman away,” D’Angelo said. “That’s what they’re for, right? I looked them up online. They’re an antipsychotic.”

“You’re nosy for a drug dealer,” David said, a sharp note of hostility in his voice. “Not minding your own business is not good in your line of work.”

“Sorry, just curious. I’ve never been asked for these before,” D’Angelo said, handing him a pill bottle. “Common side effects of Nuplazid include swelling in the legs or arms, nausea, confusion, hallucinations, constipation, and changes to normal walking. These are not all the possible side effects of Nuplazid. For more information, ask your healthcare provider about this medicine.”

“Sorry,” David said. “I didn’t mean to snap at you. I just got some bad things going on and I hope this will fix it.”

D’Angelo got up to leave. “Okay, man, well, let me know if they work and if you’re going to need more.”

David went home, and as soon as he stepped inside, his ears began to buzz again. *They’re here!* he thought. *This will be a good test.*

He washed the pill down with a glass of ice water, then lay down on the couch and closed his eyes for a much-needed nap.

“We won’t be ignored!” a voice called out inside his head. He opened his eyes to see Rachael, the pharmacist ghost, standing over him, hands clenched at her sides.

“This drug isn’t going to have the effect you think it will have. This is a *bad* move, David.”

He was tired of ghosts being angry at him. He closed his eyes and rolled over, hoping she would go away.

He didn’t know if she left, but he stopped hearing her.

Within minutes, his heart was racing, and he was chilled with sweat. *Shit*, he thought. *This isn’t good.*

His legs went numb. He tried to sit up but couldn't. *I'm paralyzed!* he thought. Panicked, he found his phone in his pocket. His vision blurred as if he were staring into the sun as he tried to dial 911. He just ended up randomly hitting buttons. "Texting D'Angelo," he heard the phone say as the world went silent and black.

There was nothing but the sense of passing time. Minutes, hours? He didn't know.

Then he felt *them* again. The ghosts were all around him.

"He's here!" David heard an unrecognizable voice say.

"We failed," Cassy's voice said.

They were drifting away from him, leaving him alone in the dark.

David felt as if he were in a pit of tar, being swallowed in the blackness, pulled down and suffocated.

"Why didn't he listen?" Shannon's voice called out from far away.

David felt a sharp pain in his leg. It spread rapidly up his body to his head like a jolt of electricity.

He gasped awake. The world lit up all around him, and he was back on the sofa.

D'Angelo was standing beside him holding an EpiPen in David's thigh.

David took a few deep breaths, and D'Angelo helped him sit up and handed him a metal canister with an orange cap.

"Take a hit off of this."

"What is it?"

"My asthma inhaler. Press the button on the side at the same time you inhale."

David did. It caused him to cough a few times, but he was already starting to breathe better.

“Damn, David, I thought you were dead for sure,” D’Angelo said.

“I almost was. How did you know?”

“You texted me,” D’Angelo said. “At least it was someone from your phone. The text said you were having an allergic reaction and to bring an EpiPen. Which I always carry. I didn’t think you knew that, though. Besides the asthma, I’m allergic to bee stings.”

“I guess I won’t be taking that drug again,” David said, sitting up farther on the couch and swinging his legs over to the floor. “My legs feel like I’m wearing cement shoes.”

“Why would you even want to take that drug?”

D’Angelo saved his life, so David felt like he owed him an answer. “I see dead people.”

“You mean like ghosts and shit?”

“Yeah. The Adderall was working to keep me from seeing them, but I can’t stay on it forever.”

“It’s this house, man,” D’Angelo said. “Just move. I don’t know why people stay in haunted houses. It’s weird, man.”

David laughed. “Yeah, I think moving is a pretty good idea. Especially since they seem to be getting more powerful.”

“How do you mean?”

“I didn’t text you.”

D’Angelo just stared at him for a moment. Then he said, “Listen, I have a confession to make. You are going to be mad, and I’ll understand if you want your money back.”

D’Angelo paused.

“Okay,” David said. “What is it?”

“Those drugs, the Adderall.” D’Angelo paused again to find the courage to continue. “Those were placebos, man.”

“What?”

“I don’t usually sell real drugs. I get the bottles from a wholesaler, and the pills are sugar with caffeine, but all fake. The college kids never seem to notice.”

“And the ‘Nuplazid’?”

“That one was real. I didn’t know how to fake those pills.”

David laughed and laughed until he could barely breathe.

A concerned D’Angelo asked, “Do you need another hit off the inhaler?”

David stopped laughing and caught his breath.

“No, I’m okay. Well, as okay as a guy who sees ghosts can be.”

“So, if you want your money back....”

“No. Consider it payment for a lesson well learned. I was in control of the visions all along. I *was* the one keeping them away. Just like they were telling me.”

David took out his phone and sent an electronic payment for five hundred dollars to D’Angelo.

“For your recording equipment. Thanks for saving my life. I don’t think I’ll be needing your services anymore, but let’s keep in touch.”

“Yeah. Let’s do that.”

D’Angelo left, and David looked around for signs of ghosts. There was no buzzing in his ears and he felt alone. *Maybe my second near-death experience has shut the door, he thought. If they come back, I’ll listen this time. I’ll demand they tell me exactly what it is they want me to do for them. I’m tired of being their pawn.*

* * *

David took a sip of his coffee as he read an email. He was alone in the big conference room at work, waiting for a meeting to start. Everyone was always late for these things, and he used the time to clear his inbox.

He hadn't seen a ghost at work since his first day back. David had started to think of the office as his safe place. He actually looked forward to days of normal drudgery.

He hadn't seen any ghosts at home that day either, so he let himself hope that they had moved on to haunt someone else. Maybe killing Mullins had satisfied their blood lust. He wasn't comfortable with that thought, but tried to console himself with the fact that he had told the ghosts he wasn't going to sell and to stop attacking Mullins. But he knew he had brought the ghosts to Mullins. The man's death was ultimately David's fault.

With a bang that almost made David spill his coffee, a disheveled man threw open the door and burst into the conference room. His shirt was rumpled and his tie wrinkled, like he had slept in his clothes. A stubble of beard indicated that he hadn't shaved in a day or two. *Great*, David thought. *So much for my reprieve from ghosts.*

"Where is he?" the man shouted. He seemed drunk or high on something.

"Who? Fitz?"

"Don't play dumb with me, you sack of shit!"

David picked up his laptop to use as protection, though what it would do against a ghost, he had no idea.

"Just calm down! I've had it with you ghosts."

"You think you're better than me!" the disheveled man shouted. "You're not better than me! Why are you here and not me?"

David held his laptop higher. "Back off!"

"You think you can stop me with a computer?" The man pulled out a gun from his pants pocket.

They're packing heat now? David thought. It's a ghost gun. It can't hurt you...can it?

He crouched down and did his best to hide behind his chair for what little protection it could offer, just in case ghost bullets were solid.

“Just tell me what you want,” David said, keeping his voice as calm and steady as he could. “Tell me what you want and I’ll see what I can do for you.”

“I want someone to listen to me!” the man screamed, waving the gun around.

David gathered his courage and stood to face him.

“What...do...you...want...from...me?” he said quietly, like he was talking to a child.

“Justice!” the angry man said. His voice cracked, and he seemed near tears.

“How can I do that for you?” David asked, taking a step toward him.

He pointed the gun right at David’s face. “You can start by being dead.”

David took another step forward. “That won’t bring you back, will it?”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” the man screamed, his gun hand wavering.

Through the window to the hallway, David could see a security guard rushing toward them.

“Drop it!” the guard yelled, his gun drawn and trained on the angry man.

The man turned quickly and shot the guard, hitting him in the shoulder. The guard fell back into the hallway and managed to roll out of sight as the madman rushed over, shut the door, and locked it.

David just stared. The man wasn’t a ghost, though he was about to make *David* one. With everything that had been going on, David had forgotten that there were threats in the world that weren’t supernatural.

The crazed man turned his attention back to David.

“Calm down, buddy,” David said, struggling now to keep his calm demeanor. “Whatever’s going on with you, killing me is just going to bring you a lot more trouble.”

The ghost woman from the bathroom was suddenly at David’s side, looking normal now.

The angry man was startled, so David knew he saw her too. The man raised his gun and took a shot at her, but the bullet went right through her.

The assailant looked at her, confused. His gun hand shook, and he began to cry. “Oh, thank god. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I don’t want to shoot anyone. I’m a good person.”

“The fuck you are!” David yelled, swinging his laptop up and smashing it into the side of the man’s head.

The man fell to the ground, dropping his gun. David landed on him and continued to beat the man until he was sure he wasn’t getting up again.

He sat on the unconscious man, his breath coming in harsh gasps and his hand throbbing. As the adrenaline ebbed from his body, David was horrified to see he had beaten the man to a pulp. His memory flashed on the bashed-in-face ghost who had tried to kill him in the bathtub.

David, himself, was covered with spattered blood.

He stood and staggered out into the hallway. The guard was leaning against the opposite wall, holding his shoulder. David yelled, “We need help over here!”

Nobody came. He supposed they couldn’t be sure it wasn’t the gunman yelling out. He glanced down the hall and saw a cardigan draped over the back of a desk chair. He ran to get it, then rushed back and pressed it against the guard’s shoulder.

“Hang on, man. The cops must be on their way by now.” The guard nodded weakly.

David went back down the hall. Every cube within sight appeared deserted. *Just like they trained us*, he thought. He'd never thought the active shooter training the company made them do would ever need to be used.

* * *

Someone had called 911. The police flooded into the building with the paramedics close behind.

David put his hands up as SWAT officers swarmed the floor, and held them up even after he'd told them the shooter was unconscious in the conference room. The guard, barely conscious from loss of blood, confirmed that David wasn't the gunman, and he was allowed to lower his hands and sink into a desk chair. The guard gave him a weak thumbs-up as he was wheeled past on a gurney.

The gunman was still alive as well. Relief and regret flooded through David. He had never done anything like that before and was shocked that he was capable of such violence. He was just glad that he hadn't killed the man. David didn't need another vengeful spirit after him.

Turned out the man was a forklift operator in the warehouse who had just been let go in the latest round of budget cuts. He had been replaced by a robot.

The police took the statements of David and the other office workers, and the crime scene crew went about their business.

David's coworker Mary brought him a cup of coffee. "I put a splash of brandy in it," she said. "You know, to calm your nerves."

"Thanks, but I honestly don't have any nerves left."

"That must have been frightening, but think of all the lives you saved. You're a hero."

David's supervisor, Frank, approached them. "How you doing, David?"

"He's still in shock," Mary said before he could answer.

“What causes a guy to go off the deep end like that?” Frank asked. “I’m just glad it wasn’t worse. Thank you for standing up to him like that. We’re giving you six weeks off with pay, as thanks for your bravery. And to give you time to process the trauma. Why don’t you go home and relax?”

David let out an exhausted giggle.

Frank left, and David looked across the room. A woman was talking to the police. She looked normal and was wearing a different dress than she had in the conference room, but she was definitely the melting-face ghost. *She’s alive?*

“That woman talking to the police? Who is she?” he asked Mary.

“Who? Oh, that’s Carol. She’s the new accountant. She started yesterday. Rough first week, am I right?”

David was shaking, more confused than ever.

“Do you want me to call someone to take you home, David?” Mary asked.

“No, I’ll call an Uber.”

He went over to un-dead Carol and the police officer talking to her.

“I guess office shootings are just the new normal now,” she said to the officer.

“It’s the hero of the day,” the cop said, taking David’s hand to shake it. “I hear you tried to talk him down.”

“Yeah, but he wasn’t in the mood to listen,” David said. “Do we know each other?” David asked Carol.

“No, I don’t think so. I just started yesterday.”

David stared at her, his head full of swirling thoughts. *Ghost? Con job? Am I insane?* He had seen Cassy as a ghost and the paranormal expert had told him ghosts sometimes take on the form of a loved one to mess with you. But he’d never even met this woman before; why would the ghost take her appearance?

The active shooter had seen Carol's ghost too and shot through her. *She saved my life with the distraction.*

David said his goodbyes and went out into the hallway that led to the lobby. There was a man in a suit at the desk, checking in with the front desk security guard.

"You'll have to excuse us," the guard said. "There's been an incident and all interviews will have to be rescheduled."

"Okay, thank you," the man said. He turned and looked in David's direction. It was the man from the roof. The vision who had jumped over the side. The one who had killed Mullins.

David tried not to make eye contact as he continued for the door.

The man fell into step beside David.

"What was all the ruckus about?" he asked.

David ignored him and pushed the glass doors open and ran out onto the sidewalk. He ran a few blocks to make sure the man wasn't following him, then called for a ride share.

On his ride home, he called Cassy and told her what had happened, leaving out the supernatural element that had saved his life. "Can you spend the night?" David asked. "I don't want to be alone."

"Oh you poor thing, of course I'll spend the night," she said, and David almost wept with relief. "I think I have some Xanax if you need it. I might even have a leftover Ambien to help you sleep. I'll bring it over."

She ended the call before he could tell her he wanted to spend the night at her place. He sat back, still shaking from the event. He really could add post-traumatic stress disorder to his list of disorders now.

* * *

David awoke with a start. A troubled dream vanished from his memory and he was happy to let it go, not wishing to

remember what it had been about. The Ambien Cassy had given him had apparently worn off.

Early morning light filtered in around the curtains. Cassy stirred in the bed, rolling over and pulling the blankets off him. He smiled and kissed her shoulder lightly, then slipped out of bed.

His muscles ached from the trauma and violence of the day before, and he took a long, hot shower to ease the soreness. He was toweling himself dry when he thought he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He squinted, trying to discern what he had seen. The blurry reflection in the fogged-up mirror suddenly became clearer, but only in one spot. Then the spot grew. Ghostly words appeared. This time, he watched as each letter was drawn.

Kill Fitz and Kang, it read.

“I don’t know any Fitz or Kang,” he muttered through clenched teeth. Did the ghosts really want him to kill people? *This is some serious Son of Sam shit*, he thought, recalling the serial killer who said a neighbor’s talking dog told him to start his murder spree. He never could understand that kind of crazy. Sure, you might hear a dog talk, but why do his bidding? He’s just a fucking dog.

And this was just a fucking mirror.

David dried himself off quickly and wrapped the towel around his waist, then stepped out of the tub and stalked over to the mirror. He wiped the words away with a furious swipe. He spoke firmly but quietly, not wanting Cassy to hear him talking to himself. “No. Whether you ghosts are only in my head or are real, I’m not your pawn in whatever vendetta you have against these guys. You managed to kill Mullins, so why not kill Fitz and Kang on your own and leave me out of it? Use your electronic interference to cut their brakes or something.”

With that, he put on his robe and left the bathroom and its ghostly messages behind.

When he opened the bedroom door, Cassy was lying on the floor. “Oh my god, are you okay?” he said, rushing to her side. It took a moment for his brain to register that she was naked, not dressed in the t-shirt and running shorts she had slept in. Then he noticed an empty bottle of Xanax in her hand.

He scooped her up in his arms and shook her. To his relief, she opened her eyes.

“Did you take these pills?” he asked. Her eyes closed again, and he shook her back awake.

“Forgive me,” she muttered.

“For what? How many pills did you take?”

“I thought it would work this time. Forgive me, David.”

He laid her down and grabbed his cell phone from off the bedside table. He tried to dial 911, but his phone briefly flashed 2030 on the screen, then went dead.

He looked on Cassy’s side of the bed for her phone, but it wasn’t there. Her purse was downstairs. She must have left it in there. He dashed out of the bedroom and ran down the stairs. He looked frantically around for the purse in the living room, then moved into the dining room. It was sitting on the table, but as he grabbed for it, Cassy came out from the kitchen with a glass of milk, looking normal and fully awake, wearing the shorts and t-shirt he remembered from the night before.

He came to a full stop and just stared at her, bewildered.

“Another naked morning, huh?” she said. His towel had fallen off somewhere on the stairs. The look on his face must have told her he wasn’t in the mood for joking around. “David, what’s wrong? Did you...need something from my purse?”

He looked at her, then behind him. His breath was ragged, and he felt a tightness in his chest.

“Tell me who put you up to this,” he said, sounding remarkably calm.

“Put me up to what?”

“That fake suicide attempt upstairs.”

“David, you’re scaring me. If this is a joke, it isn’t funny.”

“No, it isn’t funny, so if you and your cohorts cooked this up, I am not amused. How did you get dressed so quickly and beat me down the back stairs?”

“You were in the bathroom when I came down. David, what’s this about?”

He couldn’t let his paranoia go, but knew it could have been a dream or hallucination. He sat down slowly at the dining room table.

“I’m sorry. I must have been sleepwalking. I had a dream you had taken a whole bottle of pills and I couldn’t make my phone work to call an ambulance.”

She set her milk down, came around the table, and wrapped her arms around him.

“It’s okay. It was just a bad dream. No wonder, after the day you had yesterday.”

As she held him, he was pulled back into the rational world. Of course, it was a dream. Of course, she wasn’t playing some sort of sick joke on him. The ghosts were. And this time, he had felt the ghost. All of them were becoming stronger.

* * *

David heard hammering as he approached Cassy’s door and waited until it stopped before he knocked. A moment later, she opened the door, a hammer in one hand.

“Self-defense?” he asked, indicating the hammer.

“Just hanging a picture,” she said, and waved him in.

David kissed her lightly on his way through the door. He was relieved that she had finally invited him to her apartment. It meant Gary’s theory that she was a grifter in temporary housing was invalid.

It was a one-bedroom apartment, and it looked like she had been living there awhile. There were plenty of family pictures scattered around, artwork and vacation photos on the wall, and what appeared to be years of paperwork piled up on her desk in the living room.

She was in the middle of remodeling, taking out a section of wall in the kitchen to make a pass-through to the small dining room. “Let me just finish this,” she said, grabbing the framed landscape photo and settling it on the nail she’d just pounded in. “You open that.” She indicated the bottle of wine David had brought. “Corkscrew is in the far-left drawer. Glasses are in the cupboard right above.”

“Very efficient,” he said, and headed to the kitchen.

Glasses of Malbec in hand, they settled in for the conversation he had been putting off. He confessed to her that it wasn’t his house that was haunted, he was the one haunted. She listened carefully and didn’t laugh or scoff, at least not out loud. He concluded with, “So when I act strangely, that’s why. Well, part of the reason why. I’m also just, probably, a little strange.”

She smiled. “You know, I’ve never been one hundred per cent convinced there are ghosts, but I wouldn’t rule it out either. My grandparents’ house might have been haunted. We heard all sorts of weird noises coming from the attic and found out later someone had hanged himself up there,” she said. “My grandmother claimed to see the ghost, but I never did. So, you’ve actually seen ghosts? Not just heard bumps in the night?”

“Yes. So has Shannon. We saw the ghost of a little girl in the dining room.” He thought he would start with a more friendly ghost and see how it went.

“Creepy. I, for one, would think living in a haunted house could be kind of cool,” Cassy said.

“Yeah, I suppose I could write a book or something about ‘my life among the spirits’.”

“Exactly, just think of how much those Amityville people made.”

“Didn’t they all die in the house?” David asked.

“Did they? Well, who wrote the book then?”

There was a knock at the door and Cassy set her wineglass down and answered it.

A ten-year-old girl was standing in the hallway.

“Hi, Cindy, what’s up?”

“I locked myself out of the apartment again and my mom’s not home.”

“Come on,” Cassy said. “We’ll go find the super and have him let you in.”

“Thanks, I feel so stupid,” Cindy said.

“Don’t. I do it all the time.” Cassy told David she’d be right back and shut the door behind her.

David took the opportunity to look around the apartment a little more closely. He didn’t want to be nosy – he didn’t poke around in drawers or anything – but he’d never been here before and relished the chance to learn more about Cassy. He was looking at a family photo that showed a younger Cassy with what must have been her parents and little sister when he heard footsteps behind him. David turned to see a teenage girl coming out of the bedroom and inadvertently took a step back, bumping up against Cassy’s desk.

“Oh, hi,” he said to her, trying to look and sound less startled than he was. “I didn’t know Cassy had company. I’m David.”

“I’m Cindy,” she said. It was then he noticed the resemblance to the little girl who was just there. The same red hair and green eyes. He hadn’t jumped to the conclusion that this was a ghost since she didn’t have the pallor of the others. But the way she stared at him, with sad intense eyes, told him something was up. The telltale buzz tickled his left ear, though it was fainter than usual.

“Go back to the house, David. There are more of us there now. We can’t protect you here. We keep losing you. You keep slipping away.”

Shit, he thought. *At least she’s one of the articulate ones.* “Just tell me what you want from me, and no cryptic bullshit this time.”

The buzzing grew louder until the hearing in his left ear was completely gone.

Cindy’s face contorted in horror and she yelled, “Run, David, he’s here!”

David didn’t have to be told twice. He ran. In a flash, his hand was on the doorknob. He yanked the door open, only to see the smashed-in-face ghost standing there with his head tilted forward slightly and his eyes angled up, staring angrily at David.

The same three teeth as before dropped from his mangled mouth to the floor, making the same *click, click, click* sound as they bounced.

David stepped back and tried to slam the door shut, only to have it pushed back open with a violent force that knocked him to the floor.

Teenage Cindy was gone.

The mangled-face ghost slammed the door behind him and lunged toward David on the floor. David scrambled back up onto his feet and backed against the wall.

He closed his eyes and told himself it was just a vision and couldn’t hurt him much. David wasn’t in a tub or at the edge of a roof this time. He forced his eyes open, hoping the ghost would be gone, but he was still there and had picked up the hammer from the table.

He flung it at David and it hit him hard in the chest. The wind knocked out of him, David fell to his knees. The hammer skidded across the floor back toward the ghost, who once again picked it up. He came at David, swinging the hammer,

aiming for his head, but David ducked and rolled under the coffee table, which took the first blow. It caved in, and a jagged splinter narrowly missed David's eye. He scrambled back against the couch, hoping to use his legs to send the remnant of the coffee table up at his attacker, but the mangled-face man grabbed it and tossed it aside.

David covered his head as best he could, fearing the next blow. Then he heard a pounding at the door.

“David!” Cassy yelled. “What’s going on in there? Open the door!”

This distracted the mangled-face ghost, and he turned to face the door. Cassy was frantically trying to get the door open, but the ghost must have locked it on his way in.

“Cassy, don’t open the door!” David yelled. He was able to get to his feet and tackle the ghost. It was solid, yet yielding, like a squishy pillow. They both fell hard toward the apartment door just as it opened. David tumbled into the building superintendent, who had just unlocked the door for Cassy, and out into the hallway. A crowd of Cassy’s neighbors watched him land on the floor, alone. The ghost was gone.

David felt his chest and feared from the pain that a rib or two must be broken. “Call 911,” he said, and sunk down onto the hallway floor.

* * *

“So, you didn’t see his face?” the detective asked David in the emergency room bay.

A doctor was bandaging David’s chest, and he was having trouble concentrating on what the cop was asking him.

Cassy had insisted on calling the police, and David had no choice but to concoct a human assailant. To make matters worse, it was Detective Chen, who had interrogated David at the bar when Mullins died. Chen’s bedside manner had not improved since then. A death and an attempted murder in the same week had put this cop into full suspicion mode that something wasn’t right with David.

“Can you describe what he was wearing?” the detective asked.

“It all happened so fast,” David said. “Tall guy is all I remember.”

“You saw this man too?” Chen asked Cassy.

“No, but I heard the attack going on inside.”

“How do you think he got into the apartment?” Chen asked them.

“I guess the balcony.”

“So he got away by jumping off the third-floor balcony,” Chen said skeptically.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see him leave,” David said, wincing as the doctor finished his wrapping.

“I’ll write a prescription for some pain meds, but it’s just a bad bruise, so it should heal quickly,” she said.

“You seem to have really bad luck,” Chen said. “An officer back at my precinct says you beat a guy nearly to death in your office....”

“An active shooter who tried to kill me,” David said.

“And we met when a guy you had drinks with just drops dead of a heart attack....”

“He had a heart condition,” David said. “I was the one who told the bartender to call 911. So I don’t know how this line of questioning is relevant.”

“Just a terrible week, I guess,” the cop said as he flipped his notebook closed.

The detective asked to speak to Cassy in the hall. Despite the distance and lowered voices, David heard the conversation.

“You two been dating long?”

“Two or three months. Why?”

“Has he ever shown any violent tendencies?”

“No. What are you getting at?”

“I don’t think there was anyone in that apartment. I think he might have just gone berserk and started smashing up the place.”

“And tried to break his own rib?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Chen said. “Maybe he likes the attention. Lots of crazy people file false police reports. Maybe being held at gunpoint in his office triggered something in him.”

“Is there anything else?” she asked coldly.

“No, you can go. But, here, take my card just in case his bad luck streak continues.”

Cassy drove David back to his house. He’d insisted he wanted to be alone, so she watched him from the car to make sure he got in safely.

David turned and waved her on, and she drove away.

Bashed-in-face ghost was standing at the end of the walkway, like a scene from *Halloween*.

“Go away!” David yelled. “I tackled you once. I can do it again!”

The ghost dad and mom from his couch were now standing on either side of him. The mangled-face ghost evaporated.

David entered the house and saw the ghost that pretended to be Cassy standing by the stairs.

“Go get some sleep, David,” she said. “We’ll watch over you. There is so much to do.”

He wearily went up the stairs and into the bedroom, where he collapsed into a deep sleep.

Chapter Nine

A Vengeful Spirit

David felt underdressed when he saw Cassy with her client at the bar. To be fair, it was a sports bar and David hadn't expected to see a man in a suit and tie at Dick's Halfway Inn Bar & Grill. But there he was. Cassy, David, and her client would be going to Gary's show after dinner. *It's a night out*, he thought. *I should have dressed up more.*

It was her biggest client, a politician who had an image problem. The sight of his American flag pin and red power tie gave David the impression he was a Republican. *Is Cassy a Republican?* he wondered. It dawned on him they had never discussed politics. But David wasn't one to criticize any political affiliation since he hadn't voted in years.

Cassy got up from her barstool. "David!" She kissed him on the cheek, then introduced him to her client.

"David, this is Max."

"Nice to meet you," he said, shaking David's hand from his seated position. *That's a power move*, David thought. The man was older but very handsome and Cassy seemed to light up when she talked to him. David didn't like that.

"Nice to meet you too, Max," David said, taking his place at the bar.

"Feeling better?" Cassy asked. "You look better."

"Yes, I finally got a good night's sleep."

"How are the ribs? Still in a lot of pain?"

"Better. It doesn't hurt to breathe anymore, but don't make me laugh."

“Maybe we shouldn’t be going to a comedy-magic show,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. I never laugh at Gary anymore.”

The bartender came over and David ordered a gin and tonic, as that was what the other two were drinking.

“Cassy told me what happened,” Max said. “How horrible. I can’t believe how bad crime is getting in this city now that the Democrats have taken over.”

Yep, there it is, David thought.

Max turned his attention to the TV above the bar, obviously keeping his eye on the basketball score, but then continued the conversation. “Have they caught the guy who attacked you yet?”

David shot Cassy an irritated look. He didn’t want details of the attack getting around; he knew it sounded crazy to say a man beat him up then disappeared. What else had she told Max about him?

“No, they haven’t caught him yet,” David said, then changed the subject. “So, Cassy tells me you’re in politics.”

Cassy put her hand on Max’s arm and said, “Congressman Fitzgerald is in his first term in the second district up north. It hasn’t been announced yet, but with my help, he’ll be making a run for the Senate.”

The name ‘Fitzgerald’ rang in David’s ears, throbbing into a headache. The air seemed to be pulled from his lungs. *Fitz?*

“Your last name is Fitzgerald?” David asked, his voice trembling. He took a drink to cover his shaking.

“Yes. My friends call me ‘Fitz’. Cassy here is the one that got me elected with her ‘Fitz fits!’ campaign.”

David just stared at him. The buzzing sound returned to his ears, echoing *Fitz fits*.

Fitz was saying something to him, but he couldn’t make out the words. David felt as though he might faint.

“David, are you okay?” Cassy asked.

David took a deep breath, fighting to regain his composure. “Oh, the ribs are just hurting again. I think my pain meds are wearing off.”

“I think I have some Advil in my purse,” she said, starting to dig through it.

“Have we met before, Max?” David asked. “You seem really familiar.”

“Maybe. I meet so many people in my line of work it’s hard to remember them all. Or maybe you’ve seen me on the news. I haven’t had much face time on TV, but Cassy will fix that.” He squeezed Cassy’s shoulder in a way that David knew should bother him, but he was focused on the ‘Fitz’ of it all.

Pull yourself together, he thought. You are closer than ever to some real answers here.

“Do you know someone named Kang?” David asked Fitz, thinking it was worth a shot.

“No, but then I really don’t know many Chinamen.”

“Asian American,” Cassy said. “I know it doesn’t seem like much, but a slipup like that can cost you an election.”

She handed David a couple of pills, and he washed them down with his gin and tonic.

“What’s wrong with Chinaman?” Max asked.

“Besides being something my grandfather would say, it’s offensive to assume all people of Asian descent are Chinese. Not to mention the fact his family was probably here long before yours.”

“Okay, okay,” Fitz said. “So, who is this Kang?”

“Someone I met recently. I don’t remember where. He spoke highly of you.”

“So, we got the Asian American vote, that’s good.” Fitz smiled, revealing a row of perfectly straight and overly white

teeth.

David looked up at the TV above the bar. The screen flickered and the basketball game was replaced by a ‘Special Report’ newscast. The two news anchors looked visibly shaken as they spoke to the camera. The picture was full of static and distortions, not something he was used to seeing on digital televisions. A buzzing in his ears told him it could be an otherworldly message.

Behind the newscaster was a picture of Max Fitzgerald, standing behind a podium, his finger pointing in the air and his mouth open as if he were yelling. The closed caption scrolled, *President Fitzgerald launches nuclear strike against China.* The screen flickered again and the news report was replaced by the basketball game.

No one else in the bar had responded to the ominous message, even those who were intently watching the game.

That’s why they want me to kill him! David thought. *He’s going to start World War Three.* Suddenly a flurry of memories fell into place: the writing on the mirror, ghosts trying to show him the horrors of dying in a nuclear blast. It all made sense in a surreal way. Ghost logic.

David regained his composure. “Speaking of Asia, what do you think about the current problems with stalled North Korean nuclear talks?”

Things had not been going well. North Korea accidentally hit Japan with an unarmed missile in a failed launch test. A nuclear accident had also taken out a town in Pakistan. The world was nervous.

“We should have never let it get this far,” Fitz said. He signaled the bartender for another drink. “If China won’t do anything about North Korea, we should.”

“You mean a preemptive strike?” David asked, baiting him, hoping to see what this guy was made of.

“It’s an option. A nuclear bomb sure taught the Japs a lesson they never forgot.”

“Japanese,” Cassy said. “Not Japs. And can we please not talk about politics? Let’s order some food. We don’t want to be late for Gary’s show.”

David had lost his appetite and just pushed food around on his plate. All he could think of was that he now knew what his ghosts wanted. David now had a mission, should he choose to accept it.

* * *

David, Cassy, Shannon, and Max were nestled in a packed audience. Gary’s show was funny and suspenseful, a unique combination of sight gags and death-defying stunts.

David found his concentration waning as he was preoccupied with finally finding his Fitz, and what he knew the ghosts wanted him to do. *Or maybe this is all part of my delusion*, he thought. *I’ve finally gone full crazy. Maybe it is schizophrenia. I am not going to kill someone because ghosts tell me to.* Delusions or ghosts. It really didn’t matter. He would hold his ground. He would not do something violent.

Gary did the infamous bullet catch, where a gun is fired from the other side of the stage and the magician catches the bullet in his mouth. Magicians had actually been killed when this trick went wrong. Gary’s twist on the classic trick was to have all his teeth blown out in a gory, bloody mess, as would happen in real life should one try to catch a bullet with their teeth.

He opened his gory maw to the audience, and they gasped as his teeth and the bullet hit the floor. David gasped as well, as he heard three teeth hit the stage with an eerily familiar *click, click, click*.

A quick spin, then Gary faced the audience with a clean face and a mouth full of his pearly white teeth. The horri~“~ied murmur of the audience turned into applause and laughter. David knew this was the trick that had so impressed Penn and Teller.

Each of Gary's illusions was like that, gory and visceral. Sawing his assistant in half led to entrails spilling out of her. The sword through the woman in the box came out bloody on the other side. Even throwing cards at his assistant left a bloody mess as the cards were impaled into her skin.

These tricks were amazing enough, but the quick cleanup was what really was magical. Pints of stage blood and simulated gore all vanished with a wave of the hand.

David had some idea how he did it. Gary had shown him some stage blood he developed that turned from red to clear when exposed to the air for a few minutes. David was sure that was part of the trick.

For the finale, Gary's assistant rolled out a man-sized box.

"For the final illusion of the night, I will step into hell itself."

The assistant opened the black box, and it was even blacker inside.

"Hopefully it will be a short trip. But who knows, someday it may be my destiny if I don't change my ways." The audience laughed, and he grinned wickedly.

He stepped inside and his assistant shut the door and spun the box around three times. She opened the box and Gary came stumbling out, completely engulfed in flames.

The audience gasped at the horrifying sight, and a sight it was. The flames not only danced around on his body, but the audience could see his clothes and the skin on his face burning away, melting and exposing the skull beneath. They could smell the smoke and the nauseating scent of cooking flesh.

Gasps erupted into screams as some thought that maybe something had gone wrong with the trick. It didn't help that Gary was screaming in agony or that the assistant herself also looked on in horror.

David was stunned. Standing there on the stage was the flaming ghost he had seen in his house. An exact recreation of it. He had told Gary he had seen a ghost in flames on his

computer screen and in his living room, but hadn't given him many details beyond that. He certainly didn't tell him the ghost was wearing a suit.

Shannon applauded and looked over at David. Seeing he was upset, she said, "Don't worry, it's all part of the act. Amazing, isn't it?"

A fire suppression system over the stage sent clouds of gas onto Gary, creating a fog that obscured him. In a few moments it shut off, the fog cleared, and Gary stood there unscathed. He took the assistant's hand as they bowed to a cheering crowd.

Doubt returned like a bulldozer through his brain. *Could Gary be behind it all? If he could recreate this ghost, he certainly could do all the others.*

Hadn't Gary told him that he could? But why would he do it? Just to mess with him? Just to show it could be done? David's confusion gave way to a paranoia he had never felt before. A paranoia that made his brain burn like Gary's flaming man. *Maybe he's secretly filming me for a reality show or something.*

"He said for us to meet him backstage," Shannon said. "Do you think the new assistant is too pretty? That can be distracting."

"I barely noticed her," said Cassy, and Shannon laughed.

"I knew I liked you."

She led David and the others back to where Gary was mingling with the crew. He waved them over.

"Fantastic show!" Cassy said.

"Very impressive," Max said. "A bit too gory for my tastes, but well done."

Shannon threw her arms around him. "I think it's ready for Vegas."

"First act can be a little tighter," Gary said. "But, yeah, I think this will be the Vegas show."

“I especially found the burning man interesting,” David said. “Although it seems like I’ve seen it somewhere before.”

“Well, I’ve never seen anything like it,” Max said. “It looked so dangerous.”

“Gary, this is my client, Max Fitzgerald.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Max.”

“His friends call him ‘Fitz’,” David said. He looked to Gary’s face for a moment of recognition of the name, but Gary either didn’t hear it or was too caught up in the excitement of the night to remember the name on David’s mirror.

“What are our plans for the rest of the night?” Gary asked.

“How about a little club hopping?” Shannon suggested.

“Okay, let me get my makeup off and I’ll meet you in the lobby.” He turned to David. “Can I talk to you a moment?”

The others left, and David followed Gary into his dressing room.

Gary sat in front of a large mirror and started using cold cream and tissues to clean makeup off his face.

“I hope that didn’t freak you out too much,” Gary said.

“Really?” David said with anger in his voice. “You recreate my hallucination and you hope it doesn’t *freak me out*?”

“I just wanted to show you it could be done,” Gary said in the calm voice that David recognized from so many times when Gary had tried to talk him into or out of something. The calm, *patronizing* voice. The voice that said, ‘I’m the star, you’re the sidekick. I know what’s best. Just go along with it.’

“Burning gel over fireproof prosthetic mask and clothes,” Gary continued. “A holographic projection system to enhance the burning effects.”

“Well, you certainly proved it could be done,” David said. “You have the ‘how’ but not the ‘why’. What could people possibly want from me that would require a setup like this?”

My house? Wouldn't it be easier to send thugs to beat me up? Hell, wouldn't it be cheaper to simply *buy* the dump? No, it's the *why* that is the real mystery here, Gary."

"I agree, but you can't really think it's ghosts, right?"

David stared into the eyes of Gary's reflection in the mirror. "How do I know you're not the one messing with me? Do you have some reality show deal worked out? A novel you're writing? Or are you just driving me insane because you're some sort of psychopath?"

Gary turned to look David in the eyes. He still looked so calm, so *patronizing*.

"You know I wouldn't do that to you."

"Really? You're the one who found the house and told me to buy it. Pretty easy for you to rig it up with special effects before I moved in. You're the only one in my life who has the skills to pull this off!"

Gary's calm finally started to crack, irritation breaking through. "I'm the one *telling* you it's fake. There are no such things as ghosts! I'm trying to help you. You're letting paranoia get the better of you."

"You're the one who told me to *be* paranoid! How did you do the TV in the bar? I suppose that's easy enough."

"What are you talking about?"

"You, Cassy, Shannon, Fitz, you're all in on it!"

David stormed out of the dressing room.

The word finally caught up with Gary's brain. "Wait, that guy's Fitz?" he called out to David's retreating back.

David ran down the hall and exited the building through a rear door into an alley. He ran a few blocks until he was sure Gary wasn't chasing him.

He walked the streets of San Francisco for hours, becoming lost in the memories of all that had happened to him since buying the house. Would Gary really do this to him? He had

been so sure, but that certainty faded as the heat of the moment cooled. He slowly realized, holding on to normal reality was what was destroying him. Gary wasn't behind it. A crew of grifters couldn't pull it off. There was no brain disease making it happen.

His rational mind was burned away, and all that was left were the ghosts.

* * *

David made his way home sometime after midnight, exhausted. He fell into bed and was asleep almost immediately. The ghosts were quiet that night and he managed to sleep straight through until midmorning.

When he awoke, things looked clearer to him. *Of course, Gary's not in on some conspiracy to drive me mad, he thought. He's my best friend, and he loves me. And he has money. He doesn't need a treasure hidden in the house, or a crazy reality show.*

He was about to call to apologize when, like magic, Gary appeared at the door.

David didn't hesitate. As soon as he saw Gary's face, he blurted, "I'm sorry," and threw his arms around his friend.

"Me too," Gary said, returning the embrace. "I'm sorry about the burning-man trick. I wasn't thinking about your mental health. It was me just showing off."

Gary came inside. David had just made a pot of coffee, and the two of them sat in the living room, David on the sofa and Gary in the chair by a crackling fireplace.

"I just met Fitz yesterday, same as you," David said. "And yet I saw his name on my mirror, we saw his name spelled out on the Ouija board, and we all heard his name on my phone that night. All before we knew he existed."

"I admit that is strange," Gary said. "It is suspicious that he's a friend of Cassy's. But I don't know what a congressman has to do with all this."

“I do,” David said. He told Gary about the ghostly broadcast from the future. “And before you tell me hacking a TV with a fake newscast is easy, no one else in that crowded bar saw it. So that means I’m either insane or the ghosts are showing me what Fitz will do in the future.”

Gary sat silent for a moment, then said, “I remember you telling me about the visions you saw while getting your brain zapped. You said the images went by too fast to take them in.”

“Yeah. I mean, I saw some. What registered was very disturbing. People burning, screaming, a real hellscape. But most were a blur, like fence posts going by outside the window of a fast-moving car.”

“Have you considered hypnosis?” Gary asked. “To remember the images. Whether it’s ghosts or your own subconscious trying to communicate with you, those images could be important.”

“Dr. Kendrick didn’t want to use hypnosis because she said my brain could just be confabulating them. We wouldn’t get images from that day.”

“Well, it’s worth a try,” Gary said. “Do you trust me?”

David hesitated. He didn’t want to see those images again, but he did want to figure out what was going on in his head.

“Sure,” he sighed. “Why not?”

David lay down on the sofa, and Gary pulled his chair closer. “Close your eyes,” he said. “Now, just roll them up under your eyelids for a moment. That’s good, you’re doing great. You’re getting more relaxed now.”

He continued speaking in a low, soothing voice. Gary had hypnotized David before, so David knew the procedure and went under quickly.

“Think back to that day of your laser surgery. Your head is strapped in, but this time it’s comfortable. You’re looking forward to being cured, looking forward to seeing those images that flashed before your eyes.”

David saw himself in the harness. It was like he was floating above, looking down.

“I’m in the harness. They’re about to switch on the machine.”

“How do you feel?”

“Claustrophobic.”

“You don’t feel that now. You feel secure and relaxed. You are just an observer now. Nothing can hurt you. What happens next?”

“They’ve turned on the machine and there’s a buzzing sound inside my head, like a jar full of angry bees. The images are flickering past my eyes.”

“What are the images of?”

“I can’t tell, they’re going by too fast. Like the world is out of sync.”

“I want you to see the images, David. Slow them down.” He spoke more slowly, guiding David to slow the tempo of the images. “Frame by frame, like an old filmstrip.”

The whirl of color and light came to an abrupt stop. It was the image of the woman from his office. She was on fire. It was horrible, and he wanted to stop, but then he heard Cassy’s voice. “That’s it, David! You can do it. Open your mind. Let us in fully. Stop pushing us away and the pain will stop!”

He advanced to the next image. Then a few more until they were going by a few seconds at a time, flickering slowly like an old-time nickelodeon.

A few frames of ‘President’ Fitz. The Chinese president arguing at the United Nations. Missiles in the sky. Burning cities. The burning man. *It is Gary. Will be Gary*, he thought. The ghost family from his sofa wandering through the rubble in what was left of David’s neighborhood. David’s house and Gus’s house were still standing, but many were piles of burned cinders.

He saw Cassy in the bedroom upstairs, committing suicide with pills. He saw himself and Shannon in a burned-out basement, holding each other and cowering in fear as more planes flew overhead. The ghosts *were* from the future, a horrible future they wanted David to stop. David had a purpose. He was important.

David sat up quickly on the sofa. His eyes were now open.

Now more than ever, David believed everything was in the ghost column.

Gary was not so sure.

“This initial brainstorm could be where all the subsequent visions came from,” he said. “I know you want a definitive answer, David, but this isn’t necessarily it.”

“So I’m back where I started,” David said. “Not knowing fact from fiction.”

“I can’t help you with deciding what is real or isn’t. Normally, I would say the simplest explanation is usually the correct one. All this is coming from a damaged frontal lobe or something, not from the supernatural. However, Shannon saw the ghost girl in your dining room. Weird things have been happening in the house I can’t explain, and your visions of Fitz and the future don’t seem like something your brain would or could pull out of thin air.”

“What should I do?”

“Maybe talk to the paranormal investigator again. Tell him this new information.”

“Well, that will be easy. He’s coming over. Today, in fact.”

* * *

Professor Lembeck arrived at David’s house just as Gary was leaving. Gary stopped him on the sidewalk and introduced himself.

“I have to go, but promise me you won’t let him do something stupid until I see him again,” Gary said.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. But he thinks the ghosts want him to stop some future catastrophe. He’s not thinking straight. I’m trying to have an open mind about this ghost stuff, but don’t continue down this path unless you can really help him.”

“I promise to continue to use science and reason to study these phenomena,” Lembeck said. “Something caused these hauntings to happen. There might be a way to stop it.”

That seemed to satisfy Gary, and he left to get ready for that night’s performance.

“What was Gary talking to you about just now?” David asked, showing Lembeck to the living room.

“He’s concerned for your safety. I said I would do my best to help. He did mention you have a theory.”

“More than that. I know what they want and where they come from. You say ghosts can return to a place they once lived, but could they return to a time? Could they be haunting me from the future? Could they come back and communicate with me to stop the end of the world?”

Lembeck stared into the fire for a moment, digesting this. “Interesting idea. I would imagine they aren’t bound by the same rules of time and space as we are. If ghosts are created by severe psychological trauma, then I suppose the end of the world would create a lot of angry ghosts. This is just hypothetical. You’re not thinking they *are* from the future?”

“No, that would be crazy,” David laughed. “Yes! This is what they’re telling me. The world ends in 2030 and they want my help to stop it. You have to admit, it’s just as good an explanation as anything else.”

Lembeck looked like he did not, in fact, have to admit that, but he stared into the fire again, pondering. “I suppose an event like that would be packed with an enormous amount of paranormal energy,” he speculated.

“They tell me they want me to save the world by killing someone named Fitz. And last night I met a guy named Fitz. The writing appeared on my mirror before I ever heard of Max Fitzgerald. The ghosts must be telling me the truth.”

“You aren’t thinking of doing it?” Lembeck asked.

“No! Of course not. I’m not sure I *could* do it even if I somehow got the chance. Plus, how can killing one guy stop Armageddon? Just because they’re ghosts doesn’t mean they know what they’re talking about.” *It’s still just a fucking dog*, David thought.

“And then we have to consider that there might be evil forces at work here,” Lembeck said. “They might *want* to end the world. Killing Fitz could be the thing that leads to Armageddon.”

“Great, another theory. Well, now what do I do?”

“I have some more research,” Lembeck said. “There was a case of a haunted man after the atomic bomb destroyed Hiroshima. I seem to remember he was haunted by vengeful spirits *before* and after the bomb went off. He found a way to detach himself from the spirits. I’ll dig deeper. It might be able to help you in this situation.”

Lembeck headed back to his office.

David suddenly felt the need to talk to his dad and get his perspective on it. At least his dad believed in ghosts – and the end times.

* * *

After smoking a joint, and recovering from a coughing fit, David finally found the courage to pick up the phone and call his dad.

“What’s wrong, son?” his father asked after David went into a long pause at the other end of the phone.

“Dad, I think I’m going insane,” David said in a trembling voice. “I don’t know what’s real anymore. You were right. My house is haunted, and it’s worse than you could imagine.”

David told him of all the ghostly visions he had been through and all the theories swirling around in his head, none of them good.

“Do you believe me now?” his father asked. “That there is a world beyond this one where a battle of good and evil is taking place – has always taken place?”

“Sometimes I still think it could just be my broken brain,” David said. His eyes were filling with tears. Weeks of exhaustion seemed to be catching up with him.

“I felt a presence in that house,” his father said. “As did Reverend Pendergast. I believe what you are experiencing is real. That they could be demons trying to deceive you.”

“And how do I know they aren’t really angels or ghosts from the future wanting me to stop the end of the world?”

“That is God’s domain,” his father said. “He would not ask that of you or any man. How do you know these demons aren’t trying to stop Armageddon and the return of Jesus?”

There was static on the line and Cassy’s ghost said, “Don’t listen to him, David.”

“Did you hear that just now?” David asked his father.

“Yes. Don’t listen to her, David.”

“You know your dad isn’t a rational thinker,” Cassy’s ghost said.

“I’m getting on the first plane to San Francisco,” his father said. There was a desperate panic in his voice. “Don’t do anything until I get there!”

There was a loud buzz and David’s phone went dead.

* * *

After the call to his dad, David sat in the kitchen. Ghosts faded in and out around him, with bursts of static electricity that would pop and crackle, like moths fluttering around a bug zapper. David could feel them getting stronger. Cassy’s ghost reached out and touched him on the shoulder.

“Leave me alone!” he shouted. He got up and stormed into the dining room. The little-girl ghost was at the table.

“Don’t be mad, Daddy,” she pleaded.

“I’m not your daddy,” he said, continuing past her and to the stairs. The father of the ghost family was standing guard by the front door.

“He won’t get in,” he said.

“I said leave me alone!”

Shannon’s ghost appeared on the stair landing. “I’m here now too, David.”

David pushed past her and ran up the stairs into his bedroom. There were no ghosts in there; maybe they’d decided to give him some space.

He climbed into bed and pulled the sheets over his head. He fell asleep almost immediately. His dreams were strangely peaceful.

The next morning, the ghosts were gone from the house and David went next door to talk to Gus. Over coffee, David told him about his theory and the things he had seen in his hypnosis session with Gary.

“Still, how do you know the images in the hypnosis session weren’t a dream or something?” Gus said.

“Some of the images that flashed before my eyes were of Fitz and Cassy. I didn’t meet either of them until well after my laser treatment.”

“I’ve read that in hypnosis, the past and present images get all mixed up. It’s why they can’t use it in court testimony. Those images you saw in a trance might not have been the same ones you had on the operating table.”

“I agree except....”

“Except what?”

“Cassy says Fitz is being groomed by his party to make a run for the presidency. Maybe in 2028.”

“Damn.” Gus thought a moment. “Well, if he wins, we’ll know the visions are true.”

“And then it will be too late. He’ll be surrounded by a full secret service detail, even just as a major candidate.”

Gus looked David in the eye.

“You’re not thinking of doing anything crazy, are you?”

“What if you had the chance to stop Osama Bin Laden before 9/11. Wouldn’t you?”

“David, what are you planning to do?” Gus asked sternly.

“Campaign really hard for his opponent.”

Gus laughed, “Oh, okay.”

“I mean, we don’t have to kill him. We just have to make sure he doesn’t become president.”

“2028 is years away. We have some time to figure out a plan,” Gus said. They clinked their coffee cups together in a toast and drank.

“What about Kang, though?” Gus said. “We don’t have any control over who becomes president in China. You don’t suppose the ghosts are doing the same thing to someone overseas?”

“I’ll ask them next time I see them,” David said.

* * *

David redirected his energy into researching Congressman Fitz on the internet, looking for anything that could be used to sabotage his campaign. There was a lot there, but none of it had disturbed his conservative base enough to not vote for him.

Fitz had cheated on two wives. Didn’t divest stock that was a conflict of interest. Had some trouble with the IRS for not paying back taxes. There were many social media posts where

he expressed racist and misogynistic views, but those got him as many likes from his base as dislikes from everyone else.

Just what is it going to take to tarnish this guy? David thought.

His phone chimed. A text from Cassy.

Can you come to my apt and help move a couch?

He texted back, *On my way.*

This is good, he thought. He wished he could just talk to her about Fitz, tell her what the ghosts had told him, but he knew it would make him sound crazy. But he might be able to appeal to her sense of ethics. Why was she representing this guy who was an obvious racist and probably worse?

On the other hand, if she continued to be his publicist, there might be an opportunity to get some dirt on Fitz that could cause him to drop out of the race. This guy surely had even more skeletons still in his closet.

David took a taxi to her building. He was at the door to Cassy's apartment, about to knock, when he saw an orange glow out of the corner of his eye. He wheeled around. The burning ghost was coming toward him.

"Gary?" David asked. "Is that you?"

The ghost swerved around him and went through the door, disappearing into Cassy's apartment.

Or is it a demon? he thought. Panicked, David started to pound on the door, yelling, "Cassy! Cassy!"

No answer, even though she was expecting him. Was the ghost stopping her? He took a step back and kicked the door until it broke from its frame. He ran inside.

The ghost was nowhere to be seen, just a frightened Cassy coming out of her bedroom in a bathrobe.

Her mouth hung open as she looked from David to the broken door. "David, what is *wrong* with you?"

Before he could explain, someone rushed past Cassy from the bedroom. It was Fitz, in his underwear. He was brandishing a lamp as a weapon.

“What’s going on? Should I call 911?”

David couldn’t speak. He just stood and blinked at the sight of Fitz, mostly naked except for a pair of tighty-whiteys.

His mind was whirling. *With him? Doesn’t she know what he is? Is it all fake? Are they working together to drive me insane?*

“I’m calling the police,” Fitz said, disappearing back into the bedroom for his phone.

“Max, don’t!” Cassy called after him. “Just give me a minute.”

“You and *him*?” David said, embarrassed to hear his voice shaking. “Why did you text me to come over here? Just to rub my face in it?”

“I didn’t text you,” she said, pulling her robe tighter around her. “David, I never said we had an exclusive relationship. I thought you were seeing other people too. Why did you break my door down?”

“I...I thought you were in danger,” David said. “I smelled smoke. You weren’t coming to the door.” It sounded better than, *I saw a burning ghost go into your apartment.*

A crowd of tenants had gathered in the hallway and were looking into the apartment.

“It’s okay,” Cassy said to them. “Just a misunderstanding. I’m fine. Please, go back to your apartments.”

David’s feeling of paranoia gave way to shame and embarrassment. Pulling together as much dignity as he could muster, he said, “I’m sorry. Please let me know how much I owe you for repairs.” He somehow managed to stop himself from running out, just pushed his way past the tenants and took the stairs down so he wouldn’t have to stand there waiting for the elevator with everyone watching him.

He made it outside just as the police were arriving at the building. He tried to look as casual as possible as he walked to a bus stop.

A bus was just pulling up as the police entered the building, and he got on without even checking whether it was the right route.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the bus pulled away.

The ghosts tricked me, he thought. They texted me. They wanted me to find them together. They wanted me angry enough to kill Fitz.

As he rode his bus to nowhere, his phone chimed with another text from Cassy. He hoped it was real this time.

I sent the police away. Said you smelled smoke. I won't be pressing charges. Let me know if you want to talk. It ended with three heart emojis.

He wanted to ignore it, to ignore *her*. But he knew she would have been justified in having him arrested, so he texted *Thanks. Sorry, I feel like an idiot. I understand we weren't exclusive*, and ended his text with an embarrassed emoji face.

Let's talk about us soon, she texted.

OK, he texted. He had a quick internal debate about ending the text with a smiley face, but decided against it. There was no guarantee that conversation was going to be pleasant.

He didn't feel like going home and dealing with the ghosts. The bus did swing through his neighborhood on the far side of the park, so he got off and went for a walk to clear his head.

His phone rang. It was Professor Lembeck.

“Hello, David. I've done some more research on these vengeful spirits. I think I might have a way to disconnect them from you.”

David had never wanted anything more. It was time they stopped ruining his life. Couldn't they haunt a professional mercenary to take out Fitz? For that matter, couldn't they

haunt Fitz himself and drive him crazy? *Ah, but I'm the one with a hole in my brain*, he thought.

You could put a hole in Fitz's brain, a dark part of himself answered.

David agreed to meet Lembeck at the house the next day to hear more about what he had discovered about a similar haunting of a man who had survived Hiroshima.

One way or another, this has to end.

Chapter Ten

A Trip Through the Looking Glass

David returned home, humiliated and exhausted. Not only was he probably insane, he was sure it was over with Cassy. Now he only had the future ghost version of her and she was there to torment him.

When he walked up the block from his bus stop, he saw a group of people waiting for him on his front porch. *New ghosts?* he thought, squinting as he tried to make out their faces. To his surprise, it was his father, Reverend Pendergast, and their church cohorts. David actually felt relieved to see these believers on his porch. They surely would listen to what the ghosts wanted from him and could counsel him on what to do.

His dad pulled him into a hug, which surprised David even more.

“I was so worried,” his dad said. “Please tell me you haven’t done anything you regret.”

“Not yet,” David said. “Please, come on in.”

He unlocked the door and let his father, Pendergast, Sister Abigail, and Brother Dixon inside.

Upon crossing the threshold, Sister Abigail let out a small shriek and clutched the reverend’s arm. She quickly collected herself, and said, “My apologies, but there are so many of them in here now. It’s overwhelming.”

The group moved into the living room.

Pendergast raised his Bible over his head and shouted, “Back, foul demons! You have no dominion over us!”

David could not see the ghosts, nor sense their presence, so he wasn't sure if it was all an act on Abigail and Pendergast's part.

Brother Dixon dropped to his knees and started praying in some language unfamiliar to David.

Pendergast started to sweep the air with his Bible as though he were slapping the ghosts with it.

"These are demons, David," Pendergast said. "All they say are lies. They put on the faces of people you know to deceive you. They have chosen you to stop the coming of Christ!"

David's father's eyes darted around the room. "Do you see them, David?"

"No. None of them are presenting themselves to me."

Pendergast's eyes rolled to the back of his head as he began chanting along with Brother Dixon.

"Reverend, no!" Abigail screamed. "Do not channel this thing!"

This was all getting too Old Testament for David. "Okay, I think we might want to talk to them and not get all preachy here."

Pendergast and Dixon both stopped chanting. Dixon rose to his feet. Pendergast's eyes rolled back to the front. There was something different about them now. A wide grin spread across Pendergast's face.

"Hello, David," Pendergast said, only it wasn't Pendergast's voice; it was Fitz's.

"Oh, heavens!" Abigail said, her voice shaking.

Abigail put herself between David and Pendergast, holding her Bible out for protection. "Leave him! The power of Christ commands...."

Brother Dixon took this moment to bail on the group and ran out the front door, leaving poor Abigail to fend off the possession on her own.

The cat came in, passing Brother Dixon in his cowardly retreat.

Pendergast/Fitz swatted the Bible out of Abigail's hand, then shoved her aside to get at David.

He grabbed David, and David's father rushed over.

"Stop it, Reverend!" he shouted, trying to pull Pendergast off David.

David broke free and kicked Pendergast/Fitz hard in the knee. Pendergast/Fitz backed away in pain and fell to the floor.

"He's not Pendergast," David said. "He's Max Fitzgerald. The guy who's going to start World War Three."

Fitz got to Pendergast's feet and limped toward David. "I won't let you kill me this time! This time I kill you!"

This time? David thought.

David backed up, the fireplace stopping his retreat.

The cat leaped up, attaching itself to Fitz/Pendergast's back. The clawing did little to slow down the assault.

Fitz lunged at David, grabbing him around the throat. David reached behind his back and found the fireplace poker. He grabbed it and raised it to strike Fitz/Pendergast, but Pendergast was stronger and managed to catch David's wrist and twist it. David dropped the poker, and it clanged on the floor.

Fitz/Pendergast had his hands around David's throat and was choking him hard.

The cat had clawed its way to Pendergast's head and was trying to claw his face, but Fitz shook it off and redoubled his efforts to choke David to death.

David went limp, almost losing consciousness. Then he heard a loud thud. Pendergast dropped to the floor.

His father had the poker in his hand.

David watched as the ghost of Fitz left Pendergast's body and disappeared back into the darkness.

Abigail and David's father helped Pendergast to his feet.

David went to the kitchen, wrapped some ice in a towel, and returned to the living room.

Abigail held the cold compress to Pendergast's head wound. He also had deep scratches on his neck where the cat clawed him.

"I was foolish to open myself up to the evil that way," Pendergast said. "I am sorry for my hubris. I am no match for a demon like this."

"Do you believe us now, son?" his dad asked. "That these evil spirits cannot be trusted?"

"They want you to stop Armageddon, but that is the very thing that will save all our souls," Pendergast said.

"Don't do it, son," his father pleaded. "Don't kill this man."

"I'm not killing anyone. I will not be a pawn in their game," he told them. "I do see the light now."

His father wept with relief and hugged him.

David broke away, saying, "You should get the good reverend to the hospital."

"I should stay with you," his father said. "This thing could come back."

"No, go with the reverend. I'll leave the house. I need to pick up my medication from the pharmacy, then I'll stay with Gary and Shannon tonight. We can regroup tomorrow to exorcise the house again."

"We will bring the whole congregation this time," Sister Abigail said.

David watched them leave, then called Professor Lembeck and told him about what had just happened.

“I still haven’t made up my mind about stopping Fitz,” he said. “I just told them that to get them out of the house.”

“This is very serious,” Lembeck said. “If Fitz’s spirit can possess the living, he must be incredibly powerful. I’m coming over. We have to shut Fitz’s ghost down, and I think I’ve figured out a way to do it. I have to pick something up, but I’ll be there in an hour.”

* * *

Cassy’s ghost had told David, “Feed your head,” in a dream, while the Cheshire Cat offered him mushrooms.

Lenny, the ghost from the ‘hallucinations anonymous’ support group, had recommended magic mushrooms to open the lines of communication with the ghosts.

The pharmacist ghost told him not to take drugs that would shut off the hallucinations. So, what would happen if he turned the hallucinations up?

It was a last resort, but he felt he had to find out what was going on once and for all. Maybe a trip to Wonderland was in order. *Open my brain and let them in.*

He had some time while he waited for Lembeck, so he walked to a nearby herbal medicine shop. A coworker had told him they sold mushrooms under the counter. David didn’t know how to ask for them, since they weren’t legal in California. Was there some kind of code word he was supposed to use?

The herbal pharmacist behind the counter was wearing a t-shirt that looked like a tuxedo and a black top hat. He lit up when David came in. “Davy! Good to see you again, man. The usual?”

“Uh. I’ve never been in here before,” David said.

“You sure? You’re not Davy?”

“I’m David, but you must have me confused with someone else.”

“Wow, you sure look like him. Comes in all the time and buys mushrooms. Maybe I’m misremembering, I do a lot of mushrooms myself. Come to think of it, I’ve always been on mushrooms when I see Davy.”

“Well, in fact, I am in need of some mushrooms. What do you recommend?”

The herbalist pulled a bag out from under the counter. “These are great. Mellow trip. Mind-expanding.”

“How much?”

“A hundred bucks, but since you’re a regular – in my mind, at least – let’s call it eighty.”

David paid him in cash and asked, “How do I use them?”

“Put them in a tea, steep for ten minutes, and drink.”

“What’s the dose?”

“A teaspoon if you want to relax, up to a tablespoon if you want to expand your mind to the max, man.”

David thanked him and as he was on the way out, the herbalist said, “Have a great day. Feed your head, David.”

* * *

Lembeck was already waiting at David’s door when he got back from the herbalist. He had a black leather bag with him. *Serious exorcism equipment*, David thought. *Let’s do this!*

They went inside and sat at the dining room table.

“The man in Hiroshima also had an injury to the brain. That must be how you’re connected to the other side. You aren’t just being haunted by them; you’re the doorway through which they access our world.”

“My ‘dead zone’,” David mused.

When David was younger and standing in front of the TV, his dad would say, “You make a better door than a window.” Remembering this made him smile. “Okay, how do I shut the door?”

“The haunted man in Japan eventually went to a Buddhist monastery to deal with the ghosts. This monastery had a meditation room that was deep in a cave, and he discovered that while he was in there, he was no longer plagued by the spirits.”

“You’d think they would like dark places,” David said.

“I think it was the miles of rock above him. The ghosts could no longer see his brain’s frequency or use him as an entry into the world.”

“So I just have to live in a cave?”

Lembeck opened his bag and pulled out a bicycle helmet covered in foil. “You just have to block the signal.”

“You have to be kidding me!” David protested. “A tinfoil hat? Isn’t that a little on the nose?”

“It’s lead foil,” Lembeck corrected. “Wear this, and I think they will all go away.”

Lembeck extended his arm, offering the hat to David, who reluctantly took it, but didn’t put it on. *Am I really going to join the tinfoil-hat crowd?* he thought, staring at the helmet in his hand.

Suddenly, Lembeck gasped, grimacing in pain, and David looked up. The smashed-in-face ghost was behind him. The demonic man’s bloody lips were pulled back in a grin as he thrust his fist through Lembeck’s back. This ghost, David knew, could do more than zap a pacemaker.

“Drop the helmet,” it garbled through its mangled mouth. “Or I will strangle his heart!”

Other ghosts appeared behind the mangled-face ghost: ghost dad, Cassy, Shannon, all were grabbing him around the waist and shoulders and neck, trying to pull him away from Lembeck.

David grabbed the helmet and, staring into what was left of the mangled-face ghost’s right eye, defiantly put the hat on.

The ghosts flickered like a candle flame being snuffed out, then disappeared.

Lembeck fell to the floor. David scrambled for his phone and dialed 911, then began performing CPR on Lembeck. To David's relief, he gasped awake.

By the time the ambulance came, Lembeck was feeling much better, but the EMTs talked him into going to the hospital to be checked out.

Neither of the EMTs said anything to David about the foil-covered bike helmet he was wearing, but he saw them glancing at it. Let them stare. He didn't dare take it off until Lembeck was safely away.

David returned inside and sat down on his couch. He pulled off the helmet.

Cassy's ghost was now sitting across from him in the recliner.

"We sent Fitz away, but he will be back," Cassy warned.

Fitz? How could the ghost be Fitz? David thought. Did that mean David would kill him in the future, after all?

Cassy's ghost looked more human than ever. She was wearing the pale blue sundress he had first seen her wearing in his bathroom where all of this had begun only a few months before. David found himself wishing he had succeeded in killing himself that day to spare himself from all the torment that followed.

Cassy faded in and out of view. David knew he was pushing her away, but he couldn't help it. His mind was full of fear and anger. He wanted answers, but was afraid of what the answers might be. He didn't know how to move past the fear and let the ghosts step all the way into his world.

"Hang on," David said.

David put the lead-lined helmet back on, just in case the evil Fitz ghost came back. He went into the kitchen and boiled water in his electric kettle. He pulled the mushroom baggie

from his pants pocket and measured out a tablespoon into a teacup.

“Just a few minutes now,” he called out to the living room. He waited the full ten minutes and then downed the drink.

He returned to the living room, removed the helmet, and Fitz’s ghost was still gone.

He sat down on his couch and waited. *What are mushrooms supposed to feel like?* he wondered.

Then the lights in the room began to shimmer, and he knew something was happening.

Cassy came sharply into view. So much so that she looked solid and real. Her pale skin was enhanced with pink, her sullen eyes now sparkled with life.

“What now?” David asked.

She smiled and stood up from her seat and walked over to him, extending her hand. “Come with me before he comes back.”

David took her hand, and it felt solid. She pulled David out of his seated position and he felt the world drop away.

They were free-falling into the darkness of a deep hole, disembodied. David felt his stomach drop, like he did on rollercoasters.

And like a rollercoaster, he felt himself stop falling with a jerk, then being pulled up, rising and rising. “Where are we going?” he asked her in the darkness.

Before she could answer, the world lit up again, and they came to a sudden stop.

They were in Gus’s cabin, alone. It was a warm day and sunlight came in through the windows.

“This is the day it happens,” she said, letting go of his hand. “This is the world where we don’t intervene. You and I are engaged. You rent out your house to the Mendes family and move into my apartment to save money for our wedding.”

Gus opened the door and entered, followed by Cassy, Shannon, and then a future David. They all were happy as they brought in their luggage and groceries.

They did not acknowledge ghost Cassy or David and went about putting their suitcases upstairs and the groceries in the fridge.

“We all went to Gus’s cabin for the weekend. Gary had a show to do, but planned to join us the next day,” Cassy said. “When the bombs fell, we were spared from the worst of it. Gary wasn’t so lucky. A firestorm swept through Vegas.”

The flaming ghost of Gary appeared next to Cassy for a moment.

“He cannot break from his trauma,” Cassy said. “The flames keep consuming him when he tries to enter your world. Yet he still tries. Still tries to warn you.”

The thought of so many dying in such a horrible way brought tears to David’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I should have listened to you sooner.”

Gary faded away in a cloud of smoke as he was finally consumed by the flames.

Future Gus wandered into the living room from the kitchen and, before David could move out of the way, passed through him.

David felt himself dragged away from Cassy and found himself pulled to another future time. He was still in the cabin, but it was dark. The living room was strewn with empty barrels and supply boxes.

Gus was in his rocking chair as he was in David’s vision of him. He was wounded, his leg shot off, and he was holding a rifle close to his chest.

Gus’s ghost was now beside David, replacing Cassy as his guide through time.

“We survived for a while on my supplies, and later by foraging and hunting. Then a group of armed survivors

attacked us at the cabin.”

Future Shannon and Cassy came running to Gus’s side. Shannon pressed a towel to his leg to stem the bleeding.

David’s future self entered the room with a first aid kit.

“I managed to fend them off, but not before being mortally shot myself. I died in the cabin.”

Gus’s ghost was replaced by Shannon’s. She took David’s hand and away they went farther into the future.

They were in Gus’s house. The windows were boarded up, and David couldn’t tell if it was night or day.

“With supplies and ammo running low at the cabin, we decided to risk coming back to Gus’s house in the city, where he had a stockpile of food and weapons in his basement safe room,” Shannon’s ghost explained. “A few weeks later, a fire swept through the neighborhood and burned us out of Gus’s house. But your house somehow escaped the blaze, and we all moved next door.”

They were now standing in the future version of David’s house. It was dark and dusty. The living room furniture was gone, long ago broken up for firewood.

“The Mendes family were living here when it happened. We found them all dead by suicide and buried them in the backyard.”

“When Cassy got sick, she ended her life with pills. Then it was just you and me. While scavenging in the rubble, we found a little girl, Madeline, and took her in.”

David looked over to the dining room table and the girl from before was there, playing with her ponies.

“For a while, we played house. We were a happy family, for her sake.”

Shannon walked him through the dining room and kitchen to the backyard, and to another day in the future.

David saw his future self dressed in an ill-fitting tux, standing under a trellis covered in plastic flowers.

Future Shannon came out of the back door wearing a faded wedding dress, her hair cut short, her skin pale.

She walked up to David, followed by Madeline, who was dressed as a flower girl.

Shannon took her spot next to David. "I always knew you wanted me," she said, with a tear coming to her eye.

The wedding scene in front of them turned into a funeral as they placed Madeline in a handmade coffin under that same trellis, then held each other and wept.

"When Madeline died from radiation poisoning, we could no longer hide from the inevitable. We were both sick and knew the end was near. I hanged myself and you slit your wrists."

David lurched forward and vomited. He felt the future world pulling away from him.

There was a bright flash, and he found himself back in the present, his living room restored just as he had left it, except for the vomit on the floor.

Cassy was once again sitting in the chair. "You can stop all of this, David," she said. "The only way to stop Fitz is to kill him. But in all the times we've tried, you never do."

"You've tried this before? Stopping Fitz?"

"Many times. Each time, it's harder to find our way back to you. Each time, a new timeline splits off with the same disastrous results; the human race is destroyed."

The room was swerving now and David felt nauseous. He feared he had taken too many of the mushrooms and might pass out. But when Cassy spoke again, it steadied the room and his attention.

"Sometimes we can't lure Fitz here. Other times, you just lose your nerve. Sometimes he gets the upper hand and kills you. It doesn't help that there are malevolent forces trying to

stop us. They want the end of the world to come. Fitz's spirit is drawing on that strength. He is stronger than any of us and, as you know, he can physically hurt you."

"Reverend Pendergast says you all are demons, trying to stop the return of Christ," David said. "Normally I wouldn't listen to a guy like that, but then that was before I started talking to ghosts. Even if I can do this, maybe I shouldn't. We had our time on this planet and if we blow it, we blow it."

David thought for a moment.

"Hey, how can Fitz be a ghost if I haven't killed him yet?" he asked accusatorially. "And, if I killed him, how come that didn't stop the end of the world the first time?"

Professor Lembeck stepped into the room from nowhere. For a moment, David thought he had returned to help, but Lembeck's wrinkled face and gray hair let David know he too was from the future.

"All future possibilities exist in a superimposed state," Lembeck explained. "Until there is a collapse of the wave function that creates reality. When you entered the world of the dead, all these possible futures existed tangled up with each other. When Cassy and the other ghosts followed you back in time and entered the living world, Fitz, too, found his chance to change his own fate. Demonic forces have interfered, pulling him from the maelstrom of time and sending him here to stop you. It is not only a battle of good and evil – it's a fight for infinity itself."

"Even if I succeed, won't he just keep haunting me?"

"We aren't sure," Cassy's ghost said. "We can't even be sure if this will work at all. If there isn't an end of the world, how will we become the ghosts that come back and stop him? Like in *Back to the Future*, the temporal mechanics are a bit iffy," she said with a smile. "We might be from another future too. Maybe we aren't saving ourselves, but we can save your future. You can save your Cassy, your Gary, your Shannon."

David felt sick to his stomach again and was doing his best not to vomit. The mushrooms were wearing off, and the ghosts were getting fuzzy again.

He put his head between his knees until the feeling passed, then got to his feet. “Fuck, I don’t know what to do! This is all madness. I can’t kill a person just because you tell me to!”

“Save us, David,” Shannon pleaded. “Save Madeline.”

“Save us, David,” the ghost of Mr. Mendes said. His family was standing with him on the stairs.

David’s own ghost was now sitting beside him. “You know what we have to do.”

The very much alive David stood up and, gathering his courage, said, “He won’t get me this time.”

“Fitz’s ghost will try to stop you,” Cassy warned.

“I have my crazy-person hat,” he said, holding it up.

“If we can get him here, will you kill him?” Shannon asked.

“Yes,” David said. “I won’t fail this time. I know what I have to do.”

“What’s your plan?” Cassy asked.

“You get him here with a phone call. I’ll kill him with my softball bat and bury him in the cellar. I can throw him into the cistern.”

Another ghost appeared across the room. His ghost pharmacist, Rachael. Her white lab coat was covered in blood and soot. “Get some quicklime at the hardware store and pour it over the body. It will dehydrate it and keep the body from smelling.”

“Thanks for the tip,” David said. “Let’s do this. The sooner the better. Before I lose my nerve.”

* * *

Members of his dad’s church came back the next morning, on a big school bus. As promised, it looked like the whole

congregation was there. Dressed in their black-and-white old-time garb, they held hands and formed a line that went through David's front door, through the house and out into the backyard.

They spent a good hour praying and singing hymns, sometimes in English and other times in a language that was unknown to David. His father was in the line reciting along with them, and David wondered if his dad had taken language lessons. He had heard of people speaking in tongues, but that sounded like gibberish. This seemed like a real language.

David wasn't sure what to do with himself while this was going on, and settled for sitting quietly in the living room, his hands folded in his lap, listening to the praying and singing. Through the window, he could see neighbors he had never met come out of their houses and line the street to see what was going on.

David wondered if this would continue past noon, and if so, would he have to feed these people, but then Pendergast declared the house cleansed. His fellow TOETs shuffled back onto the bus.

David's father seemed very happy, relieved that his son was no longer under attack from demonic forces.

"It is a glorious day," his father said, giving David a strong hug.

"It is surely a good day for the Lord," Pendergast said. "Many hands make light work."

David thanked him and wondered if maybe it *had* worked. It would make killing the live Fitz easier, if he didn't have to fight off his ghostly doppelgänger.

David's dad said he would be back the next day and got on the bus with Pendergast and the bus drove away. David returned inside to prepare for his destiny.

* * *

David used the rest of the afternoon to get ready. He bought

the quicklime the pharmacist had recommended from the hardware store. He ordered a delivery of cement for the next day to seal up the cistern once the deed was done. The concrete company would bring a truck in the morning with it already mixed.

He went over the plan in his mind again and again. The ghosts would get Fitz to the house. Then David would look for an opportunity to finish him off with his softball bat.

David paced the living room, waiting for Fitz to show up, trying his best not to lose his nerve.

Best not to overthink, he told himself. Just do it quickly.

He was wearing his lead-foil bicycle helmet; it made him feel stupid, but he needed to be alone with his thoughts and safe from ghost Fitz's fury.

He knew he couldn't answer the door with the hat on. Fitz already thought he was crazy. He would have to ditch the helmet and do the deed fast before the mangled-face ghost showed up to stop him.

He jumped when the doorbell rang. Show time. He pitched his hat into the coat closet and opened the front door.

Max Fitz was standing there. His eyes widened when he saw David, and he seemed at a loss for words. This bolstered David's courage. He had a feeling that Fitz wasn't caught off guard too often.

"David! Ah, well, this is awkward," Fitz said. "Cassy called and told me to meet her at this address."

"I know. Come in."

Fitz did, and David shut the door. He briefly caught sight of his softball bat leaning up against the coatrack. His heart raced, and he tried to remain calm.

"Did she tell you why to meet her here?" David asked.

"No. There was some interference on the call. I could barely make out what she was saying."

“I asked her to call you. I’d like to apologize for the other night,” David said. “I know I don’t have any claims on her, and had my signals crossed. I thought I was meeting her there that night, and when she didn’t come to the door, well, I got worried, remembering the man who attacked me in that apartment.”

“Understandable,” Max said. “And I’m sorry too. But we’re all adults here. And, well, the truth is I’m married, so it never was going to be anything but sex between Cassy and me.”

That statement made David angrier than ever, but he just smiled what he hoped came off as an ‘I totally get it, bro’ smile.

“Cassy should be here any minute. Can I take your coat?” David offered.

Fitz removed his overcoat and handed it to him, and David made his way over to the coatrack and the bat.

“I hope we can all be friends,” Fitz said. “I know how much she likes you.”

In one swift motion, David grabbed the bat, swung around, and smashed it into the side of Fitz’s head. As he swung, he saw that Fitz’s ghost had appeared behind the live one.

Fitz stumbled back but did not go down and David swung again, hitting Fitz hard in the face. He fell to the ground, and David looked down with recognition. Fitz’s handsome, TV-ready face was already starting to turn into the mangled face David had come to know as ghost Fitz. Fitz was staring up at him in bewilderment and anger, but then his eyes closed.

Ghost Fitz lunged at David, tackling him against the door of his hall closet. David felt around behind his back for the knob and managed to open it. He fell to his knees, grabbing for the helmet.

“Killing me doesn’t work. You are killing me for nothing!” Fitz’s ghost garbled as loudly as he could through his mangled mouth. “They’re lying to you!”

The ghost firmly grabbed David around the waist and yanked him out of the closet, but David's hand had found the hat. He fumbled with it in a panic and almost dropped it, but managed to get it on. Like before, the ghost fizzled out. David was alone with Fitz's dead body.

He didn't waste any time. He dragged the body down the basement stairs and left it beside the hole in the floor over the cistern. A five-pound bag of lime was leaning against the wall, and David opened it with a pair of gardening shears.

He turned at a shuffling sound behind him, then fell back against the wall. The still-live Fitz had gotten to his feet. His breathing was labored, and he coughed up some teeth that had been blocking his windpipe. Fitz said something in an angry, garbled voice that David couldn't understand.

How stupid not to check his pulse, David thought, as Fitz grabbed him by the shirt collar and yanked him to his feet.

They struggled, and David's helmet fell off. The ghost of Fitz appeared and joined the fray.

The live Fitz was trying to pummel David, but was so weakened that David could have easily pushed him down if not for ghost Fitz, who was pinning David against the wall. As David struggled to push back, he realized he still had the garden shears in his hand. He wrenched his arm free and plunged the shears into live Fitz's right eye.

The live Fitz fell to the ground.

Ghost Fitz's anger seemed to give him more strength, and he yanked David forward, spun him around and threw him toward the hole. David hit the ground but managed to roll away and not fall in.

Ghost dad, Cassy, and Shannon appeared. They grabbed Fitz's ghost and held him back the best they could, but Fitz shook them off and continued his attack on David.

David scrambled to his feet and made a mad dash for the helmet.

But ghosts are faster than humans. Ghost Fitz grabbed him and, powered by the blind rage of a murdered man, lifted David over his head and marched to the hole.

As David struggled, the live Fitz must have finally left the living world. There was what could only be described as a ripple in time. David felt it as small shifts in the air, and all around him he saw multiple versions of this moment, like funhouse mirrors reflecting each other, stretching into infinity. Multiple Davids, multiple Fitzes, all stacked on top of each other. In some of the images, David went into the hole. In others, David was still fighting with the live Fitz. In some visions, the basement was empty.

In an instant, the visions started collapsing until there was just one event left. One where David was on the ground next to Fitz's body and there was no ghost.

Before anything else could happen, David dumped some quicklime into the hole, rolled Fitz's body in and sprinkled the rest of the quicklime in on top.

He sat down, out of breath and sweating, his back up against the furnace. The deed was done.

After catching his breath, he stood. *Did it work?* There was no ghost Fitz down in the cellar with him. Had the demonic forces realized they had failed and pulled that version of Fitz back down to hell? Somehow, it felt like he had never been there at all.

David ran upstairs. There was no Cassy, no Shannon, no other ghosts from the future. For the first time in months, he felt he was truly alone in the house.

He laughed with a sigh of great relief. He had done it. It was over.

David returned to the basement and poured a second bag of quicklime down the hole. In the morning, a load of cement was coming. Under the guise of pouring a basement floor, David would fill up the cistern as well, sealing Fitz away forever.

Chapter Eleven

A Man Among the Living

David sat on a park bench, watching kids play on the swings as clouds gathered overhead.

He closed his eyes, breathing in the crisp air, happy to be back among the living. No more ghosts. He had stopped Armageddon, and he knew he could never tell anyone about it. Gary, Gus, and Lembeck knew what he had been asked to do, but when Fitz was reported missing, David would say the ghosts must have taken care of it themselves. He wouldn't burden his friends with the knowledge of what he had done.

D'Angelo wandered by and stopped at the bench.

"You look like you're feeling better," he said.

"I feel fantastic," David said.

"I'm out of the drug game," D'Angelo said. "I think you almost dying got me thinking."

"Glad I could help."

"I got a job at a car dealership. Pays pretty well."

"That's great," David said. "You can use your sales skills."

"How's that creepy old house?"

"Free of ghosts at the moment, so I think I'll stay."

"Glad to hear it, man." They fist-bumped, and D'Angelo went on his way.

It started to rain and David let it wash over him as the kids scattered off the swings and to their parents sitting on park benches across from him. All was right with the world.

* * *

David returned home soaked with rain. He went upstairs, changed into dry clothes, and towed his hair dry. It had been years since he took a walk in the rain and it was just what he needed, a good cleansing by Mother Nature.

He went downstairs and collected his mail like it was a normal day. For the first time, junk mail brought him joy.

He went to the kitchen to get a beer from the fridge. A slight buzzing in his ear made his heart skip a beat. *They're back*, he thought.

David slowly closed the refrigerator door, fearful of what was behind it. A little Asian girl stood there, her face disfigured. In a soft voice, she said, "Kill Kang, 2034."

David looked past her and saw a US soldier sitting at his kitchen table in full combat gear.

"Kill Kang, 2034," he said.

David felt the air leave his lungs, and he dropped his beer bottle. It crashed to the floor as his doorbell rang.

He slowly walked toward the front door, more out of habit than anything else, because he was in a trance, his head swimming with the fact that he had only delayed the end and not stopped it. *Still, that was something, wasn't it? It bought more time, right? More time for the ghosts to finish off Kang too?*

There was a loud knock at the door, and the ghosts scattered away.

"Run, David!" the little girl called out before she disappeared. But he was tired of doing things for ghosts.

David opened the door, and Cassy was there with a uniformed police officer and Detective Chen.

"Where is he, David?" she asked in an accusatory tone.

"Who?"

"Max. I have him on my Find Friends and it says he's here, but he's not answering his phone."

“Max was here,” David said, casually glancing over at the softball bat. He had forgotten to clean the blood off, but the clean side was facing him. “He came by to apologize, then left.”

“May we come in?” Chen asked.

“No, I was just on my way out for an important appointment.”

Cassy hit a button on her phone. The faint sound of a ringtone echoed through the old cistern piping in the walls. “Then why’s his phone *here*, David?”

The ringing continued, sounding like it was coming from everywhere in the house.

“Sounds like it could be in the basement,” the uniformed officer said. Chen told him to check it out. The officer pushed his way inside.

“You can’t come in here without a warrant,” David said.

“Probable cause,” Chen said. “We’ll wait here while he checks.”

“What did you do, David?” Cassy said.

David thought about making a run for it, but the look on her face made him want to stay and explain things. He did it for her; he did it for everyone’s future.

“I can explain,” David said. “It looks bad, but it will all work out in the end.”

The uniformed officer came through the swinging kitchen door with his gun drawn. “There’s a body in the basement.”

Cassy gasped.

“On your knees,” Chen ordered.

David complied, and the uniformed officer handcuffed him.

“I should have followed up on my hunches about you before,” Chen said. “That poor guy might be alive if I did.”

“You don’t understand. I did it for everyone,” David said. “He was going to start World War Three.”

Cassy looked at him like he was crazy, and started to cry.

Somehow, David knew the ghosts would not be saving him now.

* * *

A fall and winter passed, and the house remained vacant. Vacant of David, vacant of ghosts from the future. A new family was moving in: a father, a mother, a boy, and a girl.

The landlord greeted them at the moving van and handed them the keys. A cat was cleaning itself on the stoop. The girl ran up and petted him.

“Is this our cat?” she asked with glee.

“He seems to come with the house,” the real estate agent said. “Maybe a stray that lives nearby.”

“Can we keep him?”

The mother said, “No,” and shooed it off the stoop.

After moving in their boxes and returning the truck, the four of them plopped down on the couch, exhausted from the move.

“This is a great couch,” the boy said. “It fits us all.”

Later, after tucking the kids in their beds, the mother and father went to their room.

“So someone was actually killed in this house?” she asked, taking off her shirt.

“Why do you think the rent is so cheap?” the husband said.

“Did they catch the guy?”

“Yeah, jealous boyfriend killed the guy banging his girlfriend. Doing a life sentence, I’m told.”

“Great, I bet we have a ghost now,” she joked.

They went to bed, not knowing David had bought them four more years of life.

* * *

David sat on the bed in his prison cell. Gary and Shannon had come to visit him the day before. David had told them it was best to get on with their lives and forget about him.

Shannon believed him, of course, for she had seen a ghost. Gary, on the other hand, just thought David had had a mental breakdown. But in the end, it didn't matter. David didn't want to stand in the way of their new lives together.

"The decision is made," David told them. "I'm taking your names off my visitors' list."

"Please don't, David," Shannon said. She was crying as she had done most days of the trial, and it was more than David could take. He called for the guard to take him back to his cell.

"I'll get you a new lawyer," Gary yelled as the guard took him away. "We will fight this!"

Now, David found himself across from a lawyer sitting on the cell's other bed, unoccupied since David was currently between roommates.

"You can appeal," the lawyer said. "We have the testimony of your neighbor, psychiatrist, friends, and a Berkeley professor that you believe in ghosts. I'm not sure why your first lawyer didn't play that up."

"He did. They think I'm crazy, but that I knew what I was doing. The crime was especially heinous," David said, repeating the words of the judge. "I tried to conjure some ghosts to take the stand, but you all abandoned me."

A guard stopped outside his cell and looked in. "You talking to yourself again?"

"You can't see him," David said, "but there's a ghost lawyer sitting right across from me."

The guard chuckled. “They move you tomorrow. Maybe your next cell won’t be haunted.”

“I wouldn’t count on it. Where am I going?”

“The maximum-security psych hospital in Atascadero. You’re lucky. That place is a country club compared to here.”

“Everything’s coming up David,” David said.

The guard left to continue his rounds.

The ghost lawyer continued. “Really, David, I think we can get you out of here so you can complete your mission. We are working on things. Big things. Thanks to you, we have more years to stop Kang.”

David’s laughter annoyed the ghost, and he faded back into the ether.

Another guard came to his cell. “You got a visitor. Your dad’s here.”

David let out a big sigh as he stood and put his hands through the cell door for cuffs before he was transferred to the visitation room.

* * *

Larry Zhang stepped out of his shower. He pulled off the bathing cap that was there to keep his bandages dry. He looked into the mirror at his head, wondering if he could take the bandages off yet. Wondering if his hair would grow back over the piece of missing skull. He thought it probably wouldn’t.

Larry had fallen while on a movie set. A blockbuster movie with an all-star American and Chinese cast. Quentin Tarantino was directing and had cast Larry after watching him win a Wushu tournament in Los Angeles. Even though he was only playing one of the minions to a crime lord, it was Larry’s big break into the film world.

The pay wasn’t great, but they flew him to Hong Kong and put him in a nice apartment.

The accident happened while shooting a scene in a warehouse, where he was one of the bad guys attacking the hero on top of crates and shipping containers. The fight scene was carefully choreographed by Jackie Chan himself, but a rickety crate gave way and sent Larry fifty feet to the ground.

He landed hard on the safety mat, but the crate was falling right behind him. It landed firmly on his head, cracking his skull in three places and breaking his nose.

He spent six weeks in a coma while the movie continued filming without him.

With his coordination and fearlessness gone, he figured his days of Kung-Fu movies were behind him. He was not going to be the next Jet Li.

The insurance settlement covered his medical bills and a cash payout for his missed work, but he wouldn't be able to afford his tiny Hong Kong apartment for much longer and would have to make other arrangements.

Maybe it was time to go back home to LA and work in his parents' nursing home. It was easy work, since they specialized in taking care of catatonic patients. It was quiet and the residents never put up a fuss. He could work there while he went on auditions.

He opened the medicine cabinet for some shaving cream and when he closed it, he saw the words, *Kill Kang*, written in English in the mirror's condensation. Larry looked at it, confused, thinking his vision was still impaired by the fall. He went to his bedroom, put on his reading glasses, and returned to the mirror. It was clearer now. It definitely said, *Kill Kang*.

Who's Kang, and who was in my bathroom to write this? he thought.

He wiped it away only to have the words reappear along with a second line that read,

Find David.

* * *

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About this book

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