

Amador Lockdown

Coral Russell

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AMADOR LOCKDOWN

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Written by Coral Russell.

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"You always save the best lies for yourself." - Amador Lockdown

Something has moved into the Amador Hotel. Hector, Marcos, Bev, and Tony of the Paranormal Posse are called in to either debunk the haunting or get rid of whatever is causing the problems. With the surprise arrival of Hector's son, he tries to keep his professional and personal lives separate, but whatever is haunting the Amador Hotel has other plans.

Includes Devil of a Ghost Tour and Key to a Haunting

"Amador Lockdown by Coral Russell, is an enlightening thriller with family relationships, work and what sacrifices father will do to save his son. It is a tale about a family business of ghost hunters and on one job something goes terribly wrong. No one believes that something dark and sinister is behind the veil between the two dimensions. The father is the only one who knows the truth and will do anything in his power in this realm or the other realm to rescue his son before it is too late. The twist at the conclusion of this tale blew this reader's mind." - Sue Mahoney at Great Minds Think Aloud Literary Community

"It was very hard to put down once I started, Amador Lockdown, the suspense of "what's gonna happen next?" and feeling some of the fear that the characters felt really pulled me in. The twist at the end though, that was unexpected and I love books that do that, it left me wanting more." -

Kel, reader at Goodreads

Part 1: Devil of a Ghost Tour

1885

His black robe billowed out around him, exposing the red satin lining. In one hand he held a hazel wood wand, polished and consecrated in blood; in the other hand was a ceremonial knife with a black hilt. Both were engraved with the symbols of his faith.

Shoulders relaxed, feet slightly apart, drawing air in through his nose and releasing it with a soft whistle, he spoke: "O Sadai, most holy and most powerful, vouchsafe to consecrate and bless this circle to contain the demon I am about to invoke. O most holy Sadai, to whom be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." He drew a circle with his knife on the dirt floor, still speaking: "I invoke and conjure Thee...." The point scratched through the fine sand and rocks as he carved a large outer circle and then an inner circle, filling the space between the two with ceremonial writing. "Choronzon, appear forthwith. Show thyself to me...." He drew three obtuse triangles and continued the writing at the corners and insides of the triangles. "Choronzon, come and do not tarry; Choronzon come, fulfill my desires; persist unto the end, according to mine intentions."

He stood in the center and waited.

Present

Lynn and Lee Hoyt parked their car as the sun shot its last fading rays across Cleveland Square in front of the El Paso Downtown Library. Lynn pulled Lee along at a brisk pace, even though she was the one who almost always made them late.

Two men, dressed in black, approached them as they drew near and introduced themselves as the tour guides, Hector and Marcos. Both wore t-shirts with the El Paso Ghost Tours logo. Hector motioned for them to join the other couples of various ages and persuasions standing around a park bench.

“Tell me again why we're here?” Lee asked.

“I went on one of these ghost tours in Charleston. They tell you the history of the city and point out the famous buildings, plus elaborate on any local, popular ghost stories,” Lynn answered.

“Great. You, me and a history lesson. You know how much I hate this stuff. Wait, when were you in Charleston?”

“Believe it or not, I did a lot of things before we were married.”

“That's not my fault.”

Lynn playfully slapped his arm. “It was a lot of fun and we can always start season four of *Pawn Stars* tomorrow night.”

“So, that means there are no real ghosts on this tour? What a rip-off.”

Lynn nudged him with her elbow as they approached their first stop – the library itself. She listened as Hector told numerous ghost stories about the library, which opened in 1904 and was built on top of an old military cemetery. Hector and his

investigators even experienced a book falling off a shelf for no apparent reason while trying to do an EVP session.

“For those of you that don't know,” Hector informed the tour group, “EVP stands for Electronic Voice Phenomena. Basically, you catch something on this digital recorder.” He held up a thin electrical device. “You may not hear anything during the investigation, but when you go back and review the recording, you might hear voices or unexplained sounds.” Lynn caught Lee’s skeptical glance as she wrapped her arm around his waist.

Hector continued, holding up a gray device with a rainbow of colors at the top. “Another device we use is called a K2 Meter. We’ve passed a couple out to the group. Ghost hunters believe these devices can measure the magnetic field given off by ghosts. Sometimes you can use the lights to ask ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions.”

Lee's warm breath close to her ear tickled as he whispered, “You so owe me for this.” She snuggled into his side as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and kissed the top of her head.

She smiled and whispered back, “I know, I know.”

They passed by the Plaza Hotel, which towered over downtown El Paso like a dark, silent sentinel. Lynn and Lee learned the new owner had intended to restore the building, but was currently behind bars for tax evasion. The restored Plaza Theater, a bright spot downtown, hosted the world’s largest Classic Film Festival and also claimed long-since deceased patrons still wandered the aisles.

As they approached the seven-story Caples Building where Pancho Villa plotted against the U.S., Lynn imagined, in the prevailing darkness, that the building had been drawn from negative space. She turned to Lee. Her jaw dropped in disbelief. He was snapping pictures. “Honey, what are you doing?”

“I'm taking pictures.”

“Of an empty building?”

“I got a feeling.”

She chuckled as he put the camera away and reached for her hand. "See, this stuff is interesting," she teased, giving him her most devilish smile.

"I didn't say that."

Lynn thought the O.T. Bassett Tower was the most fascinating building on the tour. The art-deco style architecture on all four sides was quite rare for its time. Small terra-cotta plaques decorated the outside, along with blocks covered in swirls and flowers. The plaque above the front door resembled the builder Henry C. Trost himself. The dull reflection in the windows signified yet another vacant historic building.

Lynn turned to Lee. "It's so gorgeous! I would rent an apartment here in a heartbeat."

"Oh, no, we wouldn't." Lee said, squeezing her hand.

Hector overheard her and agreed, "We're trying to bring awareness to the downtown area through these tours and get people interested in preserving the rich history and, of course, hunt ghosts. We've tried to bring the ghost tour inside more buildings, but some of the owners want to charge us \$5000 to go in." The group laughed in sympathy as he added, "Ghosts don't pay that well." He went on to talk about the gunfights, prostitutes, gamblers, and violence of Old El Paso, the original Sin City.

"Does it feel cold to you?" Lee asked.

"No. The wind isn't even that bad. You're not getting sick are you?" Lynn ran her hand up his back to the nape of his neck. "You don't feel warm."

"I'm fine. What's that saying? Someone must have just walked over my grave."

"Don't say things like that," Lynn said as he bent down to kiss her forehead.

"I'm just joking." They slowed to a stop in front of a plain white building.

“We end our tour at the Franciscan Hotel,” Hector said. “One of the most haunted places downtown. Inside the basement we’ll investigate an evil spirit or entity. I want to warn you now, it could get scary.” He nodded at a husky fellow. “It’s usually the big, tough-looking guys that get scared and need to be escorted out.” Nervous laughter broke out among the group. “OK, let’s head in.”

Alfred Crouse waited for the stirring of energy around him. Crouse had chosen to summon the ultimate demon, Choronzon, from the abyss. If he pulled this off, he would claim power over most of the unseen world. He lived in a city of vice for a price, the perfect place to draw up this malevolent power. El Paso, Texas was a sinner's paradise with more gamblers, whores, thieves, and outlaws than everyday citizens. A good run at the poker table would support a life devoted to the study of the dark arts.

A tiny swirl of energy appeared in the triangles, so subtle. Crouse continued with a second incantation, "...I conjure and constrain thee.... Manifest before this circle; fulfill my will in all things that may seem good to me. Should thou disobey and refuse to come before me, behold: I will curse and deceive thee of thy office, joy and station. I will bind thee in the depths of the bottomless pit...."

The energy whooshed up into a full-fledged dust devil that knocked Crouse off-balance for a split second. He failed to notice the nick in the outer circle caused by a kicked stray stone. A tiny offshoot of the swirling mass towering above him, found the opening, and shot out of the enclosure.

A full skeletal figure and horse materialized from the middle of the dust devil. Patches of skull gleamed through an iron helmet decorated with two large horns. A skin cape, horns sticking up at the shoulders and neck, billowed out then draped down to cover the horse and almost swept the ground.

"Choronzon," Crouse whispered.

Energy pressed against Crouse's head. Choronzon was speaking to him. The sounds were soft and comforting one

moment, then a thunderous scream the next. Crouse swayed on his feet as he fought not to be sick. No discernible words issued from the lipless mouth. He decided to go on with the incantation: "Welcome, Choronzon. Welcome art thou unto me; I have called thee and thou hast obeyed. I bind thee to remain affably and visibly before this circle, within these triangles, so long as I need thee, to depart not without my license, till thou hast truly and faithfully fulfilled all that I shall require."

The soft whispering and shrill screams continued as Crouse detailed his plan to the demon. He took the change in energy and pressure in his head as confirmation of their pact. The ceremony was finished by closing the circle: "O Choronzon, because thou has diligently answered my demands, I do hereby license thee to depart. Depart, I say, and be thou willing and ready to come, whensoever duly exorcised by the sacred rites of magic." His ears popped and he staggered as the dust devil sucked back into itself. The basement returned to normal as he kicked at the dirt floor until all the drawings disappeared.

Crouse removed his robe and wrapped up the wand and knife before stowing it away in his satchel. When he exited the front doors of the Franciscan Hotel, he blended in with the crowd passing by. He never noticed the filmy, smoky air hovering in the corner of the basement.

Present

The interior of the Franciscan Hotel was dim and dark, but the white walls and dark blue star-shaped tiles on the floor hinted that the owner meant the hotel to look cheery and inviting. A thick layer of dust made the objects in the room appear fuzzy. The group shuffled down the hall, single-file, into a small room to the right. On the far right wall, a large trap door stood open. The first few steps of a wooden staircase could be seen going down into the basement.

“OK, people, watch your step. Please don't lean against the door. I've had it fall on me and it hurts—a lot,” said Marcos.

Lee whispered, “You'd think they would make this a little safer.”

“Must add to the experience,” said Lynn. Lee's comforting presence followed close behind her. He'd always been overprotective, but ever since her neck surgery he'd gone out of his way to make sure she didn't trip or lose her balance.

In Missouri, where Lynn grew up, basements were cool damp places with stone walls. This basement had the same stone walls and even a concrete floor, but it was musty and humid. Lynn wrinkled her nose in disgust. Occasional flashes of light came from other people's devices - cameras, iPhones with the Ghost Radar App, and K2 Meters.

Lynn recognized Marcos's voice as he called on the ghost of a little girl believed to be trapped in the basement. The session dragged on with minimal blips on the K2 meter and members of the group turning toward perceived noises and shadows, including Lee. One corner received some particular attention after the K2 meter jumped into the red for a few moments.

“Is the ghost of the little girl here? We’re not here to hurt you, sweetie. Is that other spirit here holding you back? Is he not letting you come out?” Marcos said.

By this time Lynn was standing behind Lee with her arms wrapped around his waist. She went on tiptoe and kissed the lobe of his ear. He answered by squeezing her forearms. The investigators had warned them that whispering would interfere with the EVP session.

“Hey, that other spirit who thinks he’s such a bad ass, get out of here. We’ll be dealing with you in the next room soon enough,” said Marcos.

Lynn rested her forehead on Lee’s back. *Nothing spooky here*, she thought. Even though she enjoyed the history part of the tour, it was getting late and she was ready to go home. Lee’s shirt felt damp on her forehead. She touched her cheek to his back to be sure. His stomach muscles tensed under her hands.

Just as she was about to whisper in his ear, a couple of people shuffled on the opposite side of the room. Hector’s voice echoed in the small space. “These guys aren’t feeling so good. I’m going to take them back upstairs.” A sliver of light from a flashlight appeared and sure enough, a woman and the ‘tough-looking’ guy were headed upstairs. Faint footsteps echoed down the length of the hall overhead.

Marcos and another investigator continued for about five more minutes, but by this time, even the K2 meters stopped lighting up. “Folks, let’s head to the other room where we encountered an evil spirit. I think he’s interfering with the spirit of the little girl we’ve experienced in this room. In the other room, people have been scratched and others felt sick. I will be provoking this spirit. I’m not trying to offend anyone, but I’ll be using some coarse language.” Marcos led the group to the next room. “A lot of stuff is piled up in there, so please, watch your step.”

Lee held her arm as they made their way through a room, and into yet another room. *At least it smells better*, Lynn thought. A red EXIT sign glowed on the other side. Through the debris she glimpsed a set of stairs. “That way is completely blocked off,” Marcos said as everyone settled into position.

“All right, you son-of-a-bitch. We’re here and I think you’re a coward. You can’t do anything more than keep a little girl trapped in here. Scratch me, push me, scare me, if you can. Come on, I’m right here.” No one so much as cleared their throat, waiting for a response. The K2 meters flickered. When footsteps creaked overhead, Marcos said, “Hector must be coming back.”

Lynn frowned. The footsteps overhead were leading away from the trapdoor behind her and toward the blocked off EXIT in front of her. *That’s odd*, she thought. The footsteps stopped. She stared in the direction of the EXIT, expecting someone to come down the stairs. Her head snapped back over her shoulder when the footsteps began again from the trap door. This time in a jog across the floor and in the direction of the blocked off EXIT. “It can’t be Hector. He never jogs,” said Marcos. Nervous laughter broke the group’s self-imposed silence.

Lynn asked, “Can you call him and see where he is?”

“Good idea.” Marcos dug into his backpack for a walkie-talkie. “Hector, where are you?”

“Hey, Marcos. Everything OK?” Hector’s voice crackled over the walkie-talkie.

“Yeah, are you in the building?”

“No, I’m sitting outside with the two who left the basement. Why? What’s up?”

“Someone is walking down the hall headed out of the building. Oh, now they’re jogging. I said it couldn’t be you because you never jog, ever.”

“No, man, it’s not me. No one is in the building. I locked the door behind me.” Dull, metallic rattling came over the walkie-talkie. “Yep, still locked.”

“OK. Well, someone is only walking out of the building. We don’t hear any footsteps coming into the building.”

“You need me to come back in?”

“No. We’re fine.” Marcos’s voice rang out again as he continued provoking the spirit. “Is that you walking above us? Come on, you can do better than that. You’re supposed to be this big, bad, powerful spirit. Show us what you got.”

Lee shifted and bumped into a stack of boards on the floor. “Sorry, that was me.” To Lynn, he sounded nervous.

A flare of red caught Lynn’s eye. The sharp odor of sulfur, as if a match had been struck right under her nose, made her flinch.

“Hey Marcos, the K2 meter went off,” a man’s voice said on her right.

The air thickened with the odor of sulfur. She turned to the dark shape on her right. “Do you smoke?”

“No, ma’am, I don’t,” he whispered back.

Lee drew her close. “You feel something?”

“No, but I smell something.” She sniffed the air, and then gagged at the stench. The queasiness passed when she buried her nose in the nape of Lee’s neck, breathing in his familiar scent. The air continued to wrap around her like a thick blanket.

She was about to ‘cry Uncle’ and ask Lee to take her upstairs when Marcos told the group, “All right guys and gals, let’s head back up.” The group turned and made their way down the short hallway to the steep stairs. Marcos was the last one to make his way up. Up ahead Hector had unlocked the door and was holding it open. As Marcos exited the room behind her, the trap door slammed shut. Lynn jumped and ran to catch up with Lee, who was already out the front door.

Crouse slipped into the flow of pedestrians headed down Mills Avenue, and then stopped short. *I did it. I really did it.* People flowed around him as if he were a rock in the middle of a stream until he moved out of the flow to lean against a building. *I did it.* Resolve filled his eyes. *Time to test my new powers.*

Before long, the new gambler had made the rounds at all the popular saloons, theaters, and brothels on Utah Street and become one of the top five Faro players in El Paso. Crouse no longer blended in with the crowd. A dandy now, he wore expensive, black suits with starched white shirts and brocade vests. Large, gold rings decorated his fingers and a jewel-encrusted stick pin adorned his jacket. Even his pocket watch was made of gold with a thick, heavy, gold chain that ran across his chest. Like any gambler worth his salt, he was an excellent shot with the pistols slung low on his hips.

Faro was a game of chance and tended to favor the player. Saloons made up for this by using crooked dealers, dealing boxes and cards. None of this fazed Crouse, who kept winning his way closer to the number one Faro gambler spot in El Paso.

Crouse rocked himself back onto two legs of his chair as he pondered the cards spread out between the dealer and himself. He'd alternately placed bets on his card being the winner, loser, odd, even, and any combination strung together in a 'square.' He loved this gambling game the most because of its fast pace, easy odds, and the ability to bet all his winnings on a single turn of a card.

His chair hit the floor with a thud as a petite, fiery, redhead plopped herself down in his lap. "Mary Ann." He gestured toward the table and said, "I'm working here."

"I know. I love a man who works at whiskey drinking, wagering, and whoring as hard as you do." Mary Ann grinned. He forgave her when she slid a shot glass full of whiskey into his hand and squirmed her bottom on his lap.

Crouse slid his hand up and down her side as he laid down his chip, betting everything on the last turn of the card. Choronzon's power had helped Crouse in every way imaginable - his winning streak at the gaming table, fine clothes, good food and Mary Ann, who owned one of the most luxurious brothels in town. She was ruthless and ruled her girls with an iron fist, making them virtual slaves by letting them run up charges for basic necessities and then deducting those charges, plus interest, from their wages. Choronzon had picked a perfect partner for him.

Mary Ann let out an excited yelp when he won, bringing his mind back to the Faro table. He downed the whiskey, dropped her off his lap and gathered up his winnings.

"So what put you in a fine mood today: my whiskey drinking, winning, or whoring?" he asked.

"You didn't. I did it all by myself!" she laughed. "I spread a rumor up and down Utah Street that Alice's whores are infected with something that'll make their peckers fall off." Crouse laughed. They made their way back to the whorehouse to wile away the rest of the afternoon in her bedroom.

They were awakened by a thunderous pounding on the door and a woman shouting. "Mary Ann! Open this door and face me, you bitch!"

Crouse propped himself up on the pillows to watch. Mary Ann threw on a nightgown, marched over to the door and flung it open.

"Take it back!" yelled a six-foot tall, blond haired, blue-eyed woman, her face purple with rage.

“Take what back, Alice?” asked Mary Ann, feigning innocence.

“Take back what you said about my girls!”

“But your whores are diseased. That’s why I threw Lucy out.”

“Lucy left because you were stealing her money like you do with all the girls here.”

“Now look who’s telling lies.”

Alice reached back and cold-cocked Mary Ann in the face. Mary Ann crumpled backwards, and then leaped up screaming, “I will kill you, you fat, ugly whore!”

Alice grinned, turned on her heel and marched down the stairs and out of the brothel.

Too stunned to move, Crouse watched as Mary Ann scrambled to her feet, pulled a pistol from his holster and stormed out of the room. He scrambled outside in time to gawk with the rest of Utah Street at Mary Ann kicking Alice’s front door. When Alice’s tall frame filling the doorway, Mary Ann raised the pistol and fired.

At first, Crouse’s weekly sojourns to the basement of the Franciscan Hotel to honor Choronzon were consistent. Once the winnings poured in, he’d slacked off. The money bought comfortable living and complacency.

As Crouse made his way down the stairs, he realized how distracted he had become. Mary Ann’s shooting of Alice was ruled as self-defense and miraculously, Alice survived. Mary Ann, on the other hand, became increasingly violent with her girls and customers until almost all were gone. She was depending more and more on Crouse’s financial support.

Violence dogged Crouse. The last two weeks, gamblers challenged him at gunpoint. He narrowly avoided a shootout this afternoon with a wild, drunken gambler. The other night, a man

charged him with a knife. The man's incoherent ranting had sent pinpricks rippling across his skin.

He cursed himself for being lax and not following through with his original plan - mastering the dark arts. With his cloak draped around him, he took out his ceremonial knife and wand and carved the familiar circles and triangles. *It's time to break the pact with Choronzon.* Far away from Utah Street, in a house on Sunset Heights, he would resume his studies in comfort.

Crouse began the ceremony as usual. No actual words were spoken by the demon; instead a rush of power flowed through his body. He recited the Release of the Spirit: "O Choronzon, because thou hast diligently answered my demands, I do hereby license thee to depart...."

As he finished the verse, the air around him grew dense. Fingertips danced across his scalp. The figure of Choronzon on horseback towered over him. Then the skin cape of the demon billowed wide. For the first time Crouse took in the jaws filled with sharp teeth. His own rattled as a screech echoed and rolled through the basement.

A black mass formed, gained substance, and then rushed at him from the left, knocking the wind out of him. He scrambled to his feet and stared. There was a smear where he had disturbed the meticulously drawn circle. His eyes traveled upwards to witness the skeletal horse take a tentative step out of the middle of the intersecting triangles.

With a raw gasp of air, he gripped his knife and wand and leaped as the horse set its haunches and sprang forward.

They met in mid-air with the horse and Choronzon materializing as they passed out of the edge of the circle. Crouse clubbed the side of the horse's head with his wand and swept his knife up and into the chest of Choronzon. The whole apparition vanished in a smoky cloud. Crouse plunged to the floor.

Crouse pulled himself to his feet as the black mass attacked and plowed through him again. He slashed with his knife.

Nothing phased this new entity. *What is this?* Crouse's mind raced as he turned on his heel and ran up the stairs. When he flung himself through the front door, his ears popped so hard he cried out. Sweat ran through his hair and dripped from his face as he knelt, trying to breathe. People passing by gave him a wide berth and some snickered.

Crouse recovered and headed in the direction of Mary Ann's whorehouse. He would collect his money and leave tonight. A cold chill wormed its way deep under his skin. The air turned to waves of clear, clean water in front of him. The next words he understood perfectly, "Did you think it would be that easy? Fool!"

Present

“Let’s go get a drink,” Lynn suggested. After they escaped the Franciscan Hotel, Lee turned to Hector and pelted him with questions about what they were doing to fix whatever was down there. Hector assured Lee they were looking into reversing the effects of the black magic on the building.

Lynn barely had time to say ‘goodbye’ to Hector and Marcos before Lee steered her towards the car. She hugged him around the waist. He seemed normal enough now. A drink would be a good way to unwind from what was supposed to have been a relaxing evening.

“Are you sure? It’s kind of late.”

“Sure, I’m sure. It’s been a long time since we stayed downtown. The Dome Bar is beautiful.”

“With a six-dollar bottle of beer.”

“I want a rum and coke.”

“That’ll be eight dollars. Geesh, you’re expensive.”

“But worth it!” Lynn grinned up at him.

They strolled arm in arm across the San Jacinto Plaza to the Paso del Norte hotel and bar. On the way, they stopped to admire the alligator sculpture in the middle of the plaza. “OK, I’ll bite, why alligators?”

“You don’t know, Ms. I-Google-everything?”

“No, and obviously I don’t Google everything.”

“Live alligators used to be part of a downtown attraction.”

“You’d think that would be a little dangerous.”

“Yeah, for the alligators. Some college kids pulled a couple out of the pond one night. They put one in a professor’s office and another one in someone’s swimming pool.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope. After twelve, blissful years of marriage, I would think you’d realize I don’t kid... much.”

“Right!” Lynn gave him a squeeze around the waist as he opened the big, wooden door that led to a room, two stories high.

Over the bar, in the middle of the room, hung a Tiffany stained-glass ceiling. Dramatic lighting brought out the blue, green and white shades of the floral design. The brown speckled walls and gold-plated moldings glowed with the light from the hanging chandeliers.

“I think this is the most beautiful place to relax and unwind. There are a lot of fleur de lis decorations too. What did Hector say about them?”

“I thought they used them to brand prisoners who were marked for death.”

Lynn looked into Lee’s dark green eyes and asked, “You were asking Hector questions about black magic. How do you know about that stuff?”

“I was a bad boy when I was younger. Oh wait, that’s right, I’m still younger than you.”

“And I’ll always be the more mature and wiser one.”

“That’s why I married you, honey.”

They ordered and settled back in the comfortable, cushioned chairs. Lynn frowned as Lee fiddled with his iPhone.

“Don’t play games on that thing now.”

“What? No, I’m checking out the pictures I took.”

“Of the empty building?”

“Yeah... wait. Whoa! Check this out. There were no windows in that building, right?”

“No, there weren’t. Let me see.” Lynn took the iPhone from Lee. “OK, first one—big, empty building. Second one—big, empty building. Third one—big, empty building. I’m beginning

to detect a pattern here. Fourth one—big.. Holy shrimp!” Her eyes met Lee’s. “There’s a light in one of the windows!”

“Except there weren’t any windows. Remember? Look at the next one.”

“There’s a light. Sixth one, there’s a light. Last one, no light.”

“I took those pictures one right after the other.”

“So, it’s like someone turned a light on and then off.”

“Yea.” She grinned. “This is awesome, honey. We’ve got to show these to Hector and Marcos.”

“Sure. Here, let’s check the audio.”

“Were you recording the session?”

“Some of it, when we were down in the basement.”

Lynn took one of the ear buds as the waiter brought their drinks and set them down. “I thought you didn’t believe in this stuff?”

“Well everyone else had something to use and the iPhone has a voice recorder. I figured, what the heck.”

After a few minutes, Lynn said, “Stop. I heard something there.”

“So did I.”

After several minutes, Lynn pulled the ear bud out, shaking her head. “I don’t know what it’s saying. There’s a garbled sentence and then a word. Let’s send this to Hector and Marcos and see what they think.”

“Good idea. A toast: to a devil of a ghost hunting team.”

A week later, Lynn had a ‘girl’s night out’ planned. Lee elected to stay home rather than go out with his friends. Guilt nibbled at her conscience about leaving him behind, but he told her to go on and enjoy herself.

She returned early, around ten, to find Lee drunk and playing on-line poker. Lee was an affectionate, ‘I love you, man’ drunk, so

finding him like this didn't bother her. As she leaned in to give him a 'hello' kiss, he flinched and glared at her, "What?"

"Nothing, just giving you a 'Hi, honey, I'm home kiss.'"

"Humph."

"You winning?" she said, glancing over his shoulder.

"Not really. I win some, then I lose it all."

"I thought you hated gambling? You told me it was basically throwing money away."

"I'm just changing my mind. You know, like a woman."

"Don't get smart. Well, it's play money anyway. It is play money, right?"

"Maybe."

"Lee!"

"What? I've spent a couple of bucks. No big deal."

"Come on, hustler, let's call it a night."

"Nah, you go on, don't wait up for me."

"Lee, how long have you sat here? How many bucks have you lost?"

"What the hell? You go out and have a good time. I stay here and have a good time, and now you're jumping my ass?"

"Lee, I'm not jumping you." She held up her hands, backing away. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he shouted.

She left him and closed the door behind her. *What the hell indeed*, she thought.

Sunday morning they usually slept in before going to the corner bakery to pick up some menudo with pan bolillo and pan dulce. Lee brushed his nose as Lynn tried tickling him. Her lips brushed his ear. "Come on, menudo is good for a hangover."

"I'm not hungover. Much," he groaned. "Go without me; you know which kind of sweet bread I like."

“Oh, all right. Hey, you were grumpy last night.”

“I was?”

“Yees.”

“I don’t remember. I don’t remember much of anything. Can you put some coffee on?”

He snuggled back down under the covers as Lynn ruffled his hair. “Sure.”

“And hey,” Lee said, poking his head up from under the covers, “I’m sorry if I said anything stupid last night.”

“It’s OK,” she said from the doorway. “I love you.”

“I love you more.”

As they were slurping up the spicy, hominy and tripe soup with hunks of white bread for dipping, Lynn’s phone rang. “It’s Hector,” she said. “Hey, Hector, what’s up?”

Lee raised his eyebrows when her eyes widened and waited for her to hang up, then asked, “And?”

“He got something on the EVP. He wants to meet me down at Kipp’s Cheesesteaks to pick up the pictures and recording. Want to come?”

“No, that’s OK. What was on the EVP?”

“He heard the word - *fool*.”

“Nice, even the ghosts think we’re stupid,” Lee said.

“I’m going to jump in the shower.” Lynn winked, “Race ya!”

Lee fumbled with his coffee cup as she raced out of the kitchen and up the stairs. “No fair! I’m still handicapped.”

About halfway, he glimpsed Lynn flash him before ducking into the bathroom. Lee smiled and then froze as he envisioned himself dragging her by the hair and throwing her down the stairs. He stumbled backwards to dodge her body and caught himself by gripping the railing so hard his hands turned white.

“My God, Lee, are you all right?”

Lee forced a smile. "I, uh, yea, I'm fine. I must be hungover still."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yea, yea, I'm coming. Get the water warm." Peeking over his shoulder, he caught a glimpse of Lynn, bloody and broken, at the bottom of the stairs. He raced the rest of the way to the bathroom and shut the door.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Lynn asked him for the hundredth time. "Why don't you come with me?"

"No, you go on ahead. I need to get ready for work on Monday."

"All right, love you." Lee accepted a kiss and waved as she backed out of the driveway.

As he closed the door, he heard the creak of footsteps on the second floor. He swung around, but saw nothing. The footsteps continued to the top of the stairs, then started down the stairs. A distinct footfall landed on each step. A gauzy black mist gathered together in the shape of a person.

Not believing what his senses were telling him, Lee rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palms. The footsteps stopped. When he opened his eyes, nothing was there.

Crouse crashed through the front doors of Mary Ann's house and ran up the stairs. He grabbed a large black satchel and ran from room to room collecting his money from their various hiding places.

When he reached the top floor, he examined Mary Ann passed out on the bed. *Good*, he thought, *I can make a clean get away*. He quieted down and moved around the room collecting what few belongings he wanted to take with him. The satchel was bulging when he knelt before the dresser to sweep Mary Ann's jewelry into its maw.

He jerked his head up as a familiar chill wormed its way under his skin. Behind his reflection in the mirror, the air vibrated in front of Mary Ann's body. When she sat straight up in bed and turned to face him, his eyes widened. Her green eyes were now swallowed in blackness like gaping holes. He struggled to get to his feet, but she threw him forward, cracking the mirror with his head. Ears ringing, not only from the blow, but also from an unearthly howling and screaming, he cowered as she tore at his neck, back and arms with her nails.

Crouse managed to push Mary Ann away. She sprang forward, sinking her teeth into his arm. He wrapped his fingers around her throat, pried her off, drew back and landed a solid punch to the side of her face. The gold rings on his fingers left bloody gouges on her cheek. When she rushed him, a kick to her abdomen sent her flying backward.

She charged again—red hair streaming behind her, black eyes boring into him, mouth screaming, face contorted in rage. He

aimed his pistol and fired point-blank into her face. She dropped like a stone to the floor.

Crouse ripped off his holster and clothes, sticky with blood and bits of Mary Ann's face. His pistols clattered to the floor. Sounds of a commotion drifted up from the front of the house. After putting on clean clothes, he leaned out the back bedroom window and tossed the satchel to the ground. He hung off the back porch for several seconds before landing beside it. The backyard was enclosed by a low rock wall. He cleared the wall and made a beeline to the center of town - San Jacinto Plaza.

J. Fisher Satterthwaite was commissioned by the El Paso Parks and Streets Commissioner to create something beautiful out of the sand and mesquite-filled property.

Satterthwaite fenced off the park, put in a walled pond, built a gazebo, and planted seventy-five Chinese elm trees. Then he brought alligators. By the time he was done, the pond held at least seven. No one knew the reason behind his choice, but the unique reptile attraction drew shoppers and onlookers to the downtown area.

Crouse entered the crowded Plaza expecting to hide himself among the crowd as he made his way to the train depot. He surveyed the people going about their day and hurried to the southern part of the plaza. Couples, families, and lone men passed him without a second glance.

Nearing the alligator pond, he forced himself to shrug his shoulders, take a deep breath and relax. Sunset Heights wasn't safe now. The last train would be here in a couple of hours to take him far away from El Paso.

He paused to admire the alligators bathing in the sun, when a chill dried the sweat on his shirt and made him shiver in the

desert heat. Swiveling his head from side to side, he caught other people pulling at their clothes or hugging their bodies.

The shimmer appeared on his right. His mouth went slack as a face with black holes for eyes focused on him. He reached for his holster. Nothing there. Dread clouded his mind as he realized he'd left his holster and pistols at the whorehouse. Panicking, he hopped over the low concrete wall into the alligator pond.

The splash of water as the alligators plunged into the moat reminded him of the danger he'd jumped into. He turned around to climb back over the wall. People with pitch-black eyes peered down at him.

Crouse kept one eye on the alligators floating nearby and the other eye on the increasing number of inky black stares aimed directly at him. When he tried to make his way over the wall, the hands attached to those stares shoved him down.

Crying out in frustration, he ran to another point along the wall and was pushed back again. On his third attempt, a huge man punched him in the face, sending him tumbling down almost to the edge of the moat. He shook his head, trying to clear it, then started up the grassy slope. The alligators charged out of the water. One clamped down on his leg.

He screamed and twisted around using his heavy satchel to beat the reptile's nose. The satchel popped open on the third blow, sending its contents into the air.

Another alligator clamped onto his arm. Crouse tilted his head back to scream. Money floated down in graceful twirls from the sky above him.

Present

It took thirty minutes to get anywhere in El Paso. Lynn entered Kipp's Cheesesteaks to find Hector sitting at a table with a bottle of beer. The prominent sign above the counter read 'Beer is Good'.

She accepted a hug from Hector as he asked, "How you doing? You want to order something?"

"Pretty good. Yea, I love this place. I'll probably grab something to take home for Lee, too."

"How's he doing?"

"OK, I guess."

"So, here's your stuff. I also wanted to tell you a little more history, if you don't mind."

Lynn took a bite of Green Chile Philly with homemade fries and listened as Hector told her about the black magic practiced in the basement of the Franciscan Hotel.

When the owners first let them in to investigate, they discovered crude ceremonial circles carved in the floor and Satanic symbols on the wall along with other paraphernalia.

"Creepy," Lynn said and then she told him everything she'd experienced during the investigation.

"Really? That's a pretty strong reaction." He continued on about the hotel and how the owners weren't able to make a profit. "The hotel coasted along, but never fell into complete ruin." By the time he was done explaining, it was getting late.

Lynn checked her phone.

"Sorry for boring you with all this."

"No, no. I love this kind of stuff, but Lee usually texts or calls me, and I haven't heard from him yet." Lynn squeezed Hector's

arm. "I really liked the tour and want to go on some of the others." She picked up the to-go bag of food for Lee and the folder with the pictures and tape.

"Well, someone was even 'possessed' or more likely followed home, but we helped him with that."

Lynn stopped. "What followed them home?"

"We're not sure, other than it's a sort of malevolent spirit that wants to cause trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The person was acting strange. Doing things they don't normally do. Why?"

Lynn shrugged.

"Because we took care of it, so if anything is going on, anything at all, just let us know."

Lynn shook her head and smiled. "No, I'm sure it's nothing. Hector, thanks for everything. I hope to go on another one of those tours soon."

"Great! We've got something going on almost every weekend."

Lynn tried calling Lee before she started her car. No answer. She left him a message saying she was coming home with food.

When she pulled up in front of their house, the heavy beat of music rattled the windows. Heading to the front door, she thought, *That's not country music. When did that change?*

Once inside, the music was so loud she didn't even bother calling his name. There were empty beer bottles on the kitchen table. *Drinking again?* Setting the food down, she made her way upstairs, the music pounding in her chest. At the top of the stairs, she found him back at his computer gambling and drinking more beer.

"Lee!" she shouted, "Lee!"

"What?"

Turning her back on him, she went to their bedroom and switched off the music. “Hey!” he yelled from the study, “I was listening to that!”

Enough was enough, she thought as she marched back to the study to confront him. “Lee, I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but we need to—”

Lynn went flying backwards and landed hard on her butt. Pain jarred her neck and ran down her left arm into her fingers. She’d never been hit before. Not on purpose. Not with that kind of force. Not by a man, let alone Lee.

She scooted backwards on her rear, focusing on Lee’s panic-stricken face. His lips trembled as if he was trying to say something. Her attention dropped to his legs. They were moving in awkward, jerky strides. He clenched and opened his hands. “Lee?”

Lynn stared into his now terrified eyes, the muscles in his jaws popping until one word escaped. “RUN!”

To her horror, an inky blackness leaked from the corners of his eyes and faded into his pupils. “Lee!” she screamed as the blackness overtook his eyes.

He lunged forward. She pushed herself back to the top of the stairs. Lynn fell onto her back and kicked her legs up, catching Lee in the chest. She rolled toward the stairs, sending him crashing down to the floor below.

Lynn belly-flopped down several steps. She turned over, breathing hard. Her husband lay face down on the floor at the bottom of the stairs. “Lee?” she whispered.

The soft, ticking sounds of appliances echoed through the house. She crawled down the stairs and nudged him with her toe, expecting him to sit up and grab her. *What the hell just happened to her husband?* Her eyes never left his motionless body until she closed the front door and raced to her car.

Speeding away from their house, she tapped the number 9-1-1 and told the operator that her husband had fallen down the stairs. Then she hung up and called Hector.

Lynn hugged herself as she paced in front of the impressive art deco Basset Tower. She glimpsed the ten stone eagles, America's gargoyles, perched on the tenth floor of the building, all facing east. Footsteps signaled the approach of Hector and Marcos trotting up the sidewalk to meet her.

Lynn was trying hard not to burst into tears, but her voice came out shaky, "What in the hell is going on? Is my husband possessed?"

"We think he is possessed by a minion of one of the devil's demons that was contacted using the black magic portal in the Franciscan Hotel," Marcos explained.

"So, we burn down the hotel."

"It's not that easy. The portal doesn't necessarily belong to this dimension, so destroying the building won't change much."

"There's got to be something we can do!"

"We think," Marcos nodded at Hector, "and this may sound just as crazy, there is a way to balance out the black magic portal with a white magic portal in this building."

"Oh, screw this! I should have gone to the police," Lynn said as she began to back away.

"Hear us out, Lynn," said Hector, "We think you're the one who needs to help us close it. Everything we need is in here." Hector held up a black backpack.

"I can't believe I even thought of doing this. Oh my God, I should be at the hospital or with the cops. I probably killed my husband!" Her phone rang. She jumped, and almost dropped it, before answering the call. "Yes, yes I called. Did you find him? Is he alright?" She paused, listening.

She stared at her phone until Marcos reached out and touched her arm, “Are you alright? What happened?”

“Nothing,” she said. “He’s gone.”

“Lynn, you obviously love your husband. We don’t want anything to happen to you two. If we try to close the portal, it not only helps you now; it also stops anyone else from using the portal ever again. We can’t eliminate it, but we might balance out the powers again.”

Lynn lowered her head, and then nodded. “We need to get going. I think he’s headed here.”

“What makes you think that?”

“His eyes. He was scared and I don’t think he had a choice. This minion wants him to stop me from doing what you think we need to do.”

“OK, I’ll explain on the way up,” said Marcos.

“Way up where?”

“The tenth floor with all the eagles. We think that’s where the portal should be built.”

“What’s the plan?”

“We’ll use the fire escape to reach the tenth floor. Open a window, somehow, and find the center of that floor. Draw a white magic circle with salt. Here, I’ve written out the prayer for you to use. After that, I’m not sure exactly what’s going to happen.” Marcos put on the black backpack and they headed to the back of the building.

Around the fourth set of stairs, Lynn heard heavy breathing behind her.

“I told you to start working out,” Marcos called back.

“Now? Now’s the time you want to bring that up?” Hector said.

“Just saying.”

“Do something useful and tell her why we’re doing this.”

“Because you can’t, since you’re out of breath.”

“Cabron.”

“Lynn, remember all the symbols on this building?” Marcos said.

“Yep.”

“Well, there are five major ones repeated throughout the building. You’ve got the fleur de lis, symbol of the Virgin Mary; an acorn and leaf, symbol of patience; a seashell, symbol of pilgrimage; the Green Man, symbol of rebirth; and eagles, symbol of strength and power. All of eagles on the entire building face east.”

“Why?”

“The symbols also have magic properties like air, fire, earth, and water. The eagles also represent air for spirituality and change, with force, if necessary.”

“So why are they on the tenth floor?”

“The number ten represents harmony and creation. Since the eagles are on that floor, it should be the best place for the white magic portal.”

“But you don’t know for sure?”

“Well... ”

“Jesus, guys!” Lynn slammed her hands down on the railing. “What if this doesn’t work?”

“Hey!” Hector yelled up from several flights below them. “Listen, I think someone else is on the fire escape.” They all leaned over the railing as a black shape rounded the corner on the second floor.

“Hector, you need to put it in high gear.” Marcos ran up the couple of steps to grab Lynn and hurry her up.

“Wait, let me talk to him.” She leaned over the railing and called down, “Lee! Lee, it’s me, Lynn. Can you hear me?”

The figure stopped. The face was Lee’s, but his eyes were empty, black sockets. His face screwed up in anger as he let out an inhuman scream.

“Nope, that’s not gonna happen,” said Marcos. “Come on, Lynn. We gotta go. Hector, it’s a couple more flights. Better hurry your ass up!”

Hector muttered, “*Chingo*.”

Lee sounded as if he was taking the steps two and three at a time. Lynn reached the tenth floor right behind Marcos who was searching for a way in.

“Nothing,” Marcos said. “These are all locked.”

“Do we break in?”

“Yea, but Lee will be right behind us.”

“We’ll need to lock him out when we get in.”

“Right. Back up.”

Lynn held the backpack as Marcos wrapped his arm with his jacket and broke in the glass window. She stepped back while he knocked glass out to clear the sill. Hector yelled from right under them, “Watch it!” as glass tinkled through the mesh of the fire escape.

Marcos helped Lynn inside as Hector pounded up the last flight of stairs.

“Go, go! He’s right behind us.” Hector grunted as he squeezed himself through the window. His black cowboy hat tumbled to the floor of the fire escape.

“My hat!”

“Forget the hat!”

“No way,” Hector leaned out to pick it up as Lee rounded the corner and stood on the landing not even breathing hard. The black holes fixed on Hector. “Ohhhh, shit!”

Lee leaped. Marcos grabbed Hector by the collar of his shirt and hauled him back through the window. Lee crashed to the floor outside as they hit the tiled floor inside. Hector held up his hat, admired it for a second and put it back on his head.

“Happy now?”

“Yea,” Hector gasped.

Lee's face appeared in the window. Hector and Marcos scrambled to their feet as Lynn called out to them from behind and to the left.

"Guys, come on! This way!" Lynn was holding open a door that lead to a hallway. "Here."

Hector slid the last couple of feet in his cowboy boots. They passed through and she slammed the door shut as Lee cleared the windowsill. Lynn picked up a board to pin the door shut between the doorknob and a door brace on the floor.

"This isn't going to hold him for long," said Marcos. "The door has a glass window too."

"Well, where to now?" asked Lynn.

"This way," Marcos said, pointing down a short hall to a set of double doors.

They banged through the double doors and scrambled for another way to brace the doors shut. Marcos grabbed two shelves off an office wall and used them to jam the bars of the door handles from being released. "This isn't going to stop him for long, either."

"We need to get started," Hector gasped as he stood, bent over, trying to catch his breath.

Lynn moved down the hall, which opened up into a foyer that held the defunct elevators on the right. On the left, large ornate windows showcased the twinkling, cheerful downtown lights of El Paso. Lynn returned the backpack to Marcos who began pulling out boxes of salt.

"Kosher salt? You going gourmet ghost hunter on me?" said Hector.

"Shut up; it was on sale," Marcos said.

"Does it make a difference?" said Lynn.

"No, well... No, no it doesn't make a difference," said Hector. "Look, here's what you do..." The muffled sounds of glass breaking traveled down the corridor. Hector flipped open the spout on one container and handed it to her. He directed her to

make a large circle while he muttered a prayer, "This Sacred Circle, my fortress be, in perfect love and perfect trust be though cast, so mote it be!" She had completed a third of the circle when Lee slammed into the double doors down the hall. "Hurry, once you complete the first circle, nothing should be able to pass."

Lynn paused. "What about you guys?"

"Don't worry about us," said Marcos from the hallway. "Just finish the circle. Hurry, the door's going to give."

Lynn continued pouring again, but stopped short of closing the circle. She met Hector's eyes. "Don't hurt him."

"I don't think you need to worry about *us* hurting *him*. Close the circle."

"Promise me, you won't hurt him."

"Lynn, he's coming. Close the circle!" yelled Marcos backing up into the foyer. The doors crashed against the wall.

"Not until you promise me!"

"I promise: we will try really hard not to hurt the possessed maniac coming down the hall. **NOW CLOSE THE CIRCLE!**" yelled Hector. Lynn closed the circle. "Now make two squares, one on top of the other and another circle inside the squares. Don't break any of the edges, stay inside the middle. Once you're done, read the prayer on the paper I gave you."

"Then what?"

"Pray something happens."

Lynn put the finishing touches to the shapes as Lee stormed into the foyer. "Watch out!" Lynn yelled.

Hector and Marcos tried to draw Lee's attention, but he knocked them to the floor with one hand.

Lynn stood transfixed as Lee marched up to the circle and howled in rage. Her eyes filled with tears as he paced back and forth around the perimeter, snarling at her.

Lynn wiped her eyes, and then read the prayer, "Spirit and Guardian, I call you to my circle. Come be with me. Watch from

the east and keep me safe; witness my workings and lend me thy aid.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and whispered, “Lee, come back to me.”

Clapping her hands on the ground, she cried out, “As above, so below, blessed be!”

Epilogue

Hector and Marcos woke up to find Lynn and Lee clinging to each other as Lee chanted over and over, “I would never hurt you,” and Lynn reassuring him with “I know, I know.”

Hector pressed Lee to explain his experience, but all he got was that Lee was trapped in his own body, as if something else had pushed him aside and taken control.

As dawn broke over the horizon, Hector and Marcos led the couple back down the fire escape. Hector said over his shoulder, “There’s this great get-away hotel up in Cloudcroft with some pretty wild activity going on. We’re doing an overnight tour at the end of the month. You two should check it out.”

Hector wasn’t too surprised when Lee raised one eyebrow and said, “You can’t be serious.”

The following weekend:

“All right people, watch your step. There’s a lot of junk down here since they use the basement for storage.”

No one on the ghost tour noticed the black, smoky haze that floated in the back corner of the basement of the Franciscan Hotel...

Part 2: Key to a Haunting

The dance was beautiful. Arms waving gracefully. Bodies swaying, doing pirouettes before slumping to the floor. Long hair floating up for a second as bright liquid strands of flame. The women that didn't jump suffocated or burned to death. The doors locked.

1

Allen Harris lay on the bed, arms and legs splayed out, the sheets a crumpled mess around him, trying to will himself into oblivion. The refrain from a song playing in his head, *Make the world go away ...*

His life was pretty much over, like the other estimated eight million recently unemployed workers in America. The bank he worked for failed. The ripple of fear turned into a panic on Wall Street that more banks would soon topple. In his mind, he shared some responsibility.

The housing bubble popped, an over-inflated balloon that took Allen's career with it. Banks were making interest-only loans to homeowners and then reselling them to free up money in order to make more loans. Soon the original packaged deals were broken up and resold several times, using sophisticated computer programs to figure out the derivatives and sub prime mortgages. All went well until housing prices dropped and foreclosures piled up.

Allen's bank, Trust and Security, moved \$40 billion every three months to hide the fact that a hundred-year old company was living on borrowed money and borrowed time. With no bailout coming from the Feds, the doors closed and the world didn't stop turning.

Make the world go away... . He covered his face with his pillow and tried to suffocate himself. A rapping at the door interrupted him. His mother's muffled voice called out, "Breakfast is on the table, honey!"

He pushed down hard one more time then flung the pillow to the floor. *Is that eggs and bacon? Be a shame to let Mom's cooking go to waste.*

Allen entered the kitchen to find his father's icy blue eyes peering at him over the top of the Wall Street Journal. Allen ran a hand through his rumpled, dirty-blond hair and tightened up his bathrobe before sitting down to eat. He had a forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth when his father said, "After breakfast, I would like a word with you in my office."

"Sure, Dad."

Allen listened to his father fold up the newspaper. He felt a light tap on his shoulder as his father passed by. "I'll see you in a bit."

Once seated in his father's office, Allen picked invisible lint from his shirt, straightened his sleeves and adjusted his position in the cushioned chair.

"Our family owns some downtown property."

This was not the conversation Allen had expected. "Property?"

"Yes. Your great-grandfather owned the building and we've been using it as a tax write-off. I think it was a factory at one point. It's been vacant for at least forty years. Well, not completely vacant; the first floor is rented out."

"And...."

"And, I want you to do... something. I don't care what, but it's part of your inheritance. It's run down, but functional. You'll need to study the downtown economy and decide how best to proceed."

Allen swallowed hard. "Sure, Dad. Thanks. I'll get right on it."

Allen stood on the corner of Stanton and Franklin. In front of him, ten stories high, stood the first fire-proof building from the 1900s. The street level housed a popular retail shoe store, clothing retailer and a chain restaurant. Impressive for a tax write-off.

When his father handed over the keys, the old feeling of excitement at a new challenge drove Allen to see the property right away. The keys jingled, full of promise, in his pocket as he approached the enclosed staircase that gave him full access to the building.

2

Months later, Allen surveyed El Paso's most luxurious corporate apartments with a panoramic view of the downtown area. The price tag covered rent, utilities and once-a-week maid service. Initial marketing proved successful and half the apartments were already leased. He was a success. Again.

Allen moved from his parents to the apartment decorated in warm, earth tones. The kitchen gleamed with immaculate, granite counters, light-brown wood cabinets and stainless steel appliances.

The *plunk* of a cork leaving a bottle of Veramonte wine from Chile, echoed throughout the apartment. He poured himself a glass in celebration of moving out of his parent's house for the second time in his life, and, he promised, the last. He glided into the living room, the wine halfway to his lips, when the glass slipped from his fingers.

The torsos of at least a dozen women milled around back and forth over the hard wood floor and across the hemp rug.

Allen jumped back, his feet slipping out from underneath him. Pain shot down his leg when he landed hard on his right hip. As the sensation subsided, he remembered why he was on the floor. He scuttled back into the kitchen, kicking the door shut as he passed.

He used the counter to haul himself upright, poured another full glass of wine and downed it before limping to peak through the door again. A CD of the Paul Whiteman jazz orchestra played softly in the background. No bodies. He opened the door wider. *Fantastic*, he thought, *I'm a successful nut.*

A clerk was at his desk working on an account when a shadow passed by the window in front of him. His mouth dropped open as a body fell trailing flames. Shouts, screams, and yells from outside punctuated the fall of each person. He stood, hypnotized, as woman after woman plunged to the street below. Two girls fell, holding hands.

The maid service made no comment on the mess left in the condo nor asked any questions when Allen moved into another one across the hall. The predominately black and gray colors matched his mood for the next few days. Since nothing else freaky happened, he chalked it up to a bad case of delayed stress.

Allen brightened up considerably when his wife, Laurie, called to talk. He started walking on air after she mentioned plans to bring the girls for a short visit.

Allen had laid low when he first arrived in El Paso, but now, hooking up with old high school friends seemed like the perfect way to celebrate the completion of the apartments. Allen found out a good friend also moved back in town and opened a restaurant on the west side.

Ruli was thrilled to hear about Allen's plan for a mini-reunion of their Entrepreneurship Club from High School and offered up his place for a beer tasting and tapas party. Ruli's International Kitchen consisted of twelve tables and a long bar. Behind the bar, Allen perused a collection of fine imported beers and wines.

"What do you like?" asked Ruli.

"You know, I really go for the dark, strong stuff," said Allen.

"Then you're going to love this." Ruli reached behind the bar and popped the top on a bottle of Dixie Blackened Voodoo Lager. When he poured it into a clear glass mug it became a dark, swirling liquid topped with a coffee-colored head of foam.

Allen tasted the beer. "Wow, you weren't kidding. I do love this!" He swung around and surveyed the rest of the small room.

People started arriving and gathered in groups of four and five. Ruddy faces shone under the soft track lighting and laughter

rose and fell in quick bursts. Allen lifted his mug in greeting to several friends as they passed by, a little wobbly on their feet. "Hey, I thought this was supposed to be a 'beer tasting,' not a 'beer drinking' party." Scattered laughter broke out again. He leaned back to Ruli and said, "This sure is different from the wine tastings my wife takes me to."

Ruli slapped him on the back, "This was a great idea, man, thanks."

Allen stumbled against the doorframe to the condo, clutching a six-pack of his new favorite beer. He chuckled to himself for no reason. After three swipes, he managed to fit the key in the lock and entered the condo. The twinkling orange and yellow lights of downtown El Paso lit the living room enough that he didn't even bother turning on a light. Allen put his package on the living room coffee table, took out a beer and picked his way past furniture to the patio.

I'm back, he thought to himself. *Once Laurie gets here with the girls, we'll sit down and talk this all out. It's my fault. I'll own up to everything.* He missed his family, and right now getting them back was the most important thing.

Coldness interrupted his thoughts. He frowned. His back was colder than his front, which was exposed to the cool night air. In alcohol-induced slow motion, he turned around.

A young girl, of fifteen or sixteen, ran straight at him. Her arms reached out and her mouth was open in a silent scream, eyes wide with terror. Her hair was a long train of flames.

Allen held up his hands in an attempt to slow her down. She passed by him as he grabbed at her clothes. Momentum almost carried Allen over the edge himself. He gripped the railing and stared into empty space. There was nothing there. Nothing at all.

He stumbled back around and sat down. Holding up the beer bottle in his hand, he thought, *At least I didn't waste my beer.* He rubbed his face with his free hand, thinking, *What if it had been one of his own daughters?*

Allen woke up on the couch with the T.V. blaring and the condo ablaze with light. He tried to prop himself up with his hands, but a sharp pain made him fall back onto his elbows. When he dragged himself to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face, he noticed his left palm was bright red. It looked like a burn.

Back in the living room, numb and hung-over, Allen turned the T.V. remote over and over in his hands. The local news team was interviewing a man dressed all in black, including a cowboy hat. The scene changed to night-vision. The scrolling caption under the video read, "Ghost Hunt - El Paso Downtown Library."

The man in the cowboy hat was speaking directly to the camera when something clattered off camera behind him. He moved to investigate a book that apparently had fallen to the floor all by itself. As the camera cut back to the interview, Allen learned they were talking about ghost hunting and the man in black, Hector, ran ghost tours in El Paso. Allen leaned over the coffee table and jotted the number down on a scrap of paper in front of him.

Laurie agreed to bring the girls to his parents' house instead of meeting on neutral territory. His parents agreed to keep silent about the reasons for the separation. His mother even pulled him aside and gave Allen a bracelet to give to Laurie as a reconciliation gift. All went well during a home cooked lunch of green chile enchiladas, beans, rice, and tortillas. After Allen lavished affection and gifts on his daughters, he grabbed Laurie's hand and led her to the manicured back yard.

"Everything is going to be all right," he said.

"Really?" Laurie laughed softly. "You always could make me laugh."

Allen took both her hands in his, "I mean it. I'm back on my feet. It's not Wall Street, but we can make a life here."

"You want me to just up and leave my job? Allen, how can I trust that you won't let the pressure get to you again? You ran away and left everything behind."

Allen looked into her warm brown eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I fell apart and gave up. I let you all down and I am sorry. It's whatever you want. I need some more time to get the condos leased. After that, the property will pretty much take care of itself and then I can move back and find a new job."

"I don't know." Laurie pulled her hands out of his.

"Everything is going to work out, I promise. I could stand you being angry with me, but I couldn't stand disappointing you."

"You didn't disappoint me." When Allen tried to look away, Laurie took his face in her hands. "All the stuff doesn't matter to me. It never did. You got all wrapped up in the prestige, money,

status, all the things that didn't have anything to do with us, as a family."

"What can I do to make this right between us?"

She kissed him gently. "Asking that question is a good start."

"Since you're not interested in stuff, I guess I should give this back to Mom." Allen took out the silver bracelet inlaid with semi-precious stones.

"Allen, where did you get this? It's gorgeous."

"Well, I didn't think flowers were going to cut it, but if Mom doesn't see you wearing this, she's going to think I screwed up."

She kissed him again as he fastened the bracelet on her wrist. "We wouldn't want to disappoint her."

Allen tried to dissuade Laurie from going to the condo with him to collect his things. She asked why they couldn't just stay there, but he convinced her the condos were intended for businessmen, not families with children. He wasn't lying, but he didn't tell her the place creeped him out. Since he couldn't come up with any good reason for not showing her what he'd been working on all this time, they left the happy grandparents watching the kids and headed for the condos.

Laurie loved the third condo Allen had moved to with its cool, pale, wood paneling and cabinets accented with teal, brown and white trim. She admired the embroidered cactus and palm tree throw-pillows and asked, "Did you decorate this yourself?"

"Not exactly," he called out from the bedroom where he was stuffing clothes into a suitcase. "I came up with the color scheme and some ideas to give each condo an individual personality, but an interior designer put it all together.

"Allen, they are beautiful."

"Thanks, honey. That means a -" He was interrupted by her screaming. "Laurie!" he yelled, running to the living room. He stopped at the entryway where Laurie stood with her back pressed against the sliding glass door leading to the balcony. Her

face was turned as far as the glass would allow and her eyes were squeezed shut. "Laurie?"

A figure passed in front of him as the walls seeped away exposing the whole floor in a way Allen had never seen it. Rows of black sewing machines gleamed in a flickering orange light. People, mostly women, ran back and forth, panic-stricken. Some of them, already on fire, leapt out shattered windows while others plunged down the elevator shaft at the far end. Thick, black smoke rolled through the room. Allen started coughing. He collapsed to the floor, thinking, *Stop, drop, and roll*, before blackness thickened all around him.

The blackness turned grey and he could hear his wife crying and yelling his name from far away. When he forced his eyes to open, Laurie's face bobbed up and down. His shoulders throbbed. She must have been shaking him for a while.

"It's okay." His voice was rough and shaky.

"No, it's not! I saw women, girls. And there was a fire. Was there a fire here?"

"I don't know," he said. "But since this is the third condo that something strange has happened in, it's about time I found out."

Allen heard the chime of the elevator doors. As two men rounded the corner to enter his office, he recognized the man in black from the T.V. "Hector?"

"Mr. Harris, nice to meet you," Hector said extending his hand.

Allen shook Hector's hand.

"And this is Marcos."

"Hi, Marcos. Nice to meet you," Allen said shaking Marcos's hand.

"Likewise."

"Let's talk in here." Allen led them to his office and motioned for them to have a seat. He had splurged on the Equipale furniture that decorated the reception area and office. Every time someone new entered he couldn't help mentioning how the furniture was hand-made of estaca wood and tobacco-stained pigskin. No two pieces were exactly alike and the cushions had to be custom-made as well.

Hector and Marcos nodded politely as he finished his explanation.

Allen rubbed his hands up and down his thighs. "Now that you're here, I'm beginning to feel pretty silly about the whole thing."

"Take your time," said Marcos.

"We're not here to judge you, Mr. Harris," said Hector. "We're here to listen and help, if we can. If we can't, we'll tell you up front."

"Good, good; it just sounds so crazy." Allen took a deep breath, offered drinks and drank some water himself before

finally retelling all the events leading up to calling El Paso Ghost Hunters.

“So the first time you saw part of their bodies?” said Marcos.

“Yea, that was weird. Why would I only see about half of them?”

“Have you been renovating?”

“Yes, I hired a contractor who gutted the place. Why? Does that mean something?”

“If you find out the floors were moved, lowered or raised, it might explain what you saw,” said Marcos.

“Oh, I get it. The ghosts or whatever....”

“Apparitions,” said Hector.

“Oh, apparitions then. I guess they'd be walking in the building as they remembered it, not what we changed it to. That makes sense.”

“That’s the theory, anyway,” said Marcos.

Hector asked, “Has anyone else experienced anything different or strange?”

Allen snapped his fingers. “Now that you mention it, I think the construction crew complained about things being moved around, but nothing serious, and no one said anything about seeing ghosts.”

“I thought there might have been an accident here. Do you know anything?”

“No, all I know is this used to be a shirtwaist factory. That’s the term they used for a woman’s shirt back in the early 1900s. My great-grandfather was the original owner. He also had a partner, but I’m pretty sure they closed the factory before 1920. They opened up a couple more businesses, but nothing this big.”

“We like to corroborate anything we experience during an investigation with the history of the building. Sometimes it means something; sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes, it’s just a folk-tale that’s been handed down.”

"I'm all for you doing a full investigation. I'd like to know whatever you find out."

"Great. Here's what we plan to do, with your permission of course."

"Sure. What did you have in mind?"

"Three things. First, we'll do some research that might give us a clue as to what we're dealing with. Second, we'd like to do a full overnight investigation at your convenience. Third, after going over all the data, we'll sit down with you, and let you know the best course of action."

Allen chewed his lip a couple of seconds before answering, "Well, I think I called the right people." He patted the top of his desk, and then stood up. "Let's do this." His shoulders relaxed as he offered his hand to both men. "When do you want to start?"

"You tell us when," said Hector.

"How about day after tomorrow? How long does this usually take?"

"We'll start around ten and end about four or five in the morning, depending on the activity level."

"Do you need me here?"

"That's up to you."

"I think I'll leave it to the professionals." Allen started walking them to the elevator. "It's all settled then." He punched the elevator button. "Guys, thank you, I never believed in this kind of thing. And those dreams or visions, I can't lie—they shake me up."

"No problem," Hector reassured him. "We'll try to come up with some answers for you and help in any way we can."

Margarita wiped her brow with her sleeve as she bent over her sewing machine. The ninth floor hummed with the clatter of eighty needles biting fabric. She worked at the shirtwaist factory from sunup to sunset, six days a week. Her money went to her family, but her mother snuck a few pennies into her pocket, so she could spend Sunday afternoons downtown with her friend, Angelica.

Her mother, an older version of Margarita, taught her how a proper young lady should behave. But all those lessons flew away on the wings of the pigeons circling San Jacinto Plaza when she first spotted John. She caught sight of his family leaving St. Patrick's Cathedral after Sunday service and marked how he took his mother's arm and guided her around the square.

Every Sunday they circled closer and closer. The first time he held her gaze, she was walking around the plaza with her friend Angelica. His gaze was so intense, Margarita's heart took off running like when she was young and racing the other children from the barrio. Her step faltered as he tipped his hat and flashed a neatly folded piece of paper before deliberately tucking it in the planter in front of him. Her eyes widened at his boldness.

She clung to her Angelica's arm as they neared the planter, pondering how she was going to extract the letter without anyone noticing. Angelica made fun of her brother and started laughing at her own joke. Facing her friend, Margarita fished behind her for the letter and slipped it into her sleeve.

Her English was poor, but his Spanish was worse. His name was John.

When Margarita saw John step out of the glass doors of the elevator at the shirtwaist factory one afternoon, she stopped breathing for five long seconds. Her co-worker, waiting for her to grab the materials and move on, elbowed her and said, "Aye, aye," when she followed Margarita's gaze.

Margarita's bronzed skin turned red all the way down to the high collar of her shirt. She fought not to run back to her machine, but turned slowly and walked with measured steps. Her fingers fumbled as her mind raced – *Why and how had he managed to be here, at the factory?*

She peered over her shoulder as he talked to the owners, Mr. Harris and Mr. Blanc. He bore a vague resemblance to Mr. Harris. With a start she realized who he must be and her heart spiraled downward.

For a week she clung to sickness to avoid him. But eventually she had to return to work. She struggled to control her eyes from searching for him, instead keeping her head cast down at her feet as if the concentration was the only thing moving her forward.

Days passed before their eyes met and when they did, his were full of honest questions. She glanced down as his hand slipped a note under the materials piled at the side of her machine. This note, longer than the others, asked after her health, had he done something wrong, how could he help, when would she return to the Plaza?

The meetings on the bench started soon after. She tucked her foot with the broken sandal strap underneath her and wore her very best dress, even though it was the same one, every week. Seeing him in his Sunday suit, she didn't want her appearance to embarrass him. She realized his eyes never left hers or wandered past her face, and she relaxed.

One day, he arose and left behind a tiny package wrapped in brown paper. She peeled the paper back, like opening the folds of

a blanket to peek at a newborn, and beheld the most beautiful thing in the world.

Hector opened the door to Ruli's and called out, "The usual!" He spotted the Paranormal Posse at the farthest table from the front door and walked over to them. Marcos was Hector's partner, and Bev and Tony were paranormal investigators that helped out when needed.

"I thought there had been an accident in that building."

"What did you find out?" said Bev, between swigs of Moosehead Lager.

"The Harris family, John Harris Sr., built the building and used the top three floors as a shirtwaist factory until 1920."

"What is a shirtwaist?" asked Tony, popping a french fry in his mouth.

"It's what they used to call a woman's shirt back then."

"I thought Farrah was the only clothing factory," said Bev.

"Farrah made pants and shirts for men and was much bigger. This factory was tiny compared to them, but they still had about 100 or so young women working for them. I'm talking young, most between 15 and 18, but a couple as young as 11."

"So when Allen told us he only saw women, that matches your research," said Marcos.

"Yes, there was a fire and the workers were trapped in the building. In those days people worked long hours under dangerous conditions. The machines were open and you worked on them while they were running."

Bev shuddered. "Did people die in the fire?"

"Oh, yeah. The owners locked the doors so workers couldn't sneak out."

"They were locked in?" Tony asked.

“It was a common practice back then. When a fire broke out on the eighth floor, most of the workers were trapped. Management was on the tenth floor, so they were able to escape to the roof.”

“Which explains the women on fire,” said Marcos, leaning forward.

“It gets worse. The elevators only made a couple of runs before the fire got too hot and people started jumping down the shaft. So many women jumped from the building, the newspaper described the bodies as being stacked up like wood.”

“Jesus,” whispered Tony.

“Over half the workers died. But it’s still not the worst part. The owners, Harris and Blanc, were charged and the case went to trial. The judge found them guilty.”

“That’s the worst part?” exclaimed Bev, taking another swig.

“But... they were only fined twenty dollars by the court.”

“Twenty bucks?” Marcos, Bev, and Tony chimed up.

Marcos gave a low whistle. “Most people don’t know the U.S. has a nasty, bloody, labor history. There’s a reason labor unions were formed.”

“Later, they settled out of court during the civil lawsuit and paid \$75 per person killed,” said Hector, leaning back in his chair.

“That still sucks,” Bev said.

“It sucks and blows. Bottom line: we have a tragic event, new construction, and plenty of reason to think there will be activity - mostly residual, but with a good EVP session we might find something intelligent. Above all, we need to be respectful while we’re investigating.” Everyone nodded.

Hector leaned close to Marcos, “I need to talk to you for a second.” To the others he said, “Be right back.”

After they exited to the patio, Marcos said, “Yeah?”

“Allen said his father didn’t talk much about the building. Well, his grandfather was there.”

“At the fire?”

“Yeah, according to the trial, both Harris and Blanc were on the tenth floor. They made it to the roof - along with their children.”

“Holy shrimp! You think Allen knows his family was there during the fire?”

“Maybe. Well, not Allen. You met him. What do you think?”

“He seemed genuinely confused by all this, but you're right: his family might have witnessed the whole thing.”

“This is going to be an interesting evening.”

9th floor

Margarita caught John's eye and jangled the bracelet for a second. Then she bent over her sewing machine to continue working. When she glanced up again, John paused at her station and graced her with a huge smile.

By this time, she knew his routine at the factory. He entered through the glass door elevators and did a walk through of the eighth and ninth floors late in the morning before heading up to the executive offices on the tenth floor to have lunch. Sometimes he was accompanied by his father, Mr. Harris, or Mr. Blanc. Other times he made the rounds by himself.

When he appeared on the ninth floor, she snuck glances at him the entire time. As he brushed past her on his way upstairs for the rest of the day, their eyes met. Her heart lurched; she wouldn't have any contact with him until Sunday.

On impulse, Margarita stood up and marched toward the elevators to grab more materials she didn't need as John was leaving. She flashed her bracelet as he turned around. He smiled at her and gave a slight nod of his head as the glass doors closed.

She sighed, her eyes lingering on the elevator doors, when the manager slid in front of her. "What are you doing?"

She made a grab for the materials, realizing, too late, that the bracelet was still showing.

He grabbed her hand. "Where did you get this?"

She paused then replied, "My mama gave it to me."

The manager turned her wrist back and forth. "Wait a minute. Mrs. Harris has one just like this. How did you ... ?"

"It's mine!" Margarita yelled, trying to yank her hand back.

“Like hell it is!” The delicate bracelet broke easily when he grabbed her wrist. “You wait right here,” he said, as he strode to the elevators.

His mother’s bracelet. The thought rooted her to the spot.

Some of the other girls stopped working to gawk. Angelica put her arm around Margarita’s shoulders and asked, “Margarita, what happened?”

Margarita shook her head, afraid to tell anyone. The fire escape seemed the only way to avoid a disastrous confrontation. She ran to the door.

8th floor

The generator for the sewing machines on the eighth and ninth floors stood droning away in the southwest corner of the room. It hiccuped once, then threw a shower of orange sparks into the air. The shirtwaists, hanging from the ceiling on ropes, sent up a plume of smoke.

Betty Susner manned the phones while working on the payroll for Harris and Blanc Enterprises. Her main job was to keep track of all 300 employees. The system in place to keep track of all of them was for everyone to enter through the fire escape and leave through the elevators.

She paused over her journal when a commotion started at the other end of the room. Smoke and flames licked along the ceiling as screams of “Fire!” sent a wave of panicking girls toward her.

Betty picked up the phone and rang the tenth floor. No answer. Her desk sat on an elevated platform, but the swirl of screaming girls made it impossible to see the fire. Standing on her chair, she observed several men throwing pails filled with water on the hanging shirtwaists.

She rang the tenth floor again. The receiver slid from her fingers as the rope of shirtwaists gave way, sending fire and sparks to the floor. “Hello? Hello! Betty, is that you?” The voice jerked her attention back to the receiver dangling from her hand. “Fire!

There's a fire on the eighth floor!" She slammed the phone down and dialed the servicemen who ran the elevators.

The girls pushed, screamed, and shoved their way to the elevator doors. Desperate cries turned to a fever pitch as an elevator car came into view. "Help us! For God's sake, help us!" The car carried people from the tenth floor down and never came back up.

Screams filled the air. The girl's skirts started to catch fire. Glass shattered from both sides of the room as the girls broke windows to yell for help and escape the smoke.

Betty charged into the crowd, which was growing frenzied by the moment as flames ate up more space. Smoke stung her eyes and she buried her nose and mouth in the crook of arm. She shoved, elbowed, and swung her arms to clear a path to the fire escape. "Let me through!" she tried to yell over the pandemonium. "Let me through!" she yelled again, gripping an ordinary dull metal key in her right hand. There were only two keys for the Harris Shirtwaist Factory. The one in Betty's hand, and the other one with Mr. Blanc on the tenth floor.

The group of girls pressed up against the fire escape door was in a complete panic. Only the ones nearest Betty could hear her shouting, "I have the key. Let me through! I have the key." She started dragging girls back from the door by their hair. *I'll be hanged if I'm going to die today!*

Shouts rose above the chaos. Betty glanced over her shoulder to see the men who were trying to put out the fire earlier, now prying the elevator doors open. A large number of girls left the fire escape door for the elevators. Betty shoved the remaining girls away from the fire escape door. She pushed the key in the lock, gave it a twist and yanked back on the doorknob. The girls pushed forward. She yelled in frustration, trying to get them to understand the door opened inwards.

Betty managed to open the door halfway. Smoke poured out the opening, burning her eyes and making her cough. Screaming

and coughing, the girls squeezed through the crack as Betty fumbled with the key in the lock. She had to get the key and open the door on the ninth floor; otherwise, everyone on that floor would perish in this nightmare.

The key came loose from the lock. She clutched it to her chest and tried to keep her footing as the stream of girls carried her around the door and into the enclosed fire escape. Betty heard shouts. "It's open! This way!"

A surge of people shoved her forward as the door opened wider. Betty stumbled, losing her balance. She threw her arms wide to catch herself as she tumbled backwards. The key floated in front of her eyes for a moment. She stretched out her hand to catch it, but the relentless flow of bodies carried her down the stairs. The key fell and disappeared from her sight.

10th floor

The manager from the ninth floor stormed out of the elevator and up to Mr. Harris. "Sorry to bother you, sir, but I thought you'd want to see this." He dangled the broken bracelet in front of Mr. Harris.

"Yes?" Mr. Harris said. John jumped up from his chair and crossed the room in several long strides to snatch the bracelet from the manager's hand. The manager stepped back.

"Let me see it, John."

"Father, I can explain."

"I'm sure you can."

"Father, I gave the bracelet as a token of my affection."

"To who?"

A phone rang in the background unanswered. No one was going to answer it and miss the family drama unfolding in front of them.

The manager spoke up. "I figured she stole it. Girl like that wouldn't have any use for something so fancy."

"Who?" asked Mr. Harris again.

"Mar..." the manager started to say.

John spoke rapidly, "I gave it to a girl as a token of my affection. Margarita must have found it. I'm sure she planned to return the bracelet."

"Margarita was wearing it," the manager said softly.

John's eyes narrowed as he dangled the broken bracelet in front of the manager's face. "How? It's broken."

"She was wearing it."

John faced the manager and leaned in. "I'm sure she would have returned the bracelet, given the chance."

The manager stepped back further and turned to Mr. Harris. "Sorry for the inconvenience, sir."

"Fine." Mr. Harris waved his hand to send him off and pulled John aside. "Who is Margarita? And will someone answer that phone?"

John's eyes wandered to the far wall, his mind racing to form an explanation when he heard people gasp in alarm.

"Mr. Harris! Mr. Blanc! Betty just called: there's a fire on the eighth floor!"

"Smoke!" John's gaze followed the pointing fingers. Smoke rose up like long tendrils of black hair.

"Calm down, everyone! Head to the roof," Mr. Harris commanded.

John turned as the people nearest the elevator doors ran and crammed themselves inside. The elevator operator yelled above the crush of people trying to get in. "Mr. Harris!"

"Go on; it's all right. We're heading to the roof," called out Mr. Blanc, whose desk stood a few feet away. He strode to Mr. Harris and clapped him on the back. "Thank goodness this building is fire-proof," he said as he moved to the fire escape door.

A crowd blocked his path. Mr. Blanc raised a meaty fist in the air. He opened his hand slightly. A dull metallic key dropped down and swung back and forth from a gold chain. "Make way! I have the key."

John's eyes fixated on the key swinging above Mr. Blanc's head. He turned toward his father. "Margarita's on the ninth floor. Who else has the key?"

"John, we need to get to the roof, now." His father took hold of John's jacket and dragged him to the fire escape door.

"Who else has the key?" John shouted, trying to pull free. As they neared the fire escape door, John saw Mr. Blanc heading up the stairs. "The key! Mr. Blanc, I need the key!"

Mr. Blanc shouted over his shoulder. "Get to the roof, son. We'll be fine there."

"Please, Mr. Blanc! I need to open the fire escape door on the ninth floor." John ran after him, shoving people aside. He heard angry cries and some people shoved back. Mr. Blanc stood by the open doorway to the roof. John caught a glimpse of bright blue sky above his head.

"Mr. Blanc, I need the key!"

John saw a puzzled look cross Mr. Blanc's face as he stared for a moment at the key he held in his hand. He looked at John and replied, "Don't worry, John. Betty has the other key. She's probably already opened the door and let everyone out."

As John reached the open doorway, the panic that had tightened John's chest lessened. He knew Betty to be a firm, but kind-hearted woman. Even though he was sure Betty would get everyone out of the ninth floor, he still needed to see for himself. He looked over his shoulder to tell his father, when a rolling black cloud of smoke billowed out, smudging the afternoon sky.

John caught his father as he spilled out of the doorway onto the roof and set him down gently. He turned and snatched the key from Mr. Blanc's hand.

As he raced into the blackened stairway, he heard his father begging him to come back.

9th floor

Margarita wrapped both hands around the doorknob and tugged at the fire escape door. She heard Angelica behind. "It's locked until the shift is over."

She slammed her palm down on the door. "I have to get out of here, right now. Who has the key?"

"Miss Betty is downstairs. You'll have to take the elevator."

Margarita spun on her heel, pushed past her friend and started running down the aisle toward the elevators.

The elevator glided into view. Margarita paused at the sight of the elevator jammed full of people. Angelica called out behind her, "Margarita, just come back to work."

A scream pierced the air. "Smoke!" She spun around and saw a girl pointing out the window. Black smoke floated heavenward.

Margarita turned in a circle, watching the smoke fan out and spread down both rows of windows lining the room. Girls jumped up from their chairs and scurried to the center of the floor. She felt someone squeeze her arm. Angelica's frightened eyes stared into hers. Seconds of confused quiet ticked by, voices murmuring until fingers of flame reached between the floorboards. Margarita and Angelica clutched each other. The circle of girls burst apart. Some ran for the elevators, while others ran to the fire escape door.

At the elevators, the only man working on her floor, a sewing machine mechanic, and several girls were prying the elevator doors open. When the elevator doors gave way, the mechanic and girls started tumbling into the black hole. She jerked her head away and squeezed her eyes shut.

Breaking glass made Margarita open her eyes again. Smoke rolled into the room, making her choke and cough. She spun with her friend in a tight circle, holding their ground as all around them girls were jumping out of the windows and down the elevator shaft. A small group of girls who had chosen to stay by the fire escape door in the hopes that someone would open it were engulfed in flames.

Margarita made her decision. She drug Angelica to an open window, tears streaming down her face. She climbed up on the windowsill, and then reached down and pulled Angelica up. Margarita took Angelica's hand and looked down. Groups of men held blankets, trying to catch the falling girls. Angelica whispered, "Don't look down." Margarita met her eyes, took both of her hands and jumped.

The Roof

John fell out of the fire escape doorway. He heard his father yell for help, and then felt hands dragging him away from the smoke that was choking him. He lay coughing violently unable to speak or hardly breathe. A handkerchief was pressed to his eyes. His ears rang with sirens, shouts, screams, and thuds like sacks of potatoes being stacked up in a pile.

The black smoke was too thick. He never made it to the ninth floor and the thuds and screams that reached his ears left a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. The people on the ninth floor were dying. John sat huddled in on himself through the chaos, tears streaming down his blackened face. The key to the fire escape door slipped from his hand and made a small clink as it landed safely on the roof.

The Paranormal Posse met in front of the Harris building. “That’s new,” said Hector, pointing to the lighted *Harris Building* sign over the entrance.

Marcos knocked on the side entrance. No one answered. He turned and shrugged to the rest of the group. “Maybe he’s running late.” Everyone set down their gear and waited.

Hector called Mr. Harris on his phone. No answer. They waited for forty-five minutes and still no one appeared to let them in to investigate.

“Maybe he forgot the day?” asked Bev.

“We confirmed the details several times,” Marcos said as he dialed the number one more time. “You don’t think something happened to him?”

“Nah.” Hector picked up his backpack. “Something came up or he forgot. I’m sorry, guys. This is totally beyond our control.”

“It happens,” Tony said. “Let’s go get a drink.”

As Marcos opened the door to Ruli’s, Hector’s phone rang. “Hello, Mr. Harris?”

Hector motioned for the rest of the Posse to go on, and then turned around and sat down at one of the outdoor tables. Tony groaned and Bev rolled her eyes.

“Well, of course he would call now,” Bev said.

“Come on. Let’s grab a table,” said Marcos.

Hector returned to the group ten minutes later and sat down in front of a frosty mug of beer. He took a sip.

“Well, what happened?” asked Marcos.

“We’re not investigating.”

“I think we figured that one out. Did he forget?”

“No, I mean we are not investigating, as in ever.”

“What the hell happened? He was all gung-ho a couple of days ago.”

“From what I gathered, his father caught wind of the investigation and said ‘No way.’ Something about it being bad for business, the reputation of the building, the usual blah, blah, blah.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him this wasn’t going to show up on the news. We do private investigations all the time. He didn’t want to hear it.”

“*Y-ho-le.*”

“But, I did convince him to let us arrange a house blessing. I told him it might put the spirits at ease.”

“Do you have someone in mind for the blessing?”

“Yep, Father Eugenio. He’s a friend of my family and he works as a chaplain at the University Medical Center downtown. Since it’s close, I’m hoping he can help us out on short notice.”

“When are we doing this?”

“Allen said the sooner the better so I told him tomorrow afternoon.” Hector faced Bev and Tony. “Sorry to waste your time like this.”

“Hey, there’s beer and good company. Not a waste of time at all,” said Bev.

Hector raised his mug and everyone clinked their mugs together. “Here’s to all the ghosts out there. May they rest in peace.”

Hector and Marcos met Father Eugenio outside the Harris Building the next afternoon.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” Hector said as he led him into the elevator.

"I told you this morning, it was no trouble at all. How's your family?"

"Good."

"I was at the hospital on Sunday. How was the service?"

Hector shifted back and forth. "I don't know, Father. It's been a long time since I've been to a Sunday service."

"You know services are at six-thirty in the evening, too, if you're busy on Sunday mornings."

"Here we are," Marcos said as the elevator doors opened.

Hector jumped in front of them. "His office is right around the corner."

Hector turned the corner and found Allen sitting at his desk. "Allen, this is Father Eugenio."

"Father, it's a pleasure to meet you. Please have a seat. Marcos can you grab another chair?"

"Sure."

Hector waited for Marcos, and then turned to Allen. "So, do you have any questions?"

"A bunch."

Hector chuckled, "Great. I'm going to let the Father take it from here then."

"So this is a house blessing?" Allen asked.

"Yes," Father Eugenio replied.

"You're going to bless each condo?"

"I can. It shouldn't take too long."

"I'm not Catholic, Father."

"We can fix that."

Hector noticed Allen's puzzled expression. "Don't worry; he pesters me all the time."

Father Eugenio faced Hector. "I wouldn't use the word 'pestering.'"

"Nagging, then?"

"Hectoring," Marcos added with a grin.

Hector watched Allen fidgeting with a pen. “Sorry. Go ahead.”

“Father, do you believe in ghosts? I think it's kind of strange a priest would be involved with something like this.”

“Yes, the church has strict rules on what to do, but I can tell you, I've experienced strange things at the hospital. I can also tell you prayer is the right way to handle any situation.”

“If you don't mind sharing, what have you seen at the hospital?”

“Oh, nothing spectacular. Sometimes equipment starts acting up. The switchboard will start to go haywire and the operators will ask me to stop by. The heart monitors at the nurse's station start working again as if someone is in the room, and no one is there.”

“And you go in and bless the room?”

“Yes, and we pray.”

“And that fixes it?”

“Yes.”

“Does it ever happen again?”

“Sometimes. Many people die in a hospital, even within one day.”

“So it happens again because more people die.”

“That's been my experience.”

“I'm sorry for backing out of the investigation, guys. My father's reaction surprised me when I let slip what we were going to do.”

“I don't think you need to apologize for a good decision,” said Father Eugenio.

“You don't approve of this ‘ghost hunting’?”

“Not exactly,” said Hector.

“No, not at all,” said Father Eugenio. “Let me make this very clear. The Bible says we are not to contact spirits in any way.”

“Do you think they're bad?” said Allen.

“Not all ghosts are demons. In fact, some people have categorized seven different kinds of ghosts. There’s even one type that appears bright and happy, bringing messages of hope and love from a friend or family member to comfort us. I think God’s compassion allows this sort of thing.” Father Eugenio leaned forward. “However, Satan may be using these spirits to feed an unhealthy curiosity that could lead to danger. God warns against contacting the dead because He fears for our soul.”

“This is why we get along so well,” said Hector, motioning between himself and Father Eugenio.

Everyone waited while Allen tapped his pen against the top of his desk. “I would rather not be bothered by these... ghosts, apparitions, whatever you want to call them. I don’t want anyone who stays here to be bothered by them either.”

Hector leaned forward to speak, but Father Eugenio interrupted him. “Then let’s go make peace with this house.”

Hector led Father Eugenio as he moved from apartment to apartment and room to room, his voice ringing loud and clear: “Oh God, protect our going out and our coming in; let us share the hospitality of this home with all who visit us, that those who enter here may know your love and peace. O God, give your blessings to all who share this room, that we may be knit together in companionship.”

“O God, you fill the hungry with good things. Send your blessing on us, as we work in this kitchen, and make us ever thankful for our daily bread. Blessed are you, Lord of heaven and earth, for you give us food and drink to sustain our lives and make our hearts glad.

“Protect us, Lord, as we stay awake; watch over us as we sleep, that awake we may keep watch with Christ, and asleep, we may rest in his peace. Blessed are you, Lord of heaven and earth. You formed us in wisdom and love. Refresh us in body and in spirit, and keep us in good health that we might serve you.”

Hector led them back to the elevators where Father Eugenio turned and said, "Peace be with this house and with all who live here. Blessed by the name of the Lord."

Silence rang out for a moment. Hector watched as Father Eugenio shook Allen's hand and entered the elevator. He stood in front of Allen. "If there is anything you need, don't hesitate to call me or Marcos anytime."

Allen stared at the elevator doors. He felt calm. Laurie and his daughters went to church on Sundays. Maybe he should start joining them.

He turned around and walked to his office door. Allen blinked his eyes as a form materialized and moved toward him. It was another young girl, beautiful, with an outstretched hand. She appeared dysphoric. Through the sadness, Allen was certain she wanted something from him. Between one blink and the next, she vanished.

OK, thought Allen, it's not the building that's haunted... it's me.

Allen arrived at his parents' house, dazed from yet another encounter with a ghost. His plan was to collapse on his bed and drink the memory away, for tonight at least.

In the living room, he found his mother perched on the edge of a chair, her eyes swollen and red.

"Mom, hey, what's wrong? Is Dad okay?" He scanned the room for signs of his father.

"Oh, Allen, he's so upset. He's never acted like this before."

"Like what? What happened?" Allen sat next to his mother, putting a hand on her back.

"Remember the bracelet?"

"Yea, of course. Laurie loved it."

"I'm glad, honey." Allen handed her a Kleenex. "Apparently it meant something to him. He's upset I found the bracelet and gave it to you."

"I thought it was yours."

"I found it in his dresser while I was going through his clothes to give to Goodwill. I thought—oh, I don't know what I thought. I assumed he meant to give it to me as a present, but forgot. I could have sworn he saw me wear it."

"Is he upset we gave the bracelet to Laurie?"

"Allen, I'm not sure what he wants. Please, go talk to him."

Allen opened the door after a soft knock and poked his head in. His father sat on the bed, shoulders slumped, fingering a stack of neatly folded papers held together with string.

"Dad? Can I come in?"

His father nodded his head, but didn't look up.

Linen curtains diluted the desert sun shining through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the master bedroom. Allen picked up a small ottoman and sat in front of his dad. "If this is a misunderstanding about the bracelet, I'm sure we can fix it."

Mr. Harris continued running his finger along the light brown edges of the papers with his thumb. "Have there been problems with the building?"

Allen frowned. "No, Dad. Everything's great. We need two or three leases and we're full. Why?"

"That building has been nothing but trouble for this family."

Allen opened his mouth to answer, and then thought better of it. Opening up to his father had never been easy. The ceiling fan whirred overhead.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, Dad."

His father leaned forward. "You've seen them." Mr. Harris held up the papers. "All the men in this family see them eventually, if they spend any amount of time there."

"Are you ready to tell me why? Why is that bracelet so important to you?"

Mr. Harris tossed the papers in Allen's lap. Allen picked them up and saw they were brown with age, the folds yellow and heavily creased. Mr. Harris told Allen everything he knew about the building and where the bracelet came from. After he finished, Allen explained the visit from Father Eugenio and the house blessing.

"It's been done before. Maybe some things can't be put to rest."

"I saw something right after Father Eugenio left." Allen tapped the papers against one palm. "I have an idea."

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed his wife. "Laurie, you remember when you said how all that material stuff didn't mean anything to you?"

Hector wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his shirt and stood back to admire their handy work. The office on the eighth floor of the Harris building held every piece of ghost hunting equipment Hector and Marcos owned: full-spectrum camcorder, laser grid scope, infrared camera, EMF meter, Digital thermometer, and a digital recorder to catch any Electronic Voice Phenomena.

Most of the attention was centered around a silver bracelet with semi-precious stones laying in the middle of Allen's desk.

After going 'lights out,' Hector and Marcos settled down for an EVP session alternately asking questions and addressing Margarita by name. They didn't hear any responses, so they finished the session, and left the equipment running for the night, hoping to catch something.

Time erased many things. She hung on to her name as long as she could, but eventually even that was lost in the snowy, black and white plane where she existed.

She was aware of some of the other girls who worked on as if nothing had happened. Familiar sounds, smells, and sights would gather in a burst of activity. Then fade away. It was dull, repetitive, yet hypnotic. It took every ounce of will for her to remember why she was here. Why she waited.

A brilliant silver gleam made her start. She gathered the fragments of herself around the most beautiful thing in the world and sighed.

She lingered as long as she was able. Focusing took so much energy.

She felt herself spreading out and becoming wispy when a presence, dark and blacker than the black and white plane she lived in, swirled close. Fear flicked across her consciousness as she was engulfed by its form. She was not alone. Hundreds, maybe thousands, wandered aimlessly in the oblivion with her.

Allen removed the faceplate of the wall outlet behind his desk and tucked the bracelet in the recess. After staring at the bracelet for a moment, he searched the desk and unwrapped the packet of papers. On a blank piece of paper, an old key had been taped. Allen removed the yellowed brittle tape and placed the key beside the bracelet. He screwed the faceplate back on. He sat back on his heels and thought, *I hope this helps you find some peace.*

Hector and Marcos sat at a long conference table in Scottish Rite Temple downtown analyzing the results from the paranormal investigation. They heard what sounded like a woman's sigh during the EVP session and forty minutes after they had left the building, the camera caught the sound and slight movement of the bracelet on the table.

Five minutes after the bracelet moved, a black mass darted across the screen, Marcos looked at Hector. "What the hell was that?"

Hector replayed the video several times, squinting hard at the screen before he replied, "I have no idea."

Part 3: Amador Lockdown

ONE

He thrusts his hands against the post and still insists he sees the ghosts. - Stephen King, *IT*

Hector jerked his head to the side. He scanned the area to his right for the shadow he thought he saw a second ago. Nothing. Goosebumps raised the hair on his arms. Maybe he was just being jumpy. The Paranormal Posse had been doing this ghost tour for months now, and he'd never seen a shadow before.

The midnight cemetery ghost tours were always sold out. In the purple and blood-red sky right before nightfall, figures shuffled forward, kicking up sand and small stones into the cool night air. The cemetery was cloaked in darkness. Far-away streetlights bordered the large lot. Beyond the streetlights were ranch-style houses from the 1950s. Hector thought of the old joke: cemeteries make good neighbors because they're so quiet.

The Paranormal Posse—wearing black t-shirts emblazoned with the glow-in-the-dark words 'El Paso Ghost Tours' and jeans—encircled a group of thirty people. The Posse took turns leading the weekend ghost tours. Tonight Marcos stood in front with Hector and Bev on either side, and Tony brought up the rear. The group stood still and attentive when Marcos turned on his flashlight and pointed it skyward so that his face showed as an eerie mix of light and shadow. Bev—with a puzzled look on her face—caught Hector's eye and gave a slight lift of her chin. Hector shook his head and faced Marcos, who started the tour.

"The Concordia Cemetery contains 400 years of history on 52 acres. Over 60,000 people are buried here. Back in the 1850s, it was the outskirts of El Paso, and part of the Stephenson Ranch.

The first grave was dug for Juana Maria Ascarate Stephenson after she was gored to death by her pet deer.” Surprised chuckles trickled out of the darkness.

“I see some of you have a dark sense of humor,” said Marcos, as he walked backwards. Hector turned his attention toward the group. “The cemetery grew, and became known as El Paso’s ‘Boot Hill’ after the Wild West came to town. Gunfighters like John Wesley Hardin, Constable ‘Uncle’ John Selman, Bass L. Outlaw, and Shotgun John Collins all ended up in this cemetery.”

The beam of light from Marcos’s flashlight illuminated a white, metal cradle surrounded by a white, metal picket fence. Other gravestones around the cradle were marked by baby angels sitting with their chubby legs crossed, or lying on their stomachs, chins in their hands. Hector overheard people making small sounds of sympathy. “This is the infant area,” Marcos said. “We often get pictures of orbs, mists, and shapes. If you brought a flash camera, go ahead and take some pictures.”

The cemetery lit up with flashes of light. “When you look back through your pictures,” Marcos continued, “if you find something unusual, please let us know or post it on our Facebook page.”

When the camera flashes died down, Marcos said, “Segregation and racism continued even after death. You’ll notice, as we travel through the cemetery, certain sections are walled off.”

Hector had turned to keep pace with the group when he thought he saw a black shadow swipe past on his right. His boots crunched as he swiveled to try to follow it, but the shadow—if that’s what it had been—was already gone. Something was playing with him.

Marcos’s voice reminded him the group had moved on. “If you have recorders, go ahead and get them ready. We’re coming to the first walled-off section. This area is for the Chinese immigrants who entered El Paso in the 1880s to work on the

railway. We've gotten angry shouts and, I guess, Chinese words when people whistle. If some of you want to whistle a little bit, you can tell us later if you recorded anything."

Hector hung back as the group wandered around the small enclosed area, filling the night with soft 'cat calls and wolf whistles. Marcos flicked on his light near a large tombstone inside the Chinese section. "We're going to do an EVP session, where we record our questions and play it back later to see if anyone has answered. Just stay as quiet as possible. We've caught things here before."

A petite shadow made its way toward Hector. Even in the darkness, he could see the faint glow of her blonde hair.

"Hector, you doing okay?" Bev asked.

"Yeah, but I think I've seen a shadow."

"Awesome. Just once?"

"No, twice so far. No one else has seen it though."

"How are you feeling?"

"Jumpy as hell."

Marcos's voice rang out over the scattered group. "Okay, folks, be sure to check your digital recorders later to see if you caught anything. Now, let's head over to the Caples' mausoleum."

"I'll keep my eyes open, and let me know if you see anything else," Bev said, and then returned to her position on the other side of the group.

Once outside of the Chinese section, Marcos led the group to the left, and up a sandy trail to a large, block building with the word 'Caples' chiseled into the cement above its iron door. Hector watched Marcos climb three stone steps to the door, and faced the group. "Now this is the same man who built the Caples building downtown. The mausoleum is popular with psychics who take this tour, as well as black-magic practitioners. We've found cat and dog sacrifices, and once a cow's head that looked like it was used for some ceremony. Pretty creepy stuff."

Some of the crowd recoiled in disgust, while others kept snapping pictures or panning their devices around the area. “The green area on the right side of the cemetery is the Jewish section. They keep that section locked up, so it’s off-limits to us. Let me step down so you can take some pictures,” Marcos said.

A rock wall that bordered the cemetery was about thirty feet from the Caples’ mausoleum. Various businesses stood on the other side of the wall, with bright, halogen lights that lit up the parking lot and small sections of the wall. Hector shifted his feet, an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He glanced over the group. A shadow passed by one of the lighted sections of the wall about thirty feet away.

Hector took off at a run toward the next section of lighted wall. After ten feet, the sandy trail ended, and Hector slowed to pick his way past headstones while trying to keep his eyes glued to the next lighted section. He was halfway there when he saw the shadow start to enter the lighted area. Convinced he’d just caught someone using tonight’s tour to break in and sneak around the cemetery, Hector brought up his flashlight and shouted, “Hey!”

The shadow disappeared. Hector figured it must have ducked down when his light reached that section of the wall, not more than ten feet away. Nothing. Hector stumbled over a broken headstone, and went down on one knee. He brought his flashlight up, and panned it back and forth against the wall. There was no one there.

“Hector!” Tony’s booming voice carried across the cemetery. He was a big man, standing six feet three inches tall, and weighing close to three hundred pounds. The rest of the group teased him about being the ‘muscle’ behind The Paranormal Posse. “Hector, wait up. What’s wrong?”

Keeping his eyes and flashlight on the wall, he called over his shoulder. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” Tony asked.

Hector could hear heavy breathing. Running was not something Tony did very often. “There was a shadow that blacked out a section of the wall. I could see the head above the wall. I thought someone had snuck into the cemetery. I was going to cut them off here, but...”

Both beams traveled the length of the wall. Headstones and crosses cast long shadows along the ground. A hand clamped around Hector’s arm and hauled him upright.

“I don’t see anything, Hector. You probably scared them off, and they jumped the fence.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Hector took off his black cowboy hat, and slapped at the sand on his knee. They trotted up the trail to rejoin the tour. Hector could hear Marcos naming more famous grave sites: Florida “Lady Flo” J. Wolfe, Reverend Joseph Tays, Frank Hanna, and Jake Erlich.

When Hector and Tony returned to their places alongside the group, Marcos had his flashlight trained on a white, concrete slab, which was surrounded by another rock wall. Inside, neat rows of gray tombstones shone faintly. “This is the Buffalo Soldiers’ Memorial, and on the left is the Mason section.” Marcos pointed with his light to a towering, white obelisk. “Go ahead and take a couple of minutes for pictures.”

Most of the group had spread out, but several paused. As they approached Marcos, Hector felt eyes following him, and heard whispers of, “What happened?” as he passed by.

“What the hell was that all about?” Marcos asked in a low voice.

“I thought I saw something,” Hector replied.

“Bev told me you were feeling jumpy tonight.”

“I could have sworn I saw a shadow earlier, and I know I saw someone walk along the wall on the other side of the Caples’ mausoleum.”

“Did you find anyone?”

“No.”

“All right, well, let’s regroup and finish up the tour then.”

The shrine to John Wesley Hardin was the last stop of the tour. The large stone and steel structure resembled an old-time jail cell. Hector listened to Marcos’s explanation while scanning the area on either side of the group. “The building you see here was erected partly to show off this famous resident, and partly to protect his remains. Hardin’s relatives filed a suit with the courts to exhume John Wesley’s body, and bury it in Nixon, Texas. They lost that suit. The Mexican government, however, won theirs, and moved President Victoriano Huerta and General Orozoco Pascual, Jr. back across the border.”

A woman leaned toward Hector and whispered, “What happened?”

“Nothing, ma’am. Thought I saw something, but turned out it was nothing.”

Hector could hear the smile in her voice. “Thought you saw a ghost, huh?”

“Yeah, wouldn’t be the first time.”

Marcos started the speech they all used to close the tour. “This officially ends our tour tonight. I encourage all of you to get involved with the Concordia Heritage Association. They have living history tours here every spring where Six Guns and the Shady Ladies perform reenactments. All funds go toward the upkeep and restoration of the Concordia Cemetery.” He shone a light down the wide, sand trail toward the exit. “Please follow this trail out. Tell your friends about us. Drive safely and have a good night!”

The Paranormal Posse fell into step behind the tour group. Hector imagined what people would think when they saw The Posse together. Except for their matching t-shirts, they couldn’t be more different, physically—Tony resembled a bear walking upright, Bev looked like a strong breeze would knock her over, and Marcos was the average-looking one of the four. Hector rubbed a hand across his stomach. His thirties had seen him put

on some weight, and he was shorter than Marcos. An insatiable curiosity about the paranormal is what had brought them together, and kept them working together for almost five years.

“So what happened?” Bev asked Hector as he clicked the lock shut on the gate.

“I saw a shadow along that back wall. Took off after it. I got about ten feet from the wall, and whatever was there disappeared.”

“That’s more excitement than we’ve had out here in a long time.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Tony said.

“Get out! Get out! Get out!” Everyone but Hector jumped at the sound of a growling man’s voice.

“Dang it, Hector. I hate that ring tone,” Bev said.

“Hey, I got it from an EVP session we did in the Franciscan Hotel. It’s cool.” Hector pulled out his phone, glanced at the number, and paused. The number belonged to his ex-wife, Lydia. Since they tried to talk to each other as little as possible, this couldn’t be good.

The last thing I remember is seeing the bracelet. I was so happy. Then a shadow passed over me, and I was sucked away. I had the feeling I was traveling. Then that feeling stopped. I’m in a different place now that is darker than night. I know there are others here with me, but they are silent.

Why won’t you talk to me?

I don’t like it here.

I saw the man return the bracelet, and I would have been happy to stay there and just look at it from time to time. I wouldn't have bothered them anymore.

There it is again. I thought I heard something. I think it's a voice chanting. I can't make out the words. I follow the sound, but then it stops, so I wait.

It's getting louder, which means I'm getting closer.

TWO

We have no reliable guarantee that the afterlife will be any less exasperating than this one, have we? - Noel Coward

Hector's metal screen door opened with a squeak. "Hector?" Marcos called.

El Paso always ranked as one of the top three safest metropolitan cities, so leaving the front door open wasn't unheard of in some parts of the city. Hector stuck his head out of his bedroom door and called out, "Just a minute!"

"Everything all right? You took off last night during the tour, and then after that phone call you left in a hurry."

"I know," Hector said, as he came out of the bedroom. "You want something to drink?"

Marcos nodded, so Hector grabbed two sodas and set them on the kitchen table.

"I've been keeping this to myself, but my ex, Lydia, has been calling me and saying she's signing custody of our son, Darren, over to me. Every few years, she does this, but then changes her mind. About a week ago, she started saying the same old thing. Well, I really think she's going through with it this time. She called last night to say the paperwork was on its way."

"That's really kind of good news, right?"

"Well, according to her, he's sixteen and out-of-control. Darren's dropped out of school; he's drinking, doing drugs,

hanging with the wrong crowd. She said he even squared off at a cop.”

“Do you think it’s true?”

Hector took a sip of his soda. “Yeah, I think some of it is. But Darren has never gotten along with his step-dad. I remember him looking me in the eyes and saying he hated him when he was little.”

“That sucks.”

“Get this: Darren hasn’t even lived with her for months.”

“And you’ve been paying child support?”

“Yes, and insurance.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her she’s got a week to get his butt home, or I call the cops.”

“How long is it going to take to get him here?”

“I get the papers, notarize them, send them back; she files them with the court. It really depends on how long it takes the court to process the paperwork: a week, a month. Either way, if I’m paying child support, he needs to be living at home with her until this is straightened out.”

“Seems only fair. And that will give you some time.” Marcos polished off his soda.

“Time to do what?”

“Have you heard anything about the Amador Hotel in Las Cruces?”

“Is that the historic building they’ve been planning to renovate and turn into a museum?”

“That’s the one: Restore the Amador Foundation. Ms. Armendariz called me this afternoon. She runs the foundation. They’ve been renting it out and holding fundraisers to pay for the restoration—only thing is, for the past several months they’ve been having problems.”

“What kind of problems?” Hector tipped his soda at Marcos to see if he wanted another one. Marcos shook his head.

“It sounds like paranormal problems, and that’s what I was hoping you’d find out tomorrow afternoon when you talk with her.”

I’m close enough to hear the words, but they make no sense.

I am the power 333 of the 10 ether. I am a black hole. I destroy understanding. I sow confusion. I have set my feet in the earth.

It is a man’s voice, deep but raspy like my *abuelito*. My grandfather’s voice always comforted me. This voice does not. I would turn back, but the darkness has lightened from black to gray. I’m hoping it is a way out.

THREE

They’re all dead. They just don’t know it yet. - The Crow

The two-hour drive to Las Cruces was uneventful. Hector saw the Amador Hotel—a massive, two-story, adobe structure—from several blocks away. It was impressive, even from a distance. The edifice was light brown, with wooden beams sticking out a foot or two. The building stood alone, one of kind, surrounded by banks and office buildings.

As Hector turned down a side street, he realized the building occupied half a block. The other half was a parking lot. Several windows that faced the parking lot were boarded up with plywood. He hadn’t seen anyone waiting by the entrance facing the street, so after he parked the car next to a white sedan, he walked to the other side of the Amador, and saw another entrance.

A woman in her fifties, dressed in a dark pantsuit with a bright-red blouse, stood in front of the entrance. As Hector drew near, he could tell that, even with heels, she barely reached his shoulders, and he wasn't tall at five feet, eight inches.

"Hector Guzman?" the woman asked.

"Yes, ma'am. And you must be Ms. Armendariz." Hector held out his hand, and she shook it firmly.

"Nice to meet you." Ms. Armendariz turned and unlocked the door. As she swung it open, Hector noticed she hesitated before crossing the threshold of the Amador Hotel.

"Did you forget something?" Hector asked.

She looked over her shoulder and gave him a faint smile. "No. I haven't been back since the incident at our fundraiser."

Hector followed her. On the right were a row of doors and a hallway. To his left was the front entrance, facing the street. On the side of the front entrance was a short flight of stairs that led to a landing with a large picture window.

Hector paused as a vague sense of unease came over him, similar to what he'd felt at the Concordia Cemetery on Saturday night.

Ms. Armendariz looked behind her. "This way." She motioned with her hand toward a large entrance across from them. As they crossed the lobby, the tile magnified the sound of their footsteps: the high-pitched tink of her heels, and the thunk of his boots. Once they crossed the entrance, their footsteps sounded strange. Hector looked down, and realized the heavy carpeting only muffled the hundred-and-thirty-year-old, creaky floorboards underneath.

"Have you been here before?" Ms. Armendariz asked.

"No, but you've been in the news with your efforts to restore this building." Hector looked up. To his right was a massive main hall, with rows of doors on either side. The room ended in a main staircase that led up to the second floor. Open hallways on both

sides of the second floor overlooked the main hall. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling.

“We can have a seat in here.” She led him to a set of rooms on the left. The middle one was a parlor decorated with Mission furniture. The oak wood was stained a dark chocolate, and a colorful Navajo rug covered the floor.

“Is this furniture original to the hotel?” Hector asked.

“Unfortunately, no. We’ve asked for donations of furniture from that time period, and people have been very generous. I’ve even donated a couple of pieces. There has been a lot of support from the community for this project, which is why I don’t want that wasted because of these unfortunate events.”

“My partner, Marcos, said you called us because you were experiencing some problems. Do you think they’re paranormal?” Hector asked.

“Goodness no!” Hector gave Ms. Armendariz a perplexed look. Ms. Armendariz continued. “I know that’s what you specialize in, but I was assured that you look for proof, and that’s what I want you to do here. I think there is a rational explanation, and I’m asking your group to investigate and, hopefully, find a logical reason for what happened.”

“So you want us to debunk the claims?” Hector asked.

“If that means find a reasonable explanation, then yes.”

Hector measured Ms. Armendariz as she sat on the edge of the cushioned chair, her feet tucked underneath her, her hands in her lap.

“Is there a fee that I’m not aware of for the investigation?” Ms. Armendariz asked.

“No,” Hector replied. “It’s just that I think this is the first time a skeptic has asked us to investigate. Most people believe the activity is paranormal from the start.”

“Well, I will be very happy if it is not paranormal.”

“Our group doesn’t assume anything. We are always open to rational explanations. What sort of problems have you experienced here?”

“I wasn’t present at all the events.” Ms. Armendariz reached into her purse and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “So I’ve talked to these people, and they are willing to sit down with you and tell you what they experienced.”

Hector reached forward and took the paper from Ms. Armendariz, and unfolded it. He scanned the names and events: Eduardo Diaz had rented the hall for his daughter’s fifteenth birthday, or *quinceanera*; Kurt and Patricia had attended the Las Cruces ComicCon; and Carol was at the Restore the Amador fundraiser. Hector folded the paper back up. “Ms. Armendariz, what do you think happened?”

“I think this is a hundred-and-thirty-year-old building and all kinds of things can happen with something that old.”

“Fair enough. What do you know of the history of the building?”

Ms. Armendariz sat back in the chair. “It started out as a private residence. The family was very well-liked and even expanded across the street to make room for relatives. Eventually this building was turned into a hotel, and I’m sure some things happened here during the Wild West days, but other than that, I haven’t heard of anything out of the ordinary.”

“We’ll do some digging around ourselves and see what we can find, and we would like to schedule an investigation. Is investigating at night, from nine to four or five in the morning, going to be a problem?”

“Anytime would be fine. Ever since the break-in, we’ve suspended all our scheduled activities. But that’s money we’re losing to fund the restoration, so the sooner we get this cleared up, the better.”

“Someone broke in?”

“Yes, through those boarded-up windows in the back.”

“Was anything stolen?”

“Thank goodness, no and no damage was done, but I think this place is starting to get a reputation for being haunted. I think someone broke in to see for themselves.”

“Okay, how about this coming weekend then?”

“I don’t see why not. In fact, I’ll give you a key.” Ms. Armendariz placed her purse in her lap and, after a few seconds of searching, handed Hector a key.

Hector took it and stood up. “I think this will be more than enough to get us started. You have our phone number. Call us if you need anything or have any questions.”

Ms. Armendariz stood up. “Thank you for coming here. I know it’s a long drive from El Paso.” As Hector followed her out, she asked, “How long have you been doing this sort of thing?”

“About four years now.”

Ms. Armendariz stopped, her brown eyes intense. “So, is there really such a thing as ghosts?”

“I’ve seen some strange things. Things I can’t explain.” The image of a married couple he and Marcos had helped several years back flashed through Hector’s mind. The husband had been possessed by a demon, and the wife had helped Hector and Marcos form a white-magic portal to balance out the black-magic portal someone else had built.

Ms. Armendariz dropped her gaze and sighed. “I don’t believe in any such thing. I know that’s all the rage now, with the TV shows my kids watch, but I think people just let their imaginations run wild.”

As they passed back through the lobby, Hector again felt uneasy—as if someone or something were watching him pass through this part of the building. He stopped in the middle, and turned in a slow circle to take in the whole room.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Ms. Armendariz said, holding the front door open.

Hector rubbed the back of his neck. “Yes, yes it is.” Hector stepped out into the afternoon sun, and wondered how beautiful the Amador Hotel would be at night, in the dark.

FOUR

What happens if you get scared half to death, twice? -
Stephen Wright

The Paranormal Posse met around Hector’s kitchen table later that night. Hector gave them a recap of the meeting with Ms. Armendariz. They decided to split up the interviews and research, to see if they could get everything done before the investigation that weekend: Marcos was going to do background research on the Amador, Hector took the Diaz family, Tony took Patricia and Kurt from the ComicCon, and Bev took Carol from the Restore the Amador Ffundraiser.

With homework in hand, Marcos lingered at the front door after everyone else had left.

“Did you get the paperwork?”

“Nothing came today. She’s probably stringing me along again. I hope she realizes I will call the cops on her ass if my son is not back in her home this week.”

“Hang in there, man. I hope it comes through for you...and for Darren.”

INTERVIEW #1 Once in a Lifetime - Amador Hotel - July

Hector’s interview with the Diaz family was tense. Apparently, the wife, Maria, had not agreed to talk with The Paranormal Posse, but the husband, Eduardo, did. Before she stormed out of the room, she motioned to a manila envelope on the coffee table and said, “Just throw them away already.” The daughter, Dalia, after her phone chirped several times in a row, excused herself.

Eduardo sat across from Hector in the living room staring at the manila envelope. After several seconds, he picked it up and smiled. “Do you have a daughter?”

“No, a son.”

“Well, a daughter’s *quinceanera*, her fifteenth birthday, only comes once in a lifetime. I really wanted it to be perfect.”

“I’m sure you did. I’ve been to a few. They’re a big deal.” Hector paused as he watched Eduardo’s smile fade. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“All I can tell you is what I know.”

Mother and Daughter both stared at Eduardo Diaz in exactly the same irate stance, with arms crossed, one hip stuck out, and toes tapping an unhappy rhythm.

“How could you be such a cheapskate, Eduardo? Your daughter’s *quinceanera* only comes once.”

“Maria, I’m not being a cheapskate.” Eduardo turned to his daughter. “Wait till you see it, *mija*; it will be perfect for your fifteenth birthday.”

He watched his daughter’s eyes fill with tears. “Dalia,” Eduardo said, taking a step toward her, but she turned and ran. After a few seconds, a door slammed shut.

“Eduardo, I don’t care what favor you owe, but you are not using Dalia’s coming-out party to pay it back.”

“It’s not a favor. Oscar’s cousin rented the building for his daughter’s birthday, and he said it was great. They’ve fixed it up. There’s a huge main hall, a kitchen, restrooms, and a large staircase Dalia can walk down. Just take a look first before you get all upset. We can always find something else if you don’t like it.”

“No, we can’t. You waited too long and all the other reception halls are booked. We’d have to go to El Paso to find something now. I trusted you to do one thing, Eduardo, one thing.”

“And I found a reception hall. It’s open, it’s available, and—I’m not going to lie—it’s at a reasonable price.”

Maria slapped her hand on her thigh. “Cheapskate!” she said through clenched teeth before turning around and stomping off toward her daughter’s bedroom.

The morning of the *quinceanera* began with a thanksgiving mass, where Dalia’s godparents presented her with a locket on a fine, gold chain. Nestled inside was a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe. A Bible and a rosary set, both embossed with a porcelain picture of Dalia, were also presented. At the end of the mass, Dalia walked to the statue of the Virgin Mary and set a bouquet of flowers at her feet. Then family, friends, and relatives all drove to the center of Las Cruces for the reception at the Amador Hotel.

Eduardo held the door of the limo open. He marveled at Dalia’s beauty and grace as her gloved hands gathered up the voluminous, white, lace folds of her dress decorated with baby-blue roses. She stood four and a half inches taller with the crystal tiara balanced delicately on top of her thick, black hair. The crystal tiara displayed the number fifteen in the center of a heart.

Once inside, Eduardo turned Dalia over to the *dama*, female Court of Honor, for the final preparations. The *galan*, male Court of Honor, mingled, waiting for the festivities to begin.

Long tables on either side of the main hall held boxes and bags of birthday presents for Dalia. The aroma of *mole*, *barbacoa*, *arroz*, *frijoles*, fresh *tortillas*, and *salsa* with pungent cilantro made Eduardo inhale long and deeply. He followed his nose to the end of the great hall and around the corner to the front entrance of the hotel. There was a kitchen off of the lobby where plate after plate of steaming food was laid on another long table. A wet bar with liquor, non-alcoholic drinks, and champagne was set up at the other end.

The balcony above the front door served as the showcase for the birthday cake. Sunlight from the large picture window illuminated the three-tiered, center cake supported by pillars tall enough so a small fountain fit underneath. The water bubbling

from the fountain was baby blue to match the roses on Dalia's dress. On either side of the center cake were smaller cakes, which connected to the top by lace-decorated steps. Each step held a doll.

Eduardo was staring up at the cake when he was rocked forward as his friend, Oscar, slapped him on the back. "See, I told you this place would work out."

"If this is her birthday, what is she going to expect for her wedding?"

"The moon," Oscar slapped him on the back again. "Nah, this only happens once in a lifetime. Enjoy it."

Eduardo's chest swelled with pride as the photographer slipped in front of them and took a picture. "Hey, get my good side," he said. The photographer snapped several more before working the rest of the room.

A bell chimed to begin the ceremonies. Everyone filed into the main hall as glasses of champagne were passed hand to hand. Eduardo worked his way up to the front. He admired the Court of Honor assembled on the staircase—fourteen young women on one side matched by fourteen young men on the other. In the middle stood his daughter. Eduardo watched as one of the *galan*, Julio, climbed the stairs and presented Dalia with a heart-topped scepter on a satin pillow.

Eduardo felt his wife slide her arm around his middle and give a gentle squeeze. He raised his glass. "A toast!" He coughed into his hand as tears threatened to overwhelm him. "It seems like only yesterday when we brought her home. Now here she stands, before all her family and friends, a young woman. I am so proud of you, Dalia. This is your special day. *Salud!*"

Applause and a chorus of "*Salud!*" echoed through the main hall.

During the rest of the ceremonies, Eduardo coughed into his hand several times to clear his throat and hide fresh tears. During the shoe ceremony, Dalia gracefully raised each foot so Eduardo

could trade her flats for two-inch heels. The ceremonies ended with the presentation of The Last Doll. A symbol of her last childhood gift, because after this day she would be considered a young lady.

Since Mexican tradition stipulated girls do not dance until their fifteenth birthday, or *quinceanera*, the waltzes that followed were an important event. Eduardo gazed through watery eyes as Dalia danced with each of the young men from her Court of Honor.

The photographer had been weaving in and out among the guests, but now Eduardo noticed the photographer rubbing his eyes and cleaning the lenses on the camera. Eduardo frowned, and started to intercept him to ask what was wrong, when the music for the family waltz began to play. He felt a warm hand slip into his. When he turned and saw his wife's broad smile, which showed one crooked tooth she usually tried to hide, he relaxed and waited for what he knew, after years of marriage, would come next.

"Eduardo, I've been bragging to everyone how you found the perfect place for the *quinceanera*."

"I don't want to say I told you...."

"And you won't," she said, smiling, as she stepped forward into his embrace to begin the waltz.

After all the traditional waltzes were through, the DJ kicked in for the real party. All the young adults and children danced, while the adults drank and ate. Thirsty from all the dancing, Eduardo sauntered back to the lobby to grab a drink and escape the loud music.

As he entered the lobby he glanced up at the cake. It had cost a fortune, and was the centerpiece of the party. He stopped in mid-stride. Did the cake just wobble? He turned to face the balcony. There it was again. A wobble. All the dolls had rocked back and forth slightly. He started up the stairs, thinking that kids were playing underneath the table. If anything got broken....

Crack!

Eduardo looked up to see the table falling forward, sending everything on top crashing forward over the railing. All he could do was watch as a tidal wave of cake, dolls, fountain, and baby-blue colored water levitated for a second, before gravity took over.

White cake and icing splattered the walls and banister. Broken doll pieces littered the brown tile. The blue fountain water dripped from the balcony onto the lobby floor, seeping into the cake. Eduardo moved like a man walking through quicksand down the stairs. He sat with a thud on the bottom step as other guests, who had been in the lobby, rushed around as if there was anything they could do. It didn't matter how it had happened. His daughter's perfect day was ruined.

A week after the birthday party, Eduardo was startled when Maria stormed up to the dining-room table and dropped a large envelope in front of Eduardo. "Ruined!" He took in her face, realizing she was on the verge of tears. "As if losing the cake wasn't bad enough, almost all of the photographs taken by that relative of yours are ruined!"

Eduardo maneuvered the envelope in front of him, and dumped the pictures onto the table. He started to thumb through them faster and faster, as photo after photo held swirls of gray mist floating around Dalia, his daughter.

At the Court of Honor picture, the most important one of the day, the young men and women were lined up on either side of the staircase, all smiling and happy. His eyes moved up to his daughter's beaming face, and sparkling, crystal scepter and tiara. The priceless moment was frozen in time by the photographer. Everything was so perfect—except for the towering, black mass floating directly behind his daughter.

“Can I have a friend look at the photographs? I can also talk to your photographer and try to figure out what happened.”

“My cousin went over his equipment, and he’s since taken other photographs. He doesn’t have an explanation. But you can talk to him if you want.” Eduardo handed the envelope to Hector. “There was no reason for the table to flip over like that, either.”

Hector took the envelope from Eduardo, and thumbed through the pictures. “When we’re finished, I’ll let you know what we found out.”

Eduardo stood up. “It doesn’t matter, and you heard my wife: throw them away when you’re done.”

Hector heard the door close firmly behind him. He stopped after a few steps, and did a double take. Dalia was leaning against the side of his car.

“Can I help you?”

“No. But I think I can help you.” She handed him a folded piece of paper. “That’s Julio’s number. He was a *galan* at my *quinceanera*. He’s into all this paranormal stuff, like you. I showed him the pictures, and he got all excited. Last month, he took a couple of friends and snuck into the Amador to investigate. You’re going to want to talk to him. Whatever they found scared the crap out of them.”

INTERVIEW #2 - Las Cruces ComicCon, Amador Hotel - August

Patricia and Kurt were both skittish as Tony squeezed his bulk into a chair across from them at a wine bar on the east side of El Paso. Tony noticed Kurt rubbed Patricia’s shoulder to comfort her.

“You know the only reason we’re talking about this again is because you said you believed something happened to us,” Kurt said.

“You’re not the only ones who’ve experienced something at the Amador Hotel.”

Tony saw Patricia glance at Kurt, while Kurt held Tony's eyes. "We're not?"

"No. We're talking to someone from a charity event that took place a month after the LC ComicCon who may have experienced something similar."

Kurt and Patricia looked at each other, and then Kurt took another sip of wine before reliving the events of that Saturday in August.

Kurt stepped through the front doors of the Amador Hotel with his girlfriend, Patricia. They were cosplay enthusiasts, and had decided to come dressed as anime characters. Patricia wore a black-and-white French maid's outfit with plastic, kitty-shaped ears, and Kurt wore khakis, tennis shoes, a red t-shirt, and had dyed his brown hair black to match the character. Kurt looked down to see Patricia smiling at him. "This is awesome!"

"Yeah, and we didn't have to travel five hundred miles to attend a ComicCon. Hey, I haven't taught you how to speak English yet, so all you can say is 'Chii'. Come on, stay in character," Kurt teased.

Patricia struck a pose. "Hmmm, we'll have to see how long that lasts. Chiiii!"

They approached the table where posters featured the muscular, yet busty, female mascot holding up a glowing LC ComicCon sign, and plunked down their money. As they entered the main hall, Batman nodded to them.

"This is so cool!" Kurt said. Cosplayers circulated around the tables - Rogue and Gambit, Loki, Valkyrie, Darth Vader, Neo, and a group of characters from Yu Gi Oh and Naruto.

The Star Trek Federation was raising money for charity by snagging little kids dressed up in superhero costumes, and putting them in 'jail'. Passersby donated money to get them out.

The Klingon Empire kept a watchful eye on the proceedings, and passed out business cards in hopes of recruiting new 'Klingons'.

Artists were scattered throughout, working on new pieces, with multiple comic books fanned out around them and open portfolios showing various sketches. Vendors were selling horror collectibles, gaming cards, miniatures, comic books, anime DVDs, manga, and even handmade clothing and crafts by women from Chiapas, Mexico.

Patricia and Kurt stopped to admire the dream-like sculptures with human and animal characteristics.

"Can I touch it?" Kurt asked.

"Sure. You break it, you bought it." A young man, dressed all in black with jet-black hair, smiled at Kurt, and then returned to a sketch he was working on.

Kurt picked up a small clay head covered with hundreds of folds, like a shar pei dog. Even the horn sticking out the side of the forehead had folds.

"Dude, this stuff looks kinda evil."

Patricia nodded in agreement, in case "Chi" wasn't understood.

"I'm drawn to horror, but I also like to mix in comedy. So, it's like a cuddly demon."

Kurt smiled. "I didn't say it wasn't cool."

They stopped at a table lined with crates filled with comic books. Kurt leaned over and began to thumb through them. He took in a sharp breath when he caught sight of a Superman comic book, unopened, in a sealed, white, plastic bag with the Superman logo on the front.

"Chi?"

"Yeah, sure. Go ahead. I'll be here."

Patricia wandered off to look at a display of handmade jewelry and crafts. She fingered several *onigiri*, Japanese rice cakes, made out of felt and decorated with smiling faces.

Patricia held up the *onigiri*, and the vendor replied, “Those are seven dollars.” Patricia opened her small purse, and handed the vendor her money. Dangling the felt *onigiri* over her wrist, she watched a kid jam out to Guitar Hero.

Kurt snuck up behind her and grabbed her sides, tickling her.

“You’ll never guess what I found. An unopened Superman comic. I think it’s worth about fifty bucks! I only paid four dollars.”

“Chii!”

“No, I didn’t steal it. Hey, if you sell comics, you’re supposed to know what they’re worth.”

Patricia used Kurt’s cosplay character name. “Hideki is a crook!”

“I’m not giving it back.” Kurt hid the bag behind his back. “What did you find?”

Patricia lifted her wrist so he could see the *onigiri*.

“Neat, but you’re not hanging that on my rearview mirror.”

Patricia pouted.

“Nope. They’re cute; that’s why they can’t go in my car.” He leaned forward and kissed her on the nose.

They had circled the hall once more when Kurt noticed a sign taped to the staircase.

“Nice, they’re showing movies on the second floor.” After looking over the poster, Kurt said, “It’s already started, but they’re showing a cult classic from the 1970s. Want to check it out?”

Kurt took Patricia’s hand, after she said “yes,” and led her up the stairs and down the open hallway on the right side of the room. One hall was filled with small steps leading up to wooden doors, and the other hall was a row of windows.

“What are all these doors for?”

“Hotel rooms. This used to be a hotel. One of *the* places to spend the night back when Billy the Kid was alive.” Kurt pointed to the first floor. “Look, there are more rooms on the first floor.”

At the end of the hall, they walked across a short balcony, and then through a set of double doors. A young man was in the room reading a comic book. He looked up as they entered. "Hi," he said, "the movie's already started. Just go in and have a seat."

Kurt led the way through an open door on the left to another room. At one end was a large, flat-screen TV. The movie illuminated rows of empty chairs. They sat down a couple of rows from the back wall.

Lately, I've been having awful nightmares. The voices may be the souls of those you've beheaded... they curse me from ponds of blood... or mountains of spikes... from ghastly places... I can hear them as they send chills down my spine.

The ending was a bloodbath, where the hero slaughtered an entire enemy army single-handedly. The screen went black, plunging the room into darkness.

Kurt yawned. "What's next?"

"*Vampire Hunter D.*"

"Haven't we already seen it?"

"Yep."

"Where's the lights? Hey, the movie's over," Kurt called out over his shoulder.

There was shuffling, and then repeated clicks. A man's voice said, "Sorry, lights aren't working." There was silence, and then more clicks. Muffled voices floated up from downstairs. "Head this way. There's more light out on the balcony."

Kurt took Patricia's hand, and led her through the darkened room to the door. They passed the young man flipping the light switch. "We must have blown a breaker." He gestured outside the doorway. "The whole place is out."

"It's an old building. Probably happens all the time," Kurt said.

They walked out to the balcony. A voice drifted up from below. "Everybody, please stay where you are. We'll have the power back up in just a minute."

Kurt watched Patricia lean over the railing. He let his eyes linger on the back of Patricia's bare legs. A breeze drifted up and lifted the hem of her short, black skirt. A half-smile played over his lips at the unexpected peek of white ruffles framing her bottom. His eyes traveled up the length of her back. The breeze grew stronger, and lifted the ends of her long, black hair. He had leaned forward to draw her in for a kiss when the sound of rustling paper caught his attention.

A voice shouted from below, "Hey! Someone close the door!" Kurt saw vendors stand up to lean over their tables as comic books began to flutter and threaten to take flight.

The wind turned into a gale. Comic books whipped into the air. Pictures and figurines tumbled to the floor. Kurt put his arm around Patricia, and moved between her and the railing.

Kurt watched the turmoil below continue as the gale roared through the building. Patricia shrieked. Kurt wrapped his arms around her. "What's wrong?"

"Something is in there!" She pointed back at the movie room.

Kurt's shoulders tensed as he looked over her shoulder. The room was still dark, but a darker shadow moved, blocking out the dim light filtering through the heavy curtains over the window. "It's just the movie guy."

"No, he's over there."

Sure enough, Kurt followed Patricia's pointing finger to see the young man from the movie theater running down the stairs at the other end of the building.

"Babe, calm down." He kept his grip on her, and steered her toward one of the hotel rooms on the left. The gale showed no signs of dying down. He turned the door knob, and the door swung inward easily. They darted in, tripped on the small step, and tumbled to the floor.

Kurt sat up, and kicked the door shut against the growing force of the wind. The tiny room was empty, with only a window at one end, and an old, metal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. "There. We'll ride it out in here." He pulled Patricia close. She trembled in his arms. "What did you see?"

"I don't know, but it scared me."

"It's okay. Boy, do we have something to tell Angela and Paul when we get back tonight. They're going to kick themselves for not coming with us." He gave her a big squeeze. "Let me see if it's died down out there." Kurt stood and pressed his ear to the door.

"Kurt...."

"I can still hear the wind, but I think things are calming down."

"Kurt, what is that?"

"What?"

"That."

Kurt heard the slow squeal of rusty chains. The light from the small window illuminated the small room. The room was empty. The squealing picked up speed.

"What is that?"

"I don't know," Kurt admitted. He noticed Patricia's hair start to swirl upward. The squealing intensified. His eyes darted around the room, but there was nothing to see.

Then he looked up.

The metal chandelier, with empty, black light sockets gaping like empty eyes on a skull, swung back and forth. Kurt pulled Patricia to her feet and kept one arm around her while his other hand groped behind him for the door handle. The air whipped around them as if a storm was about to be unleashed in the tiny room.

"Kurt!"

He turned the doorknob and pulled. The door stayed shut. "Oh, come on!" He turned the door knob and pushed. Nothing. He didn't want to release Patricia, but when the door didn't

budge, he turned around and took the doorknob in both hands, and yanked. The door flew open, knocking them both to the floor.

Overhead, the chandelier swung in wide circles, scraping the ceiling like skeletal fingers on a chalkboard. Kurt's eyes stung and started watering. He sat up and stumbled to the door, Patricia clinging to his side.

"Kurt, what's wrong?"

"Something got in my eye..." He tumbled forward, missing the small step again, and felt Patricia land on his back. He raised his head. Through watery eyes, he saw the floor of the balcony was covered with comic books. They were all opened to the same page: a picture of a man and woman cringing, eyes wide with fear.

Tony drained the last of his beer as Kurt leaned back, his story finished. "Did they ever give you an explanation for what happened?"

"They kept going on about how the swamp cooler must have gone nuts. But that doesn't explain why we experienced something just in that room. Even if that was the answer, which I doubt."

"And it doesn't explain that shadow I saw," Patricia whispered.

INTERVIEW #3 - Restore the Amador - Amador Hotel - September

Bev looked down. The table was vibrating.

"Sorry," Carol muttered. "I shake my leg when I'm nervous."

Bev looked back up, tightened her pony tail, and smiled. "No problem. Really there's nothing to be nervous about. The information is confidential. No one will know you talked to me."

"Okay. We were having a great time before the lights went out."

“So you were at the Restore the Amador fundraiser?”

“Yes, with my friend Becky.”

“Tell me everything you remember about that night.”

Carol took a sip of the Mocha Frappe she'd ordered when they arrived at the coffee-house. She took a deep breath, and then went into vivid detail about that night in September.

“Murder! Murder!”

People stopped their various activities, and rushed toward the main staircase of the Amador Hotel. Excitement hung in the air.

A woman in a green, satin gown wrung her hands, and then paused to lean over an older man lying sprawled on the landing. She let out a sob.

A man wearing a badge sauntered past the onlookers, his thumbs hooked into his gun belt. The crowd parted to let him through. When he reached the woman, she ignored him, crying out, “It’s murder! It’s murder!”

The man grabbed her by the arm and swung her around to face him. “Esmeralda, what happened?”

Esmeralda shook her head, crying, unable to speak.

He took hold of both her arms and shook her. “Calm down! What happened here?”

She motioned with her head to the lifeless body on the floor. “Sheriff, it’s the colonel. He’s been murdered!”

“How do you know?”

“It was in the whisky. He’s been poisoned!”

He released her and knelt beside the body. A whisky glass was on its side by the colonel. He reached over to examine tiny, white flakes along the side. Satisfied, he gave an audible, “Hmph.” The leather belt around his waist creaked as he straightened and addressed the crowd. “Well, ladies and gentlemen, it appears we have a murder.” He raised the whisky glass and showed it to the

crowd. "I believe the colonel was poisoned with Moon Flower. The Indians used it in their ceremonies, but if not prepared properly, it is fatal. Now, the question is, who would have a reason to murder this fine, upstanding gentleman?"

Esmeralda tottered forward. "Oh, there were plenty in this community that wanted him out of the way!"

"Like you, Esmeralda." The crowd turned toward a well-dressed man.

"And who might you be, sir?" Sheriff Pat Garrett asked.

"I'm Mr. Anderson. I sold the colonel an insurance policy about six months ago, and Esmeralda here is the sole beneficiary."

Esmeralda threatened to swoon, but Sheriff Garrett took hold of her arm again and pointed to a room on the right with a large number one taped to the door. "Well, Esmeralda, looks like you get room number one."

Two men escorted Esmeralda down the stairs into the room.

"Who else, Mr. Anderson?"

"Those cattle rustlers: the Farmington Gang and the Mesilla Valley Gang. The colonel was in charge of rounding them up."

"Are they here tonight?"

"Just so happens they were here enjoying the poker table and whisky-tasting tonight." Mr. Anderson searched the crowd. "Over there! Mr. Hall and Mr. Treet."

"I didn't do anything to that old coot," hollered Mr. Treet.

"Me neither," said Mr. Hall.

"Nevertheless, gentlemen. You have earned yourself a room." The two bristled as men stepped forward to escort them to room number two.

"Who else, Mr. Anderson?"

"I remember Mr. Bourough from the Shalen Colony and the colonel not seeing eye-to-eye."

There was an uproar from the middle of the crowd. "We may not have seen eye-to-eye, but that doesn't mean I killed anyone!"

Sheriff Garrett's gaze bore down on Mr. Bourough. "What, exactly, were you arguing about?"

"He was trying to remove one of the orphans from my care. We are a Utopian community dedicated to serving orphans, and making them sinless leaders of the world. We follow the New Bible written by the Angel Oahspe."

"Room number three, please."

"This is an outrage!" Mr. Bourough grumbled, as he was led to his small room for the evening.

"Mr. Anderson, this is turning into quite a long list of suspects."

"I believe there is only one more, Sheriff."

"And who might that be?"

Mr. Anderson turned to the back of the crowd. "Ms. Carmela."

There were gasps as a woman in a beautiful, black gown turned to flee the main hall. Two men stepped in front, blocking her. She turned around to face Sheriff Garrett, swirling her gown and placing both of her hands on her hips. "Now, Sheriff, you wouldn't want to ruin the colonel's reputation among these fine, upstanding citizens, would you?"

Garrett glanced back at the fallen colonel. "Oh, I don't think he'll mind."

Mr. Anderson broke the stare-down between the two by clearing his throat. "It seems that the colonel and Ms. Carmela were,—how should I put this?—friendly."

"How friendly?"

"Ummm, very friendly."

Carmela tossed her head back and laughed. "That is an excellent way of putting it. But we haven't been 'very friendly' for years, and I have no reason to see him dead."

Mr. Anderson said, "It seems this friendly relationship may have ended because of an act of indiscretion."

"It ended because I wanted it to end."

“Why did you try to run?” asked the Sheriff.

Carmela pressed her hand to her heart. “That big gun of yours scares me, Sheriff.”

“Room number four, please.”

Carmela cursed and shrugged off the men when they tried to take her arms. “Fine, fine. But you don’t have anything on me, Sheriff.” She turned to the bartender. “Be a dear and bring me a glass of wine.” The bartender froze in the middle of wiping a glass. He looked from Carmela to the Sheriff, who shook his head.

Sheriff Garrett pulled himself up to his full height, and looked over the crowd, “And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen: a right fine murder mystery to solve tonight. The wine- and whisky-tasting bars and the poker table will remain open. I have the utmost faith that one of you can solve this murder.” He stepped back and gave a hand to the colonel to help him to his feet. “Let’s give a round of applause to the colonel here. You play dead real well.”

The main hall of the Amador Hotel rang with the crowd’s applause.

“I hope no one called 9-1-1,” the colonel said with a grin.

The crowd chuckled. Carol turned to Becky beaming. “Wow! I’ve always wanted to go to one of these. So, first impression: who did it?”

Becky rifled through her papers, “I don’t have a clue. I’m going to have to talk to the characters first, and even then I still might not have a clue.”

“Me either. They all had a motive, but I think that’s the way this is supposed to work. Let’s join our group and see if multiple heads are better than one.”

The orange-dot sticker in the top, right-hand corner of the instructions led them to a small group clustered around door number three. They met their guide, who would lead them around to each door, where they could interview a suspect for ten

minutes. At the end, everyone would gather, and whoever guessed the murderer would win a gift certificate for a dinner for two.

Becky and Carol listened to their group discuss the case so far. One or two appeared to know their way around a Charity Murder Mystery Event, so they hung back and let a woman in a pink dress question Mr. Hall and Mr. Treet first.

“Did you kill the colonel?”

“No, I didn’t kill the colonel! I didn’t need to.”

“Aren’t you a cattle rustler?”

Mr. Treet snorted. “I’ve never taken anything that wasn’t mine.”

“The colonel was rounding up the cattle-rustling gangs, and your gang was on his list. You needed to get rid of him.”

“Well, thank goodness we live in the good ol’ US of A. We hired a lawyer to take care of the charges by the state. The large cattle companies are taking up all the land and water, and leaving nothing for the smaller ranchers. If they could hire guns like the colonel, and lawyers and politicians to help them, well, then so could we.”

“Does Moon Flower grow on your ranch?”

“Ma’am, Moon Flower is a weed. It grows everywhere around here.”

Carol glanced up from the papers in her hand and asked him, “Mr. Treet, you hired a lawyer?” Papers rustled as the rest of the group rifled through the background information.

“Yes, we did.” Mr. Treet paused. “Our group of small ranchers banded together and hired a lawyer.”

Carol thought he looked uncomfortable. “Did you win?”

“What?”

“Did you win your case against the big ranchers?”

“Well, no. Fact is, we lost the first round.” Mr. Treet puffed his chest out. “But we’re still fighting, and we’re confident we’ll

win the second round. Our lawyer is running for the Territory Legislature.”

“Isn’t the colonel running for that same office?”

Mr. Treet said, “Yes.”

“What makes you so sure you’ll win the election?”

“There are more of us than there are of them. We’ll win by an honest, fair election. Unlike the first time.”

“Thank you, Mr. Treet.” As they moved out of the room, Mr. Hall tipped his hat to Carol and winked.

As the group walked across the main room, they congratulated Carol on her questioning. “I completely missed that in the colonel’s bio,” said Becky.

The woman in the pink dress turned to Carol and Becky and introduced herself. “Hi, I’m Nita. Good catch back there. Is this your first time?”

“Yes,” said Carol. “For both of us.”

“Well, you’re in for a treat, because this mystery is based on actual people around Las Cruces.”

“So there was a colonel?”

“Oh yes, he was murdered, along with his 12-year-old son. They never found the bodies—just their blood-covered wagon.”

“How awful,” exclaimed Becky.

“And the rest of the characters are real too?”

“Some. The gangs were blamed for the colonel’s death, but no one was ever brought to trial. A man did found an orphanage, and he wrote a bible he believed was dictated to him from an Angel of Oahspe. There are still a group of believers scattered around the country. Sorry, I’m a bit of a history buff, and I love the idea of restoring this hotel,” Nita said, as the group entered another room.

The group traveled from room to room, grilling the suspects in turn, and gathering clues until a bell rang out through the Amador Hotel, signaling the end of the investigation. People

filtered back into the main hall, where Sheriff Garrett was waiting at the top of the main staircase.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope you’ve enjoyed this event. We’ll give you about ten to fifteen minutes to discuss everything you’ve learned this evening. You may discuss the case with anyone you like. All the suspects will line up at the bottom of the staircase in case you have any last-minute questions. Good luck!”

Becky and Carol huddled with their group. Those that were too shy to speak up during the interviews came up with last-minute questions, and hurried back and forth to ask the suspects individually. The majority of the group still believed that it was a team effort between Esmeralda and the two ranchers.

Becky noticed Carol had stayed silent, and leaned over. “Who did it?” she whispered.

“I think...” She was interrupted by Sheriff Garrett ringing the bell again.

Sheriff Garrett called out to the audience. “Let’s have a show of hands. As I call out the names of each suspect, you raise your hand if you think that suspect is the one who killed the colonel.” He called out the names and counted hands. “Well, now. It looks like Esmeralda, Mr. Hall, and Mr. Treet are the most-likely suspects. Anyone care to explain their reasoning?” Several brave souls did stand up and go into lengthy explanations about why one suspect or another was the murderer.

Becky elbowed Carol. “Go on.”

Carol shook her head, horrified at the prospect of speaking out in front of all these people.

“Go on!”

“Anyone else?” asked the Sheriff.

Becky practically started a shoving match trying to get Carol to raise her hand.

“Yes? Don’t be shy! Who do you think did it, ma’am?” Sheriff Garrett called out.

Carol swallowed hard several times, sure that others could see the papers shaking in her hands. "I think it was...."

Before she could finish, the entire hotel was plunged into blackness. People exclaimed, giggled, or groaned in annoyance.

The man playing Sheriff Garrett spoke, his voice strong and clear. "Ladies and gentlemen, please just remain where you are. This is an old building, and quite temperamental at times."

The lights snapped back on. Some people said, "Hurray!" Others yelled, "Cheers!"

"Now, where were we? Yes, ma'am, please go ahead before the lights go out again," Sheriff Garrett said with a laugh.

"I think it was Mr. Bourough. But I think all of them had a reason to kill the colonel. I just think Mr. Bourough got to him first."

"Interesting," he said, rocking back and forth on his heels. "Please explain."

"Well," Carol looked around at her audience. Then their faces disappeared as the lights went out again. Loud groans echoed throughout the room.

The lights didn't come back on. Carol pressed her shoulder against Becky's. "I can barely see anything," she said.

"I know."

The air vibrated as doors slammed shut on the second floor. The crowd shifted uneasily. A woman's voice rang out. "Please, everyone, move to the red exit sign. I'm sorry...." Then, a sudden gale ripped through the room, pulling at Carol's short hair. She turned her head from side to side at the sound of slamming doors all around her.

"Did you see anything else unusual?" Bev asked.

"You mean besides lights flickering on and off for no reason, and doors opening and closing by themselves?"

Bev winced. "Sorry, that does sound like enough fun for one night."

Carol finished the rest of her Mocha Frappe and shook her head. "No, I didn't see anything else."

"Did they ever offer an explanation?"

"Not one that I believe."

INTERVIEW #4 - 333 - Amador Hotel - September

Hector pulled into a parking space, and gave Tony a quick wave as he pulled in beside him. Parks weren't the greatest thing in this part of the country. For one thing, grass doesn't grow very well in the desert, not even on the golf courses where they water them twice a day.

The Sunland Park Skate Plaza was in the middle of nowhere, with a ribbon of green trees and shrubs behind the park along the Rio Grande. In front of the park, across the road, sand dunes rippled as far as the eye could see. The skate park was shaped like the Zia in the New Mexico flag, with four patches of grass, and a couple of trees and bushes, surrounded by concrete. It was skater heaven, complete with stairs, rails, pathways, and even park benches that mimicked a downtown area, minus the buildings.

"Thanks for meeting me here," Hector said, as he got out of the car.

"Sure."

Hector and Tony crossed the parking lot, and dodged teenagers as they whizzed past on skateboards. They reached a bench, unharmed, and sat down.

"Pedestrians do not have the right of way," Hector said.

Tony agreed. "So what's the kid's name?"

"Julio," Hector replied.

"You think he's going to show?"

"I don't know. He picked the place and time, so more than likely, yes."

"Have you heard any more about Darren?"

“I hated to get my hopes up, but yeah.” Hector grinned. “The paperwork is filed, and I may see him as soon as this weekend.”

Tony clapped a big, beefy hand on Hector’s back, and said, “All right.” Hector didn’t know if it had anything to do with his size, or the fact that he worked at a nursing home, but Tony had the patience of a saint, and was perpetually upbeat. Plus, if a big guy like him ever got scared during an investigation, then it had to be some seriously crazy shit. Hector had never seen Tony scared yet.

Hector leaned back and crooked an elbow across the back of the bench. “I’ve got to tell you: I’m nervous.”

“About talking to this kid?”

“No,; about getting Darren back.”

“Relax. You’ll be great. Once he gets here, and sees that you only want what’s best for him, Darren will straighten up.”

Hector and Tony both looked up as a skateboard slid to a halt in front of them. A Hispanic boy, about fifteen years’ old, eyed both of them.

Tony asked, “Are you Julio?”

“Are you the guys Dalia was telling me about?”

“Yep,” Hector said.

“Am I going to get in trouble if I talk to you?”

“No. Ms. Armendariz said nothing was stolen or damaged.”

Hector watched Julio size them up. Julio seemed satisfied; because he kicked his skateboard into one hand, and told them about the night he and his friends had snuck into the Amador Hotel.

Three shadows glided down the alley between the Amador Hotel and an office complex. The sound of sneakers skidding to a halt reverberated between the walls of the buildings. At the back corner of the hotel, the shadows bunched up and paused.

“Okay, smart ass, the place is locked up. Now how do we get in?” Nelson whispered.

Julio’s plans weren’t that specific. He and Xavier had been two *galans* during Dalia’s *quinceanera*. She’d come to school a couple of weeks later waving around a picture of the Honor Court on the balcony, with a black shadow hovering behind her. That night, Julio started looking up information about the Amador Hotel, and ran across the news articles on the LC ComicCon and the Restore the Amador fundraiser. The news chalked it up to electrical problems in an old building, but Julio thought something else might be happening.

“The news said some windows were broken. Look,” he said, pointing down the back of the building. “It looks like two windows are boarded up. If we can get a corner loose, we’re in.”

A large, paved parking lot spread out behind the building. The closest lights were the streetlamps at the other end of the parking lot. Julio paused to make sure no cars were traveling around at three in the morning. “Go, go, go!”

They ran to the first window. “Xavier, you keep a lookout. Nelson, help me get the window open.” They both yanked at a corner of the plywood. It didn’t budge. “We should’ve brought a hammer,” Xavier whispered.

Nelson reared back and kicked at the board. The board didn’t budge, but the sound echoed out over the parking lot. “Dude, what the hell are you doing?” Xavier whispered.

“You can’t kick it in,” Julio said, as he grabbed Nelson’s arm and pulled him toward the next window. “This board looks warped. Try this corner.”

Xavier stood to the side as Julio and Nelson dug their fingers up under the corner of the board and yanked. A small squeal of metal answered their effort. “*Otra vez...again*. This time, brace your foot against the wall,” Julio instructed.

Nelson did what Julio asked. Julio nodded, and then both boys yanked again. The board gave a loud crack, but didn’t

appear to move much. Julio knelt down to inspect the corner. It was loose, and when he pulled upward on the corner, a nice-sized gap appeared under his fingers. “We can squeeze in,” he said, standing up.

Nelson, the biggest of the three, turned around and knelt with his back to the wall under the window. He grunted as he squeezed first his head, and then his torso, up behind the board. He felt hands pushing his legs. “Hey,” he yelled, “cut it out!”

“There’s a car coming!” Xavier said.

“Oh, shit.” Nelson braced his palms against the top of the windowsill and shoved. When the backs of his knees cleared the windowsill, he let himself tumble backwards onto the floor.

Julio’s head appeared a second later and, as soon as Nelson could get a hold under his arms, he yanked him clear of the window.

Xavier stuck his head inside. “Pull me in!”

Nelson grabbed Xavier’s arms and pulled until his feet and knees went thunk on the carpet.

“Owwwww! God damn it!” Xavier rolled over and clutched his leg.

“What?”

“Something cut my leg.”

“Where?” Julio asked, flicking on his flashlight.

Xavier rolled his blue jeans halfway up his calf. “Here.” A red line, oozing pinpricks of blood, started at his ankle, and then disappeared further up his calf underneath his blue jeans.

Nelson thumped him on the back, and then grabbed him under his armpits and lifted him to his feet. “I’ve had worse cuts on my eyeball.”

“Shut up! That fucking hurt.”

“Quiet,” Julio hissed. They all froze, listening for sounds of an approaching car or the whoop-whoop of a siren. “I don’t think they saw us.”

There was a 'click,' and then a small beam of light shone out from the flashlight in Xavier's hand.

"My leg hurts," Xavier complained.

"Pussy," Nelson said, as he poked Xavier in the ribs.

"Shut the fuck up!"

"Seriously?" Julio motioned toward the doorway with his beam of light. "Let's do this."

"Hey, where's my flashlight?" Nelson asked.

"I thought ??? told you to bring one," Julio said.

"No," Nelson said.

Julio and Xavier exchanged a look.

"Here, take mine." Julio handed his flashlight to Nelson.

They made their way slowly through the back rooms to the main hall. They stopped, and bobbed their lights up and down on the staircase. "This is where we were when that picture was taken."

"Okay," Nelson said. "Now what?"

"Xavier, why don't you sit down on the steps while we go upstairs and have a look around?" Julio suggested.

"We should stay together." Xavier's voice wavered in the gloom.

"I thought your leg hurt?" Nelson asked.

"It does, Nelson, but we should stay together...just in case."

"In case of what? A strong breeze ruffles your hair?"

"Julio, why did you invite this *pendejo*?"

"Nelson," Julio said. "Come on, I thought you wanted to check this out."

"Check out what? This ghost crap? I don't believe in it. I just thought breaking into this place would be cool."

"Okay, fine. Nelson, you stay down here. Xavier, come on."

"We should stay...."

"Xavier, just come on!"

Julio followed Xavier up the staircase, and turned left at the landing to walk up the small staircase leading to the hotel rooms.

Xavier flicked the light back and forth. “There’s a room back here.”

As Xavier played his light around, Julio said, “There’s nothing here. Let’s check the other rooms.”

They walked down the hall, and paused before each wooden door. The doorknobs felt slick under Julio’s hand. They poked their head into room after room.

“It’s just a big, empty building,” Xavier said, disappointed, after Julio shut the door on the fourth room.

“Oh, shit, I almost forgot,” Julio said, tugging something out of his pocket.

“What?”

“This.” Julio held up a slim, gray, plastic stick with a rainbow of small light bulbs at the top. “It’s a K2 meter. You know, like the one ghost hunters use on TV. They say ghosts give off an electromagnetic field. No lights, no ghosts. Lights, there may be ghosts.”

“Damn, bro, isn’t that expensive?”

“I bought it second-hand. It’s so old I have to stick a penny in here just to keep the thing on.” Julio pointed to a penny jammed a quarter of the way in at the top of the on/off button. He opened the door to a room. “I’m going to walk in the room, and you stay here. Hopefully this baby will light up.”

“What do the different lights mean?”

“It starts out green; then, as they get closer, the colors change to yellow and orange. If the ghost is right on top of you, it’s red. It will stay on red as long as the ghost is near.”

Julio walked around the perimeter of the small room, keeping the K2 meter pointed in front of himself. He reached Xavier. “Nothing. Let’s try the next room.”

“Hey, guys!” Nelson called out from below.

Julio and Xavier walked to the wooden railing and leaned over. “What?” answered Julio.

“This is boring. There’s nothing here except some old furniture.”

“Nelson, you can leave if you want. Thanks for helping us get in. We’ll catch up with you later.”

“Nah,” his voice faded as he walked out of sight underneath them. “I got nothing better to do... which is sad.”

“We’re almost done up here.” Julio opened the next door, and Xavier shone the light on another empty room. The rooms were not much bigger than a closet. He took slow, measured steps around the perimeter of the room, holding the K2 meter out slightly ahead of him. He was walking back toward the doorway when they heard a hard thud from downstairs.

The light left the room as Xavier lit up the railing. “What was that?”

Julio followed the wall the rest of the way to the door, and then stepped out into the hallway. “Nelson,” he called out. He watched Xavier’s beam of light flit back and forth along the main hall below. They heard another hard thud. Nelson’s flashlight rolled out into view from underneath the landing. A second later, Nelson fell hard on his backside to the right of the light. Xavier jogged toward the stairs, his leg apparently feeling much better.

Julio leaned over the railing. “Nelson, you all right?”

Nelson scuttled backwards out of the range of the flashlight. Even in those few seconds, Julio saw the expression on Nelson’s face: he was terrified. Julio yelled, “Nelson, what is it?”

Xavier had reached the bottom of the stairs. He had rounded the corner of the banister and vanished out of sight, when Julio heard the sound of bodies colliding. Xavier’s voice drifted from the back room where they’d snuck in. “Nelson, you asshat!” Seconds later, there was the sound of splintering wood and a dull thud, followed by another.

“Xavier? Nelson?” Julio stood in darkness on the second floor. The only light came from the small pool made by the flashlight on the bottom floor—where Nelson had dropped it.

Julio backed up from the railing, and crept down the hallway toward the stairs. He paused to listen at the top, and then made his way down, wincing every time his foot landed on a squeaky step.

At the bottom of the stairs, he hesitated, not wanting to leave his flashlight behind.

Nelson must have seen something. Julio pointed the K2 meter slightly ahead of himself, and then advanced to retrieve his flashlight. Halfway there, the K2 meter sprang to life, its cheerful colors making a small rainbow in front of him. Julio stopped. The rainbow faded. He stared ahead for a few seconds, and then moved forward. After only a few steps, his K2 meter flashed again. Julio stopped. He gazed at the comforting pool of light ahead of him. *Fuck it*, he thought. He took one step back, to turn around and leave, when something moved in front of the flashlight, blacking it out for a couple of seconds.

Julio didn't wait to see more. He finished turning around, and sprinted for the back room and the window. In the darkness, he ran his shoulder into the doorjamb, spun around, and landed on his back. His breath left him in a whoosh. There was a soft plunk behind his head.

When he could breathe, he put his hands flat on the floor to sit up, and realized his K2 meter was gone. Julio's eyes darted back to the flashlight in the main room. The circle of light shone undisturbed. His flashlight he could replace, but it had taken him forever to save up for a second-hand K2 meter that his parents did not want him to have.

Julio flipped onto his hands and knees. Nelson had completely busted out the plywood board nailed over the window. Faint light from the streetlight on the other side of the parking lot only lit up a few inches past the windowsill. Julio pushed his hands in front of him, and swept his palms along the carpet. *It couldn't have fallen that far away*, he thought. He soon

reached the bottom of the window. “Shit, shit, shit,” he muttered.

He sat back on his heels, and gazed out the window. Sighing, he leaned to the right and, on his hands and knees, swept the floor. The floor creaked, as if someone had stepped up to the door and stopped. Julio snapped his head toward the now-darkened doorway. The flashlight from the main room was no longer visible. Someone, or something, was blocking out the light.

“Hello?” Julio’s voice sounded reedy and high-pitched, even to his own ears. He blinked, and the flashlight from the main hall was visible again. Whatever was there was now in the room with him. “Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be here. I just need to find something, and then I’m leaving.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his K2 meter light up and stay lit. He whimpered as he scurried forward and grabbed the device. He rocked back on his heels, and stood up. He moved in front of the window. The lights of the K2 meter were still lit...all the way to red.

Julio turned, hauled himself up, and was bringing his other foot to the windowsill when pain flared across his shoulders, then raked down his back as if the tips of red-hot wires were being dragged down its length. He cried out as he continued to push himself out of the window, but the pain continued: over his rear end and down the backs of his legs, even across the soles of his feet. Julio landed, face-first on top of the plywood Nelson had knocked out of the window. Pain radiated down the entire length of his body. He flinched when a white light blinded him.

“Julio, it’s me. Are you okay?” When Julio didn’t respond, Xavier said, “Just get up. We got to get out of here.”

Julio struggled to his feet, and cried out again when Xavier tried to put his arm around the middle of his back. He hopped up and down, the soles of his feet on fire.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” asked Xavier.

“My whole back is on fire.”

“There’s nothing there. Come on, before we get caught.”

“Where’s Nelson?”

“Shit, the dude hasn’t stopped running. I couldn’t catch up with him; then I realized you weren’t following, so I came back.”

Julio clutched his K2 meter, and limped across the parking lot. When he reached the well-lit street, he glanced back at the Amador Hotel. Out of the darkness of the window, two hands rested on the windowsill.

Hector started to ask, “Did you take....” But the teenager rolled his eyes, let his skateboard drop with a clatter and, with one powerful kick, sent himself sailing across the concrete pathway out of sight.

FIVE

It’s not that life is so short, it’s that you’re dead so long. -
Mark Whetu

Marcos had his work cut out for him. Internet information about the hotel was sketchy at best. Everything that was listed—a couple of pictures and a slim biography of the family—was located at New Mexico State University’s library.

The university’s library was a glass and concrete structure surrounded by palm trees. Any library felt like a second home to Marcos. Before computers made finding books relatively easy with a couple clicks of a mouse, Marcos remembered flipping through thick cards filed in rows of solid-wood cabinets. At thirty-five, armed with his backpack, he still liked to think he blended in with the college crowd,—these days people his age and older were earning a degree right alongside the just-out-of-high-school students.

After a couple of hours, Marcos found out the Amador Hotel started out as the one-story, adobe home of Don Martin Amador

in 1866. Twelve years later, Mr. Amador expanded the building, and started the Amador Rooming House, which would later become the Amador Hotel. It was a popular way-station for travelers between Mexico and Santa Fe.

Old pictures, circa 1880, in the archives of the library showed a building with wooden-framed porches and large trees. Horses harnessed to buggies were tethered out front. There were also family photographs of Don Martin Amador and his family. The most colorful people surrounding the hotel were none other than Billy the Kid and Sheriff Pat Garrett. The mysterious death of Albert Fountain caught Marcos's eye, since neither the killers nor the bodies of Albert Fountain and his twelve-year-old son were ever discovered. Although deaths and other assorted tragedies would have occurred at the hotel, there was no concrete paper trail to suggest paranormal activity.

Marcos left the artificial chill of the library, and walked to his car. Marcos's phone chirped. A text from Hector said everyone would compare notes at his house tomorrow night.

Crumpled-up, paper wrappers and beer bottles littered the kitchen table. For this meeting, Hector had gone to the family-owned restaurant down the block and ordered *Tortas de barbacoa* with all the fixings for everyone. Bev was the only one that didn't order extra Valentina hot sauce. Well fed, The Paranormal Posse relaxed in the living room to compare notes.

"We have great business meetings," Tony said.

"We should have them more often," Bev agreed, tucking her feet underneath her.

"I'm going first," said Hector. "The good news is my son is coming to live with me. In fact, she's putting him on a plane this weekend."

"Which means...?" Marcos asked.

“Which means I can’t do the investigation at the Amador with you guys on Saturday.”

“The paperwork got done that fast?” Marcos asked.

“No, not exactly. It’s filed, and she talked to the clerk, who said she didn’t see any problem with it. Lydia said she would send him now. Darren won’t be any wiser.”

Marcos, Bev, and Tony exchanged glances.

Hector rushed to reassure them. “I saw the paperwork; it’s a done deal. Lydia doesn’t think she can get him home. I’m not even sure she wants him back, so Darren will be here, and he’ll be happy.”

After a few seconds, Bev said, “I’m sure he will be.”

“And we can manage without you,” Tony said. “You don’t do that much, anyway.”

“Ohh, thanks.” Hector smiled. “So, let’s get this meeting started with the Diaz family. What a mess. I had the pictures analyzed by a friend, and I talked to their photographer. We have no explanation for why the pictures are messed up.” Hector pointed his thumb in Tony’s direction. “Tony and I met with Julio, who broke into the Amador with two friends to investigate. He said an entity scratched him, but he didn’t show us any marks, and we didn’t get to talk to the other boys that were with him.” Hector looked up. “Who’s taking notes?”

“I will.” Bev reached into her purse and pulled out her phone. After a few taps, she said, “Ready.”

“Check the balcony. The table with the cake flipped over, so you need to see if there could be any reason why.”

“Could it have been another person or a kid up there, messing around?” Tony asked.

“No. He said he was on the steps when it happened, and no one came down the stairs.”

“Got it,” Bev said. “I’ll go next. The Restore the Amador fundraiser. I don’t have any explanation for why doors would open and close. The lights could be electrical. I’m going to see

what I can find out about the electrical setup there. Faulty wiring? It is an old building.”

“Right,” said Tony. “And the ComicCon had the same black-out, and also wind. They blamed it on swamp coolers gone crazy.”

“I don’t know about you, but my swamp cooler doesn’t blow that hard even on high,” Hector said.

“I guess all we can do is check the place out, and see if we can debunk it,” Tony finished.

“Well, I didn’t unearth anything during the research, either. There were some famous people who stayed there, and then there is the Fountain murder, but that didn’t happen at the hotel. I’m sure things related to the family happened at the Amador, but no one is left to ask, and they didn’t write anything down.”

“I wish I could go with you guys on the investigation, but I’m super excited to be picking up Darren tomorrow.”

“We’ll be fine, and maybe next time Darren will join us,” Bev said.

SIX

Who would not shudder if he were given the choice of eternal death or life again as a child? Who would not choose to die? - St. Augustine

On Saturday, Hector stood at the bottom of the escalator, trying to look cool while waiting for Darren to come down. In his mind, he was ticking off all the things they could do together as Father and Son. They had a lot of catching up to do.

Lydia, his ex-wife, never did get him home. She told Hector that she tricked him into the car by taking him shopping for a new skateboard and shoes. From the mall, she drove him straight to the airport and put him on a plane.

Hector saw shiny, white shoes first; then he scanned his son’s baggy blue-jeans and, finally, his white wife-beater. Darren was carrying a flimsy, plastic, grocery bag in one hand, and a skateboard in the other.

“Oh, no way,” Darren said, shaking his head. “No way.”

“Hey.” Hector took his hands out of his pockets and stepped forward.

Darren walked right past him without another word, and headed down the hallway to the exit. Hector let out the breath he’d been holding, and dropped his head. *This was not going to be easy.*

“*Hola, mijo!*” Mrs. Guzman stood on tiptoe to make the most out of her four-feet-nine inches, and wrapped her arms around her son’s neck in a hug. “Where is he?”

“Hi, Mom.” Hector kissed her on the cheek. “He’s outside.”

She shuffled past him and headed into the kitchen, opening the refrigerator. “What are you feeding him?” She opened the door to the pantry, and then looked at him, her face pinched. “You have no food in the house.”

Hector turned back to the door. “Hi, Dad.”

“*Mijo,*” Mr. Guzman said, as he shuffled to the couch and sat down with a groan.

“Mama, stop. Just sit down, relax,” Hector said.

Hector heard his mother cluck her tongue, and then the clattering of pans soon followed by the click-click-click of the pilot light on the gas stove. “Mama, I promise, we ate already.”

She waved a fast-food bag in front of his face, “Whattaburger?” Hector noticed her eyes traveling to the spare tire growing around his stomach. “You both need to eat real food.”

Hector looked down. He was almost thirty-five, so he’d put on a few pounds. What did she expect? He patted his dad’s shoulder as he sat down next to him.

“How’s it going?” his father asked.

“Not great, since he won’t talk to me yet.”

“He’ll come around.”

“You should bring him to church this Sunday to see Father Eugenio,” his mother said from the kitchen.

“Maybe, Mama.”

“At least now you can give up this craziness with that group you belong to.”

Hector leaned back in the couch. *Not now.*

He felt his father’s gaze level at him. “You know, Pope Benedict declared anyone who belongs to the Masons is in a state of grave sin, and may not take Holy Communion. You don’t want to pass this on to Darren. He needs some guidance. Bring him back to the church. You need to think about what’s right for him, now.”

Hector swallowed what he wanted to say and, instead, stood up and walked to the sliding-glass door. “I’m going to go check on Darren.”

Hector paused out of sight of his parents, and took a deep breath. *What do they want from me?* He and his wife were excommunicated when they agreed to a divorce. How could he just go back to the Catholic Church as if nothing happened? He had joined the Masons soon after. For all their secrecy, the group was a fraternity that contributed to local charities, and insisted its members lead a moral life, which included the belief in a Supreme Being, whatever that meant to each person. Plus, Marcos and Tony were members, and Bev was part of the Order of the Eastern Star.

The bricks against his shoulder were warm from the sun shining in the cloudless, blue sky. He listened to the clank and tink of his son doing tricks on his skateboard on the concrete patio.

Hector advanced to the corner, and leaned against the side of the house. Darren looked just like Hector. They both stood five-foot-eight inches with jet-black, unruly hair that could only be tamed by keeping it cut short. Darren had a light tan from living

in Utah. Soon he would be darker than Hector, since he was fearless of the southwestern sun.

Darren took pains not to look in Hector's direction, or acknowledge him, as he skated a little ways with his knees bent. Hector watched as Darren jumped up, sending the skateboard flipping through the little bit of air between his feet and the concrete, before plunking down wheels-first.

"Darren, it's time to talk."

"About what?" Darren never took his eyes off the skateboard as he spoke. "You all make the decisions. I'm just along for the ride."

"That's not what happened."

"Oh, right, my mom didn't want me anymore. She picked her husband over me. So I get dumped on you."

"I've always wanted you to live with me."

"Right."

Hector stood up, and closed the gap between them. "She would never give me custody. Not even joint custody. She only let me see you when she needed a break."

"Yeah, it's all about the money."

"No, it's not." Hector took a couple of steps back. "But this is good; I want you to get it out. Whatever you got to say, say it. I want you to hear the truth."

Darren stopped, one foot on the skateboard, one on the concrete. "Bullshit."

"Ask. Ask me anything."

"I'm not upset that I'm here. I'm upset with the way you did it."

"When she told me she was signing you over to me, I jumped at the chance."

"Why didn't you ask me?"

"There was no time. One week, and we had the papers signed and filed. Plus, she said she had to trick you just to get you to the airport."

"I was doing just fine."

"You dropped out of school."

"School is stupid."

"No, Darren, it isn't. You can't get a job without at least a GED."

"You don't need a GED to work fast food."

Hector shook his head. "You're going to make a living by saying, 'Do you want fries with that?'"

"Whatever. Like I said, I'm just along for the ride."

"Do you drink?"

"Yep."

Hector crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Do drugs?"

"Sometimes."

"Smoke?"

"Yep."

"Not anymore," Hector said.

The skateboard clattered to the concrete. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah, screw it. Fine. Fine."

"She told me you would act up, and I'd send you back, but that's not going to happen. I'll feed you, clothe you, and put a roof over your head. You don't have to worry about anything, just be a sixteen-year-old. Okay?" He tried to look his son in the eyes, but Darren kicked off a few feet away on his skateboard, and started doing tricks again.

"How long you been out of school?"

"A while."

"I saw your transcripts."

"Yeah." Darren shrugged.

"You got a behavioral rap sheet a mile long. You've flunked every class." Hector moved up the side of the patio across from Darren. "Why? What was so bad?"

Darren popped up one side of his skateboard, grabbed it, and stomped up to Hector. "He pushed Mom and me around all the

time. He pushed me one day, but I wasn't having none of that, and I pushed back. My mother let them lock me up in a psych ward for seventy-two hours. After that, she kicked me out, said it would be easier if I left."

"She told me you moved out. And a psych ward; are you sure?"

Darren spread his arms wide, and gave Hector an exasperated look. Then he dropped his skateboard, and rolled off a little ways.

"Darren, I didn't know any of this was going on."

Darren ignored him and continued his tricks.

"So the year is almost over, and I was thinking we should just get you the GED. Well, you can't take the test until you're seventeen, so you've got plenty of time to study." When Darren didn't reply, Hector turned around and called out over his shoulder, "Come inside and say hi to your grandparents. They're excited to see you."

Hector opened the sliding-glass door and smelled his mother's familiar cooking, the holy trinity of Mexican food: garlic, hot peppers, and onions.

"Where's Darren?" she asked.

"He's coming in."

The unmistakable whir of wheels on the sidewalk drifted in through the front screen door.

His dad leaned over the back of the couch and looked out. "Isn't that Darren?"

Hector raced to the front door and out to the sidewalk. Darren's shirt was flapping out from behind him as he glided away. "Darren! Darren, get back here!"

Darren never looked back.

How am I ever going to get him to eighteen in one piece?

SEVEN

Women are supposed to be the ones good at keeping secrets, and I guess they do keep a few, but any woman who knows anything at all would tell you she's never really seen

into any man's heart. The soil of a man's heart is stonier... A man grows what he can... and he tends it. - Stephen King, *Pet Sematary*

"I am the power 333 of the 10 ether. I am a black hole. I destroy understanding. I sow confusion. I have set my feet in the earth."

The shape that is speaking looks like a body wrapped in black gauze. There are no features, so I can't tell if he sees me or not.

In front of him hovers a large window, translucent like the wings of a hummingbird. The outline of the square has rough edges that pulse from time to time. This is the only source of light. Everything else is pitch-black and lifeless.

I hesitate, since he is still repeating the phrase that led me here. Do I interrupt him? Wait for him to stop? I clear my throat. Nothing. I reach out to touch a gauzy, black shoulder, but I don't see anything. My hands are gone! I panic, and try to lift my arms, and then my legs. I know I had a shape, my shape, before being brought here.

What did you do to me? I blurt out.

The voice fades away in the middle of the phrase. *I didn't do anything. You came to me.*

No, I did not. You took me.

You always save the best lies for yourself.

What lie? What are you talking about?

How long has it been since you've tasted anything as wonderful as cake?

The shape didn't move as he spoke, and I still couldn't tell if he was facing me or not. I tried to will arms and legs into existence. What's happening? I don't know. A very long time. Where is my body?

Interesting. Out of all the spirits I've gathered, you're the only one who can speak. You've been in darkness for how many years now?

A long time. Why did you bring me here? Why do you keep repeating that phrase? Why did I lose my body?

This must be the most excitement you've seen in a very long time then. I told you, you came to me, and I think that is why you don't have a body anymore. Have you ever heard the phrase, 'In the beginning was the word'?

y el Verbo estaba con Dios, y el Verbo era Dios. I know it. I went to church every Sunday. And you're not God.

That doesn't diminish the power of my word.

This was ridiculous. He wasn't going to help me get out, just talk in circles. What do you think is going to happen by repeating yourself?

Only one way to find out.

But you repeat it over and over. It's... *como se dice*, annoying.

To you. Look at how bright it is over there. All the colors and shapes, the movement.

I moved closer to the translucent window. I strained to make out what lay behind it. There were colors and flashes of light. It looks like a fair I went to once, when I was young, I told him.

A fair. What was it like?

There were rides, and lots of sweets. My favorite ride spun in circles, so everything flashed by, and I was screaming. Not because I was afraid, but it was all so very exciting.

Exciting, yes. That's what life is supposed to be.

But we're not alive anymore, are we?

Abhh, but we're not dead, either.

Then let me go. Or at least go back to where I was. I was happy there.

I can't. You came to me.

I did not!

Your anger...no, your fury. Your sadness. Your disappointment. You came to me.

I was not angry; he returned the bracelet to me.

When you stop lying to yourself, you'll see more clearly.

I'm not lying. I told you, he gave me back the bracelet.
I was happy.

Fine, let me point out the obvious. He didn't give it back to you. He lived. He went on to marry, and have sex with another woman whom he loved till his death. He had children. He lived comfortably until he died. And when he died, he passed on. He didn't linger here, where it's dark all the time and nothing changes until you start to forget everything, even your own name, or you're a mindless drone like those others, doing the same thing over and over again. You were different. You clung to your hurt, your anger, your despair, your....

I was burned alive!

Technically, you jumped, thereby committing suicide. But you were on fire, I'll give you that. The truth is you would never have met me if you were happy. Did you ever stop to think why the friend you jumped with didn't linger?

Who are you?

I am the power 333 of the 10 ether. I am a black hole. I destroy understanding. I sow confusion. I have set my feet in the earth.

What do you want?

I don't want to be here anymore.

Marcos, Bev, and Tony each hauled a briefcase of equipment out of the car, and through the Amador Hotel's front entrance. They unpacked K2 meters, EMF meters, digital recorders, and temperature gauges. Since this preliminary investigation would be short, they were using handheld devices.

Marcos knelt on the cold, tile floor of the lobby, and snapped open the latches on the silver, metal briefcase.

"There aren't any tables?" Tony tried opening a door off of the lobby.

"Afraid not. I only have a key to the front door." Marcos took out his EMF reader as Tony set his briefcase next to Marcos's. "Let me do an EMF sweep while you watch the temperature, Tony. That sound good to start with?"

"Sure."

Bev opened her briefcase on the stairs that led up to the balcony overlooking the lobby. "What do you want me to do?"

"How about running the digital recorder so we can do an EVP session?" Marcos got up, flicked off the lights in the lobby, and led the way into the main hall. "Let's start here." He pointed his flashlight to his left, toward the three rooms that, together, made up the parlor.

All three sat in the middle of the room while Marcos asked questions: "What is your name? Are you the one who created that wind? Do you know you're dead?" The old building remained silent, but Marcos knew something could always turn up after analyzing the recording later. What they really needed was a real-time device, to listen to the recording as they were asking the questions. Another piece of equipment to add to his wish list, and see if his wife would object to the price. His 'hobby' was getting a little expensive, according to her.

"All right. Let's sweep the building. Tony, you head to the right, I'll take the left. Bev, if you want to hang out in the middle, maybe snap some pictures?"

“Sounds good,” said Bev. Marcos watched Tony’s flashlight move off to the right. There were small rooms on either side of the main hall, and a couple of rooms behind the main staircase. After finishing his side of the room, Marcos met up with Tony and Bev at the bottom of the stairs.

“I haven’t seen any spikes on my EMF meter. Temperature has stayed the same, too.”

“Same here,” said Tony.

“Let’s just sit here for a second and get the feel of the place. Bev, if you want to do another EVP session, go ahead.”

Bev brought up the digital recorder and started talking. “See this device in front of me? I can record your voice. I just need you to speak loudly.” She then asked the same questions Marcos had asked earlier.

In the middle of one of the questions, Marcos whispered, “I think I see a shadow at the end of the hall.”

“Above or below?” Tony asked.

“Below.”

The silence stretched out as all three focused on the shadow. “I’m going to walk down there and check it out.” Marcos stood up, and walked toward the parlor at the far end, keeping to the side so he didn’t obstruct the view of Tony or Bev.

About three-quarters of the way there, Marcos heard Tony whisper, “Up above.” Marcos stopped and gazed upward. To the left of the double doors, Marcos made out a black shadow. Before his eyes, the shadow appeared to first become denser, and then thin out, until it disappeared completely.

Marcos turned around and walked back. “We all saw that, right?”

“Yeah,” Tony and Bev answered together.

“That was interesting.”

“You know what else is interesting,” said Bev. “I wonder how Hector is doing.”

“Yeah,” said Tony. “Have you talked to him?”

“They’re adjusting,” said Marcos. “It got off to a rough start, and it may take a while to work everything out if Darren’s in as much trouble as the mother said he was. You know, you guys can call him and talk to him yourself.”

“I don’t think it’s a good time for me to talk to him right now,” said Bev.

“Why?” asked Marcos.

“Hector and I used to... you know.”

Marcos took a step back. “What the hell; I’ve been spending most weekends with you guys and y’all been holding out on me.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, bro. My spare time is spent online playing Final Adventure,” said Tony.

“Hold on,” Bev said. “Hector and I are ancient news, but he knew I liked to tinker with electronics when he started up this group. We’re cool. I just don’t want him to get the wrong idea. Besides, you have kids, so you should be the one to go.”

“Okay, I’ll go tell him what happened tonight,” Marcos said. “And tell my wife I’ll be late for dinner, again.”

I can’t help it. If he won’t take me back, then he’s going to get an earful. You’re still here.

Shut up.

Good, he’s angry. I’m curious, why are you still here?

Shut up.

You wanted over there. You chanted those stupid phrases over and over again. And look where you are. Still here.

I was there.

For a second.

That's longer than you.

I've been thinking.

I can't wait to hear it.

You know, I may be lingering here for all those reasons you listed, which means you are here for those same reasons. You're trapped in this darkness, staring through this window at life, just like me.

EIGHT

You can only be young once. But you can always be immature. - Dave Barry

Marcos plunked down on a sofa across from Hector.

"How's it been going?"

"Not great, yet; we'll get there. I am sorry about missing the investigation."

"Dude, don't sweat it. I don't think we have any answers for Ms. Armendariz, but maybe we can still help her."

"What happened?"

"The short version is: there were no spikes on EMF or temperature, nothing out of the ordinary on the EVP, but all three of us thought we saw a shadow materialize downstairs, walk upstairs, and then disappear."

"Did you catch it on camera?"

"No."

"Did you get any reading while the black shadow appeared?"

"It disappeared before I could get close enough. The feeling, although that isn't measurable, was of someone checking us out." Marcos scooted forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "I was thinking of a way to tie us with the Restore the Amador

Foundation, and use the rumor that the building is haunted to her advantage.”

“How so?”

“List it as an ongoing investigation, and hold tours like the ones at the Concordia Cemetery and downtown El Paso. Split the proceeds with the foundation.”

“That would give us more time to investigate, and she wouldn’t be losing money in the process. Okay, let me know what she says.” The theme to the X-files filled the living room. As Hector walked to his cell phone on the table, he said over his shoulder, “And feelings could be measurable. I think we just need to implement a scale, from like one to ten. You know, the same way they rate pain in hospitals.”

Hector answered his phone, “Darren, yeah, what’s up?”

Marcos walked to the kitchen to help himself to a glass of tea, catching half of Hector’s conversation. When he got back to the living room, Hector was off the phone. “Well, Darren’s made a friend at the skate park and is spending the night at his house.”

“He just got here. Is that a good idea?”

“Who knows? I hope I can trust him, because I really don’t want to go through two years of not being able to.”

Marcos settled onto a comfortable chair at his house after dinner, and called Ms. Armendariz. She answered on the second ring. Marcos did a recap of the research, interviews, and investigation, and made his proposal for The Paranormal Posse to continue investigating while offering tours. Ms. Armendariz sounded interested, and said she would run it by the rest of the board. She thought the tours could start as early as the following week, if the board agreed.

When they said their goodbyes, Marcos leaned back in the chair, and slid his cell phone between his fingers while balancing

it on his thigh. He sent a silent *Thank you*, to whoever was listening, for his wife and two children. His family was healthy and happy, and indulged him and his friends' paranormal activities, as long as it didn't hit the bank account too hard.

Something about the case didn't feel right. The first set of readings they took gave no indication of the level of activity that was experienced in the former hotel. There had to be a story to explain the escalation in phenomena. His thoughts were interrupted by his wife's voice. "Marcos?"

"Yeah, I'm done. Be right there."

He stood up and walked to the door. *We'll just have to keep digging*, he thought to himself.

Ms. Armendariz and the board gave the okay to start the tours that weekend. The Paranormal Posse collected their gear, and drove two cars to the Amador Hotel. They had sold ten tickets to the tour in a matter of hours via their website.

Darren had assured Hector that, at sixteen, he could take care of himself. Hector insisted Darren keep his cell phone close, because he would be calling to check up on him. If this didn't work out, Hector told his son, Darren could always stay with his grandparents on the nights Hector ran the ghost tours.

As they got out and started unloading their gear, Hector's phone rang. He checked the number, and didn't recognize it.

"Hello?" Hector said. He heard a woman's voice, trying to keep her anger in check as she explained that Darren had convinced her thirteen-year-old son to sneak out of the house at two o'clock in the morning. "No, ma'am," Hector said. "I don't believe Darren would've done something like that. I understand. I'll check the texts on his cell phone. I tell you what, I will talk to him when I get home, and call you back. Yes. 'Bye.'"

“What’s up?” Marcos asked, on his way back for the other case of equipment.

“Remember Darren made a friend at the skate park?”

Marcos nodded his head.

“Well, that led to some other friends, and one lives at an apartment complex a couple of streets away. His mother just called me to say Darren snuck out with her thirteen-year-old son last Tuesday night.”

“Oh, great. He was hanging out with a thirteen-year-old?”

“I saw this kid; he’s bigger than Darren and has a deeper voice. I would’ve never guessed he was thirteen.” Hector shook his head. “Marcos, I hate to do this to you guys, but I think I’m going to have to sit this one out.”

Hector sighed in relief when Marcos didn’t hesitate. “It’s not a problem. We can handle this. Let’s get the rest of the equipment out of your car, and then take off, man.”

“I am really sorry, but I know all this will be straightened out in a couple of weeks, tops.”

“Relax, this is family. Take the time you need. I’ll tell the others,” Marcos said, as Hector handed him the last of the equipment.

“I owe you guys.”

Hector drove back to El Paso in silence, not even turning on the radio. He rubbed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers. He was the leader of the group, and even though the four of them were a close-knit bunch, he was the only one who worked part-time so he could run point on the investigations and tours. Everyone else had full-time work, or families to support. Now the shoe was on the other foot, and he felt guilty as hell for letting everyone down. But he would feel even worse if he ruined this chance with his son. He only had two years to help straighten Darren out.

When Hector entered the house, Darren was watching TV in the living room.

“What happened? I thought you had some big ghost hunt going on tonight.”

“I got a call from the mother of one of your friends,” said Hector.

Darren remained quiet.

“The friend that lives up on Edgemere. What’s his name?”

“Spaz.”

“Spaz? What’s his real name?”

“His name is Jason, but we call him Spaz.”

Hector shrugged. “All right, well, his mom just called and said she found texts on his phone about you two planning to sneak out of the house. I told her you didn’t, but now I’m asking you. Did you sneak out of the house?”

“You drove all the way back here to ask me that?”

“Yes, as a matter-of-fact I did. This is important, Darren. Did you sneak out of the house?”

Hector stared at his son as he shrugged and gave him a blank stare.

“A shrug? The answer is either yes or no. Did you, or did you not, sneak out of the house?”

“Maybe.”

“Goddammit, Darren. Did you or didn’t you?”

“It was his idea.”

“The kid is younger than you. Did that seem like a smart idea for you to follow?”

Hector watched his son’s eyes fall to the floor.

“Spaz is grounded, and you need to apologize to his mother.”

“Fuck that.”

Anger propelled Hector across the floor, and into his son’s face. “I stuck up for you. I told her you wouldn’t do something that stupid.”

“I’m not stupid.”

"I never said you were, but anybody can do a stupid thing. And you made me look stupid for backing you up. What do I need to do? Put locks on the gates?"

"Go ahead, waste your money. If I want to get out of the house, I will."

"No, you won't." Hector jabbed a finger in the direction of Darren's chest. "You are not an adult. You have no business being out at 2:00 a.m. Besides, there is a curfew here." Hector straightened up. "What were you doing then, anyway?"

"Nothing! Just walking around because I couldn't sleep."

"Well, then, you need some work to do during the day so you won't have trouble falling asleep at night. You are going with me to apologize, now."

"No."

"Yes, you are. You are going to man-up, because when you make a mistake, you apologize. He's grounded, and so are you."

Hector watched Darren open the sliding-glass door and storm outside. After counting to ten, Hector followed, and found him on the back patio.

"Why won't you let me live with my friends in Utah? I was doing fine. I don't need you and Mom to take care of me," Darren challenged.

"Because you have family to live with. And there is no way I am giving you up when I always wanted you to live with me."

"Well, I don't want to live with you!"

Hector rocked back on his heels, and put his hands on his hips. "The only way I'll let you move where you want is if you're emancipated."

"Fine."

"Fine? Do you even know what that means? You have to get a job, and prove you make enough to support yourself. You don't even have a driver's license, let alone a car."

"Whose fault is that?"

“Yours. Right now, I can’t trust you as far as I can throw you. Do you really think I’m going to pay for your GED classes, and get you a car, while you’re busy sneaking out of the house, supposedly under the influence of a thirteen-year-old?”

“Why won’t you just give my friends custody, then?”

“Because I’m a dick. I want you to graduate. I want you to get a decent job. I want you to be successful. I want to spend two lousy years with you before you go off on your own.”

Hector had seen Darren crack a smile when he called himself a dick. “What are you laughing at?”

“You called yourself a dick.”

“And?”

“Well, you are, but I just didn’t expect you to come right out and say it.”

“Shut up, little man.”

“Who you calling little, round boy?”

“Round boy?” Hector rubbed his stomach. “I’m not that big.”

“Yes, you are. I’m going to have to be your personal trainer.”

“You’d have to stick around for that.”

“Yeah,” Darren said, looking down.

“We have to go apologize.”

“Goddammit.” Darren turned away and sent a rock scuttling across the patio.

“When you do something wrong, you admit it, make it right, and move on. Just be glad this is something you can make right.”

Hector watched Darren’s shoulders drop. He looked over his shoulder at Hector and said, “So that’s what all this is about: you’re trying to make everything right with me.”

NINE

Energy and persistence conquer all things. - Benjamin Franklin

Prep work for the Amador Hotel tour included setting up four DVR cameras that were taped to the bottom railing of the main staircase and on the first landing. The angle took in the

entire downstairs and upstairs hallways. InfraRed Illuminators, devices that allowed night vision cameras to take images as if it were daylight, were also mounted in the parlor and upstairs where Marcos, Bev, and Tony had seen the shadow.

The Paranormal Posse set up a command center in a room to the right of the staircase. The room held a flat-screen monitor on top of a portable table. The screen was split up into four sections, dedicated to images from each of the DVR cameras. A recorder sat in front of the monitor, and on one side, a walkie-talkie softly crackled static. Folding chairs filled the rest of the room, so the tour group could all see the screen.

Marcos unlocked the door, and held it open for the group of ten people to pass through.

“Evening, and welcome to the Amador Hotel. Please follow Bev with the flashlight, and have a seat on the floor in the main room. We’ll be ready to start in about five minutes.”

Marcos saw a flashlight wave up and down, and the group filed past. They acclimated the tour groups right away by keeping the place dark. As he closed and locked the front doors behind the last person to enter, he was impressed with how well ghost-hunting groups conducted themselves. They were usually a serious, thoughtful bunch. He turned and followed, playing his flashlight back and forth to make sure there were no stragglers.

When he entered the main hall, ten people sat comfortably on the carpeted floor. Tony and Bev counted heads to make sure everyone was accounted for. Marcos stepped forward after they were done, and introduced The Paranormal Posse. He spoke a little bit about the history of the Amador Hotel, and how a portion of the proceeds from the tour would be donated to the Restore the Amador Foundation.

“You may or may not have heard of the strange winds that blew through the Las Cruces ComicCon and Restore the Amador Murder Mystery fundraiser. We’ve been conducting our own investigations, but so far we haven’t come up with any

conclusive explanation. The Restore the Amador Foundation has graciously allowed us to continue our investigations, and invite tours in to help solve this case. Bev has equipment available for you to use. We'll split into two groups—one is going in the command center and the other is going to investigate.”

The Paranormal Posse had been running the Amador ghost tours twice a month for several months now. The shadow had not returned. The wind had not returned. The EVP sessions recorded noises and sounds, but no words or sentences to indicate an intelligent haunting. Phantom footsteps were picked up several times on the recorders, and mysterious K2 blips were the only thing out of the ordinary.

Every time The Paranormal Posse finished an investigation, they examined the footage recorded during, and every time, no real evidence was found.

Kipp's Cheesesteaks was packed on a Friday. The Paranormal Posse, including Hector, was gathered around a table in the back. They had decided to combine their meeting with celebrating Hector's return to investigating.

“How's Darren?” Marcos asked.

“Good. Darren is studying for his GED and doing well on the pre-tests. He went to the Sunland Skate Park Festival to show off in front of some skateboarding pros. He entered the intermediate-level skating competition, but they were still a little better than he was.”

“Ah, man. Didn't they have a beginning level?”

“I asked the same thing, but Darren said they only had two levels—intermediate and 'skate or go home'.”

“Well, we're glad to have you back,” Marcos said and lifted his beer bottle. All four tinked their bottles together.

"I'm glad to be back, and I'm ready to finally be able to investigate the Amador. Tell me what's happened so far," Hector said.

"Ms. Armendariz is thrilled with the publicity and the money raised for the restoration," Marcos said. "Since we've only had non-scary stuff to report back, she's convinced it was some kind of mechanical malfunction. At this point, she is booking the Amador for events, and wants to know if we would be interested in kicking it up a notch for Halloween."

"Sweet," Hector said.

"Yep, this is my idea for the big event, and Ms. Armendariz has already cleared it. I think you guys are going to like this."

"What is it?" asked Bev.

"A Lockdown."

"Nice!" exclaimed Tony.

"It's going to be a lot of work, but that's great idea," said Bev.

"I think we can handle it," Hector said. "We can pull out all the stops—break out all the equipment, have people sleep over in the hotel rooms, offer breakfast...." said Hector.

"Finally catch that shadow," added Marcos. Tony and Bev nodded in agreement.

"No kidding, I'd hate to think you guys were just seeing things... all at the same time." Hector smiled.

The black, gauze-covered figure has been gone for a while now. It's no use trying to tell time here, but the light through the window grows and fades. It has done that so many times, I've lost count. I think it's safe to say that he's been gone for months.

You can still talk...; interesting.

I swirl around. I can see light-colored wisps of whatever I am now in my peripheral vision.

You're back. Where did you go?

To collect energy; it's all about energy. You can never have enough.

I wish I could touch him. He appears firmer. The crinkles and folds of the gauze are smoother, as if he exchanged his old wrappings for new ones.

You lied. You could have taken me back.

There is nothing for you to go back to.

If I still had a face, I would be smirking right now. You're not the only one who's been busy collecting.

TEN

For a good time, dig. - epitaph of Platy Paul

Hector and Darren pulled up and parked in back of the Amador Hotel. Hector opened the trunk of his car, and handed Darren a thick briefcase. He grabbed the last one, and closed the trunk. The slam of the trunk echoed through the empty parking lot.

As they rounded the corner of the building, Marcos looked up. Hector registered the surprise on Marcos's face, and gave him a warning look. Darren was not supposed to be at tonight's Lockdown. He was supposed to be staying with his grandparents.

Marcos took the hint and said, "Hey, Darren. Glad you could help us out."

Darren nodded.

“Here,” Hector said to Darren, handing him the briefcase. “Take this equipment inside for me, please. Tony and Bev will tell you what to do next.”

Again, Darren only nodded in reply as he took the case. Marcos pulled the door open for him, and waited until the door closed before turning to Hector.

“I take it something happened.”

“Yeah, we had a minor setback.”

“What happened?”

“He hung up on me when I was talking to him about staying out past curfew.”

“Oh, no.”

“I can’t stand being hung up on, besides the fact it’s disrespectful.”

“I can understand that.”

“Then when he came home, he wouldn’t talk to me. I can’t stand that, either. If something’s bothering you, then you need to talk.”

“Yep, but Hector, I know those things about you. I doubt Darren understood.”

“I know, and I wasn’t trying to be a total ass about it, but.... ”

“What happened?”

“He climbed on the roof to get away from me.”

Marcos lowered his head and chuckled. “What did you do then?”

“I turned on the hose.”

Marcos’s chuckle turned into a laugh. “You didn’t.”

“Nah, he ran to the other side of the roof. But I wanted to.”

“So, did everything work out?”

“Yeah, we talked. Again. And he did apologize for everything. We’re okay, and Darren knows how important tonight is to us.”

“It’s all right, man. We’ll deal.” Marcos clapped his hands together. “And I have great news. We had some buzz about this

Lockdown, and a couple of guys came forward to offer their equipment.”

“Nice. What are they letting us use?”

“Not one, but two EMF pumps to raise the electromagnetic field. Maybe this shadow hasn’t appeared again because it doesn’t have enough energy to manifest. The two events where it caused the most commotion had a lot of people to draw energy from.”

That’s a great idea,” Hector said.

“Remember Mr. Canter?”

“He’s the amateur ghost hunter that’s been on a couple of our other tours?”

“That’s the one. He started building ghost equipment as a hobby, and put together what he claims is a ghost tank. You gotta see this thing. Mr. Canter claims it catches spirits.”

“Marcos, this is great stuff. You really stepped up and took care of everything.”

“Least I could do. You’ve been handling all this for almost five years. You deserved a little break.” Marcos held his thumb and finger up, almost touching.

Hector chuckled. “Thanks, man.”

“Wait, there’s one more thing we have to play with tonight: it’s called a spirit box. It’s a little bit different from the ones we’ve seen, in that you just hear white noise, and then words if a spirit decides to use it to communicate.”

“That depends on if it’s an intelligent haunting.”

“Exactly. This is also one of the few places we can use this ghost tank, because of its size.”

“It’s that big?”

“Yeah, at least six feet tall.”

“Is it all ready in there?”

“Yep, we’re all set up except for the equipment you brought. We’ve still got plenty of time before people start showing up.”

“Full house?” Hector asked.

“We sold out the fifteen tickets in, like, fifteen minutes. Caterer will be here in the morning with donuts, bagels, and coffee for breakfast.”

“I checked the Ghost Weather Station, and we’re active for solar flares and unsettled for the geomagnetic field tonight.”

“Then if there are any spirits, shadows, or ghosts in this place, tonight is the night to see them,” Marcos said, holding the front door open for Hector.

The Amador Lockdown participants started to arrive at 9:00 p.m. Since this was a former hotel, each person or couple was assigned an empty room in which to put their sleeping bags. The plan was to have investigations circulating throughout the Amador until 4:00 a.m. At that time, everyone would go to their rooms for the night, and wake up to a late breakfast around 10:00 a.m. Hector figured they would be done around noon after breaking down and packing up the equipment.

Except for the part about spending the whole night in the Amador, things started off much like any other ghost tour. Marcos split up the fifteen guests into three groups of five. One group would monitor the command station, one group would wait outside and see a demonstration of how to use the handheld equipment, and the last group would conduct an investigation within the hotel.

Hector watched Darren hang back at first, and then jump in when needed to help set up. He overheard Darren asking questions about the different pieces of equipment and what each was used for. Just before the Lockdown swung into high gear, Darren walked up to him and asked, “Do you really believe in this stuff?”

“Yes, I do. I have seen some things that I just can’t explain.”

“Do you think we’ll see anything tonight?”

“If we’re lucky, maybe we’ll catch that shadow on film.”

“That would be cool. If I see something tonight, then maybe I’ll start believing in this stuff. Until then, I think you’re kind of weird.”

Hector laughed and pulled him into a one-arm hug. “I’ll always be a little weird.”

ELEVEN

Dead people are all on the same level. - Charles Starkweather, serial killer

Hector looked out over a group of fifteen people, seated on the floor in front of him in the main hall of the Amador Hotel. “All right, guys and gals. We are about to get started. By now, you all should have found your name taped to one of the doors, and stowed your sleeping bags in that room. The only strange sounds coming from the rooms tonight should be from ghosts. We’d like to keep our G-rating.”

Hector heard a few snickers.

“There’s a water fountain and restrooms down that hall, to the right of the main staircase by the command center. The Restore the Amador Foundation is in the process of turning this building into a museum, so if you brought your own beverages or food, please keep them in the area off of the front lobby. We want to be invited back here. Any questions so far?” Hector watched various people shake their heads.

“All right, then. We are going to turn off the lights so you can see how dark it will be in the hotel for the investigation.” Hector nodded to Bev, who was standing by a row of light switches. There were a series of clicks as, one by one, Bev started turning off the lights.

When it was completely dark, Hector continued. “It will be this dark for the investigation, so we want everyone to take their time and watch their step. Speaking of steps, the step is missing in front of one room upstairs, so be careful if you decide to go in there to investigate. Now, I’m going to turn it over to Marcos,

who will explain some of the activity that has been reported in the Amador.”

“Thanks, Hector.” Marcos stepped forward, and recounted the interviews done with eyewitnesses during the Las Cruces ComicCon and the Restore the Amador Foundation. “Maybe we’ll experience some of that phenomena tonight.”

Some members of the tour group shifted nervously on the floor.

“Come on. That’s why you signed up for a Lockdown, right?”

Several giggled, and one man with a crew cut said, “Hell, yeah.”

“We also have some new equipment to use tonight. I’m sorry, Bev. Can you flick back on the lights just in the main room for a moment?”

After a soft series of clicks, the chandeliers lit up the main room.

“We have several K2 meters that measure the electromagnetic field here for you to check out and use. We have some digital recorders for EVP sessions. We have a spirit box.” Marcos held up what looked like a black, plastic hamburger bun, with a cord running to a small, black box. “Each group will get a chance to use this during an EVP session, so if there is an intelligent spirit that wants to communicate with us, then we can have a real-time conversation with it.

“We also have Infra-red Illuminators, upstairs and downstairs. You can’t see anything right now, but on the screen in the command center, those rooms will look lit-up for our night-vision cameras. It makes it easier to see anything out of the ordinary.

“If you see a small device, it is an EMF pump. The theory is that apparitions use electromagnetic energy in order to take shape and communicate.

“Now, what I’m really excited about is our ghost tank.” Marcos gestured to the large, Plexiglas box behind the group.

Several people turned around to take a look at the unusual contraption. “Mr. Canter was gracious enough to let us borrow something he built. He claims that his device captures ghosts. It will be interesting to see what kind of activity we get. We’re going to wait to fire it up until we’re done with our EVP sessions, because Mr. Canter said it’s noisy, especially when a ghost shows up.”

Hector stepped forward, and saw a mixed reaction across the faces in the group: some looked nervous, some excited, and some skeptical.

“All right,” Hector said. “Let’s get to it then. I need group A to move to the command post with me and my son, Darren. Group B, you’re the lucky ones that get to wait outside with Bev and Tony, and Group C, you’re with Marcos, and first up to investigate.”

10:00 p.m.

Hector, Darren, and Group A sat around the flat-screen monitor showing four different pictures of the main hall. Hector explained. “We have four DVR cameras set up on the staircase. You can see Group C moving upstairs, and Group B is leaving the building there on the left.

“Our job is to man the walkie-talkie.” Hector showed the walkie-talkie to the group, and handed it to Darren. “If we see anything on these cameras, we can radio in, and they can check it out. We also want to mark the time and place, so when we go back and review the evidence, we know to check that film more closely. The group can also radio us, and tell us something they heard or saw, and we can mark the time and place, as well.

“I’m going to sit to the side here, and I need a couple of people to move their chairs up and watch the screen. Don’t be afraid to speak up if you think you see something. You’re the ghost hunters tonight.”

The group sat in silence for several minutes. Marcos’s voice crackled over the walkie-talkie. “This is Group C. Just letting you know that we’re about to start an EVP session in the rooms behind the main staircase.”

“Copy that, Group C.”

Hector turned toward his group. “While we keep an eye on the monitor, let’s go ahead and introduce ourselves. You, of course, know me; I’m Hector, and this is my son, Darren. How about you in the back?”

“Hi, I’m Kevin and this is Erika.”

Erika stuck her hand up and gave a brief wave. “Hi.”

“My name is Chris,” said a young man. His face was decorated with several piercings.

The two men in front of the monitors spoke up, never taking their eyes off of the monitor.

“I’m Robert.”

“Hi, I’m Steve.”

“Great to have you all here. Kevin, Erika, no paranormal noises coming from your room tonight.”

Kevin put his arm around Erika and smiled. “We know how to be quiet,” Kevin said, and Erika smacked him on his leg. The group chuckled.

“Group C, come in,” the walkie-talkie interrupted.

“Go ahead.”

“We’ve got movement down the hall on the left side of the staircase.”

“Your left or my left?”

“The hall with the rooms.”

“Gotcha. Are you going to go check it out?”

“Did you see anything?”

Hector looked at Steve and Robert in front of the monitor. They both shook their heads.

“No, we didn’t see anything, but let me mark the time and we can look again later.”

11:00 p.m.

Kevin, Erika, Robert, Steve, and Chris stood outside the Amador Hotel, drinking soda and munching on chips and candy.

“Did you see that shadow?” asked Chris.

“Yeah, on the top floor. That was wild,” said Steve.

“Almost like it was running into the room where they were having the EVP session,” Robert pointed out.

“The group looked kind of freaked out when they came into our room,” added Chris.

“Yeah, a couple told me they heard some pretty weird noises,” said Kevin.

Erika leaned into Kevin’s side and said, “I’m not so sure about this anymore.”

Kevin wrapped one arm around her, and pulled her close. “What’s not to be sure about? Nothing’s going to happen except, maybe, if we’re lucky, we’ll see a shadow or hear something strange. It’s not like there’s anything in there that can hurt you.”

Erika looked up at Kevin. “If we’re lucky, huh?”

“Hey, stuff dies down, and you know how those shows are on TV. Those ghost hunters go for hours without seeing anything,” Kevin said.

“Yeah, it would be awesome if we saw that shadow up close and personal,” agreed Chris.

“How do I get talked into these things?” Erika asked as she shook her head.

Hector opened the front door. “All right guys, we’re up next in ten minutes. We’re going to be the first ones using the spirit box,” he said with a grin.

12:00 a.m.

Hector's group sat in a circle on the floor in one of the larger rooms upstairs. He spoke into the digital recorder. "This is Group C in the suites across from the main staircase. We're about to start an EVP session using a spirit box."

"Why are these rooms so much larger than the others?" Erika asked.

"My understanding is that these suites were used by the rich and famous at that time. I would have ended up in one of the little rooms."

"They are tiny," Erika exclaimed.

"Usually we don't sit so close together," Hector said. "Not that I don't like you all, but tonight is different, because we have this new piece of equipment, and I want everyone to be close enough to hear in case there is a reply."

The spirit box emitted a small light at the top. "This is the transmitter that scans the AM frequencies, and it's attached to these speakers." Hector held up the plastic hamburger bun. "When I turn it on, you're going to hear a lot of static. I'll ask some questions, and then we'll go around the circle this way, starting with Chris."

There was a click, and the room was plunged into total darkness. Soft static filled the room, as if someone had left a radio on in-between channels. Clothes rustled as several people shifted, trying to find a comfortable position.

Hector called out, "Are there any spirits here with us tonight? My name is Hector. We have several devices here that will help us communicate with you. This device here with the red light will record your voice if you speak into it. We have another

device that will help us talk with you directly. Oh, hey, who has the K2 meter?"

"I do." Steve spoke up.

"Great. Tell us if it lights up."

"Sure."

Hector cleared his throat. "Can you tell me your name?"

"I've got a hit," announced Steve. The K2 meter lit up with a tiny rainbow of colors.

The static cleared for a brief second, and an electronic voice whispered, "Three."

There were several gasps and a "Whoa" from the circle.

"Okay, you guys heard that right?" asked Hector.

Darren spoke up for the first time since the Lockdown started, "I think it said three."

Several murmured in agreement.

"We think we heard the number three. Are there three of you here?" asked Hector.

The static paused, and the disembodied voice repeated, "Three."

"K2 meter lit up again," Steve whispered.

"Can you tell us your name?"

"Three."

"It's said 'three' three times; I don't think that's a coincidence," Hector said.

"No way," agreed Chris.

"Okay Chris, why don't you go ahead, since we have its attention?"

"Do you know you're dead?" asked Chris.

The sound of static echoed through the room.

"Why are you here?"

Static.

"How can we help you?" asked Erika.

Kevin groaned.

"What?" Erika whispered.

“We can’t help them. Why would you ask that?”

“I can ask whatever I want. I’m not telling you what questions to ask.”

“But I wouldn’t ask something like that.”

“Something like what?” Erika said, her voice rising.

“Ummmm,” said Darren. “There are other people here.”

“Can I ask my questions?”

“Sure,” Hector replied before anyone else could. “Ask whatever you want. You never know what spirits will respond to.”

Erika, Robert, and Steve all asked various questions, but the only answer was more static.

“Why don’t we go ahead and explore another part of the hotel? We’ve got about a half hour left.”

“Wait,” said Darren. “Can I ask something?”

“Sure,” said Hector.

“Can you show yourself to us? We want to see you.”

A faint voice drifted above the static. “Soon.”

1:00 a.m.

All the groups had done a walk-through of the building, and were gathered in the front lobby. Some people got out drinks and snacks, while others lounged in chairs or on the steps. A couple was dozing off. Small clusters of two and three people talked in quiet tones.

“I’m pretty sure everyone had a chance to use the spirit box.” Hector called out above the hushed conversations.

Nods rippled through the group.

“What did you think about it?”

Darren said, “We got like four responses? It kept saying the number three.”

“Yeah, we did. Anybody else hear anything?”

“We got the word ‘Run,’” said a young woman.

“Run? And did you?”

The young woman giggled. “No.”

“Good, good.”

A young man sporting a high-and-tight haircut said, “I thought we heard a moan right about the time we saw that shadow on the second floor.”

“Great. So what do you guys think: is the place haunted?” asked Hector.

The Lockdown tour seemed pretty much split between those who thought the building was haunted, and those who weren’t sure.

“If you brought recording devices, be sure to set them up in your room tonight. You might catch some EVPs.”

Nervous laughter trickled back to Hector. “I just said EVPs, not anything scary. Well, I wouldn’t mind hearing something

scary.” Hector smiled at the group. “No, I hope you all sleep well tonight...since we’ll be kicking you out early.”

Hector heard footsteps behind him. He turned to see Marcos give him the thumbs-up. Hector turned back to the group and said, “Looks like we’re ready to start up again. At 3:00 a.m. we will fire up the ghost tank. Some investigators call 3:00 a.m. ‘dead time,’ because they believe the spirits are more active for that hour.”

2:00 a.m.

Hector glanced at the people snoozing in the lobby. “There are twelve of you left standing, and an hour before we start the ghost tank. If any of you want to investigate on your own, now’s your chance.”

Without hesitation, people disappeared into the maw of the hotel’s main room.

Kevin held the K2 meter out in front of him, while Erika followed, using the video recorder on her iPhone.

“I don’t like this room,” Kevin announced, pointing ahead of him.

“Why?” Erika asked.

“I don’t know. It just gives me a creepy feeling.” Kevin paused right outside the door to one of the rooms on the first floor. “I’m going to go in first. If you wait out here and record, then we’ll know your phone isn’t setting off the K2 meter.”

“Okay; I’d rather stay out here anyway.”

Kevin entered the room and followed the perimeter. When he got to the far-right corner of the room, the K2 meter lit up to red. “Did you get that?” Kevin asked.

“Yeah,” Erika whispered from the doorway.

“Is anyone here?” The K2 meter flashed two more times, and then stopped. Kevin paused. The K2 meter didn’t flash again, so he decided to walk around the rest of the room, panning the K2 meter back and forth. Nothing.

When he reached Erika, she asked, “Do you still feel have a creepy feeling?”

“Yeah. I just don’t like that room.”

“Let’s check out more rooms.”

Kevin walked past Erika. As soon as they entered the middle of the main room, the K2 meter lit up again. “Whoa. There it is again.” Both paused, and waited to see if the lights would flash again.

A minute later, Erika asked, “Now what?”

“You want to head upstairs?”

“Sure.”

Kevin led the way up the stairs, and as soon as they reached the second floor, on the left, the K2 meter flashed again. Erika ran the video recorder just behind Kevin. “It’s like we’re following it.”

When the K2 stopped, they were in front of a room on the second floor. Kevin reached forward and opened the door. The wooden door creaked as it opened. He took a tentative step into the room. “Are you recording?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

As Kevin made his way around the perimeter, the K2 meter flashed in the far-left corner. “Is anybody here with us?” he asked.

The K2 stopped. A minute ticked by before Kevin moved back to the door.

“Maybe when we play it back, we’ll hear something,” Erika said. “I’m getting a little tired. Can we head back downstairs and rest? We still have another full hour with that ghost tank.”

“Yeah, might as well.” The stairs creaked and shifted under their feet as they walked downstairs. “Why did you ask if we could help the ghosts during that EVP session?”

“Why did you get upset I asked?”

“It just seemed weird at the time. Of course we can’t help them; they’re dead.”

“But think how horrible it would be. I mean, it’s hard enough for a person who is alive to get help and change their life for the better. What if you die and you’re stuck like that? Even if you wanted to change, you couldn’t. It’s not like there are any ghost shrinks around.”

Kevin chuckled. “Yeah, I guess not. But still....”

“Ow!” Erika stopped, and grabbed the small of her back.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. It felt like something pinched me.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it doesn’t hurt now.”

Kevin put his arm around Erika’s shoulder. “Let’s get into the light and check it out.”

They found Hector in the lobby talking to the rest of the group. When they were all together, Hector said, “I’m glad you all stayed awake long enough to be able to go in by yourself. Did anyone experience anything they want to talk about?”

Kevin spoke up. “We followed the K2 meter into one room, then out in the hall. Then up on the stairs and into that first hotel room.”

“When it’s a pattern like that, it usually means a residual haunting. The ghost is just doing its own thing, no matter what’s going on. Were you recording at the same time?” Hector asked.

“Yep.”

“Be sure to analyze it later, and let us know if you find anything.”

“I may have gotten scratched,” said Erika.

“What happened?”

“I came walking down the stairs, and I felt a pinch at my back. When I rubbed the spot, I felt something. Kevin looked at it and said it looked like scratches.”

“Can I see?”

“Sure.” Erika lifted up the bottom corner of her shirt on the right-hand side.

Hector examined her back for a moment, and then said, “I don’t know. Did you scratch yourself?”

“No.” Erika dropped her shirt, and turned to face Hector.

“Maybe it’s an insect bite?”

Erika shrugged. “I’ve never had an insect bite me that much before. It doesn’t hurt now, though.”

“Okay, let me know if it starts bothering you. Did you take a picture of it?”

“Kevin did.”

“Let’s look at it again tomorrow. If you see bumps, it means a very angry bug bit you, not a ghost.”

3:00 a.m. - Dead Time

Hector circled around the lobby until he found Darren munching on some gummy bears. “How you doing?”

“Great. This is kind of cool. I want to be a ghost hunter when I grow up.”

“Seriously?”

“No.” Darren grinned. “But I wouldn’t mind working with you, because it’s such a cushy job.”

“This is hard work.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“You haven’t analyzed evidence yet. That’s the real work, where you watch hours and hours of film, and listen to recordings.”

“Sit on your butt for hours and watch TV. Yeah, that sounds rough.” Darren tossed a gummy bear into the air and caught it in his mouth.

“When you catch something, it makes it all worthwhile.”

Darren had tossed another gummy bear up, when a hand shot out and grabbed the candy in mid-air. “Hey....”

“What?” asked Marcos innocently. He popped the candy into his mouth with a smile.

“Pretty good reflexes, for an old man,” Darren said.

“Are we ready?” Hector asked.

“Yeah, Bev has checked out the ghost tank, and we’re ready to go.” Marcos held out his hand to Darren for more gummy bears.

“All right.” Hector walked to the center of the lobby to address the group. “This is the last investigation of the night, folks, during what we like to call ‘dead time.’ At four, we’ll

regroup briefly, and then everyone is free to go to their rooms for the night. Sorry we had to wake you guys up.”

The three sleepers grinned. “I know I’m too old for this,” one of them said.

“Breakfast will be catered by the Percolator. Marcos, lead the way.”

The group entered the main hall, and walked to the center of the room to stand around a six-foot-tall, Plexiglas chamber. A humming noise came from a black cube at the top of the container, like a swarm of wasps was powering the machine. White tendrils of lightning snaked off in all directions. The air was charged, and the hairs on the back of Hector’s neck stood on end.

“You can sit or stand in front of the device. If a spirit wants to manifest, this device is supposed to give them the electromagnetic energy they need to do so.” Hector continued, “We did get the number three during an EVP session early, so we’re hoping there may be three entities, and one of them will be able to manifest.”

Hector and Marcos stood to either side of the ghost tank so the group would have a clear view of it. Bev was in the command center, monitoring the video feed. Tony was standing at the back of the group.

Hector said, in a loud, clear voice, “Is there anyone here with us? We have a device here giving off a lot of energy that you are free to use.”

3:05 a.m.

The random lightning was hypnotizing. Hector dragged his eyes away, and searched the group to see where Darren was, but it was too dark. Hector called out to any possible spirits again, reminding them that they were welcome to use energy from the EMF pumps.

3:10 a.m.

Hector's, Marcos's, and Tony's walkie-talkies each crackled, making all of them jump. "This is base."

Marcos answered, "Copy base. What's up, Bev?"

"I got something moving on the second floor, all the way down at the other end."

Everyone turned to look at the balcony upstairs.

"What do you see?"

"It's a shadow that's darker than the rest."

"Is it still there?"

"It's moving around the doorway. There...there it is again on the outside of the left door as you're facing the doorway."

"Okay. Copy base, we'll keep an eye on it. Tony, want to keep an eye on that for us?"

"Yeah," Tony agreed.

"Anyone else see anything?"

The group shifted back and forth between looking at the doorway and looking at the ghost tank, but no one spoke up.

"Okay. Don't be afraid to shout out if you see or hear something."

3:15 a.m.

Hector called out, “This is our last investigation of the night. If you want to show yourself, now’s an excellent time to do so, and you should have plenty of energy.”

The lightning shifted. At first it had fanned out around the top of the black box, now it flowed forward. Hector pointed at the change. Marcos nodded.

Sleepy faces perked up as the lightning continued to flow forward, and then snapped back, as if it were breathing. Hector tensed as it spread out farther and farther over the heads of the group.

Then everything stopped. The box fell silent, the lightning disappeared. Hector shifted from one foot to the other, and glanced at Marcos. *Did we break it?* he wondered silently. The walkie-talkie made him jump as Bev’s voice said, “Guys: that shadow is back.”

There was a sharp crack as lightning shot clear across the room and lit up both floors of the hotel with the flash. A shadow, in the figure of a person, stood out against the propped-open door upstairs. Hector stepped backwards. He wanted to be ready to head upstairs for a closer look at the shadow. The tendrils of lightning snapped back, and the room was plunged into darkness.

There were a few seconds of stunned silence, and then shouts. “Did you see that?” “What was that?”

The lightning flashed out again, only halfway across the room this time. Hector was staring at the spot where the shadow man had been, when a shout of, “Over there!” from Marcos drew his attention to the right and up.

The shadow man was halfway down the upstairs hall.

The group panicked. Several women screamed. In the brief lightning strike, Hector saw most of the group stand up, with about half moving in Tony's direction. In the darkness, Bev's voice crackled. "Are you guys okay?"

"Yeah," Marcos replied.

"What do you want me to do with the group?" asked Tony, his voice sounding high and choked.

Hector hesitated as he recognized the fear in Tony's voice. Even the big guy was scared. "Take anyone outside who wants to go."

"Hector, this doesn't feel right. We should probably just get everyone out," said Marcos uneasily.

"I'm fine with that," agreed Hector.

The lightning struck again, but now it was at its normal range, just above the Plexiglas.

"Hector, it's in the box," Marcos whispered harshly.

Hector leaned back, and frowned in concentration. He couldn't see anything. He leaned to the side to avoid a small glare from the lightning that continued to flicker overhead. "Marcos, I don't see...." Screams and pounding footsteps echoed through the building from the group just as Hector saw a dark shadow, loosely in the shape of a human figure, materialize inside the box.

Hector's eyes stayed glued on the shadow figure in the ghost tank. "I see it. Tony, get everyone out."

"I don't think that'll be a problem. Hell, most of them are gone already."

"Make sure everyone's okay, but don't let them drive off yet," Hector instructed.

"I'll try," Tony replied, as he turned and jogged toward the lobby, his footsteps thudding across the main hall.

"Bev, please tell me you're getting this." Marcos spoke into his walkie-talkie. "Bev, do you copy?"

"Marcos, you got a recorder?" Hector asked, inching his way in front of the ghost tank.

“Yeah,” Marcos replied, pulling one out of his pocket. He moved forward to meet Hector.

“Huh, I never figured we’d actually catch one. Now what?”

“Let’s see if it has anything to say.” Marcos turned on the recorder.

The gauzy blackness dissipated, and then reformed into the shadow man.

“My name is Hector and this is Marcos. What is your name?”

Silence.

“Why are you here?”

Silence.

“Do you know you’re dead?”

A dark, swirling mist in the form of a human hand pressed itself against the Plexiglas.

Hector and Marcos both took an involuntary step backwards.

“Hey! You stepped on my foot.”

Startled, Hector and Marcos both jumped and spun around.

“Darren?” Hector lowered his voice. “Get out of here!”

“What is that?” Darren’s voice was shaky.

Hector glanced at the ghost tank. “Not really sure yet.” He put a hand on Darren’s arm. “Wait outside with the rest of the group.”

In the ghost tank, the hand disappeared, and the shape of a head stretched forward.

“It’s coming through the box,” said Marcos.

“It wasn’t in the box to begin with,” Hector pointed out.

A door slammed to their right. “Bev? Are you okay?” Marcos spoke urgently into the walkie-talkie.

Static crackled back.

“It’s still coming,” said Darren.

Hector and Marcos exchanged a glance, and then flinched as all the doors slammed shut.

“I don’t think it’s happy we mentioned the word d-e-a-d,” said Marcos. Hector thought he heard a quaver in Marcos’s voice.

“Marcos, take Darren outside with Tony. I’ll get Bev.”

Marcos shook his head. “I think we need to stick together.”

Hector took the walkie-talkie from Marcos. “Bev, hold tight. We’re on our way.” Over his shoulder, Hector said to Darren, “Stay behind....” Shooting pain ran up the left side of Hector’s body; then utter darkness closed in.

4:00 a.m.

A beam of light stabbed Hector's eyes. He jerked his head to the side. "Hey, stop."

"Hector, are you okay?" Bev asked.

Hector felt a hand on his shoulder. "I don't know. Where's Marcos?"

"Right here." Marcos's voice was pinched.

Hector rolled toward Marcos's voice. In the beam of the flashlight, he could see him sitting cross-legged, his head hanging down.

"I got him," Tony's voice came from behind the flashlight.

"How about turning on some lights?" Hector asked.

"We can't," replied Bev. "Look at this." Hector followed her flashlight to an outlet on the wall. "All the electricity, and I do mean all of it, is completely fried. Outlets, light switches, everything."

"What about our equipment?"

"Gone, even the DR cameras. Nothing works."

"But the IR?"

"Even stuff that ran on batteries blew up. Look."

Hector followed her flashlight beam again as it illuminated the ceiling. The ornate cover at the base of the chandelier had smears of black soot trailing out along the edge.

Feeling rushed back into Hector's body. He was queasy, and the left side of his body felt like it had been raked along barbed wire.

"We are in deep-shit trouble for this," Marcos whispered.

Hector couldn't imagine the amount of damage there was to the building. "Marcos, I don't feel so good."

“Me neither, bro. My right side is on fire or something.”

“Let me look,” Tony said, aiming his flashlight at Marcos’s arm. “Damn.” Deep, red gouges marked the entire length of his arm.

Bev shone the light on Hector’s right arm. “I don’t see anything,” she said.

“No, it’s my left.” Hector raised his left arm, and gingerly pulled down the sleeve of his t-shirt with his right hand. The light played over the left side of his body. The same marks as Marcos traveled the length of Hector’s left arm and disappeared beneath his t-shirt. “What about Darren? How’s he feeling?”

Silence ticked by for several seconds. “Did you find him?” Bev’s light shone on Tony.

“I thought he followed me out,” Tony replied.

“He didn’t.” Hector insisted. “Darren was right behind us when we were hit. Where is he now?”

“I-I could’ve sworn he followed me out,” Tony stammered.

“He didn’t, Tony.” Panic made Hector’s pulse race. “Where is he now?”

“I don’t know, Hector. He wasn’t here when I reached you,” said Bev.

Hector struggled to get to his feet. Halfway up, his stomach lurched, and he doubled over.

“Take it easy,” said Bev, holding him by the arm. “I’m sure he’s here. There’s been a lot of commotion. He’s probably hiding somewhere.”

Hector staggered, but stayed on his feet. “We need to look for Darren. Tony, go and check the outside. Talk to the tour group and see if anyone saw Darren. Tell them there was an electrical problem and we’re giving refunds for the whole tour.”

Tony’s flashlight moved toward the lobby.

“And Tony?”

“Yeah.” The light spun around. Hector lifted his arm to shield his eyes, and tried to think of what he could say to make Tony understand.

Tony said, “Hector, if he’s out there, I’ll find him.”

“And see if you can get us some more flashlights,” Bev added.

Hector grabbed Bev’s hand, and shone the light on Marcos, who was still sitting on the floor. “Marcos, you okay?”

“No, I’m completely wiped.”

Hector reached out to Bev. “Give me your flashlight and stay with Marcos.”

Marcos lurched to his knees. “Hector, wait.”

“I have to find Darren.”

“Then let’s find him. Help me up.”

Hector and Bev moved to either side of Marcos to help him stand. After several false starts, Marcos made it to his feet.

“Let’s start at the back of the building,” said Hector. “Darren! Darren, come on out. It’s all over. Everything’s okay.” But in the pit of Hector’s stomach, he knew things were far from okay.

TWELVE

“The reason all of this is so horrible,” McVries said, “is because it’s just trivial. You know? We’ve sold ourselves and traded our souls on trivialities.” - Stephen King, *The Long Walk*

Hector sat on the couch with his head in his hands. The whirring of the fan through the vents was the only sound in the house.

Hell was breaking loose, and all Hector could do was stare at the floor.

Ms. Armendariz was suing them for damages due to their investigation at the Amador Hotel. The entire hotel would have to be rewired, to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars.

Lydia, Hector’s ex-wife, was hysterical. Hector’s parents were hysterical.

For all intents and purposes, The Paranormal Posse was no more. Marcos's wife was furious over the upcoming lawsuit, even though Hector was taking the blame and had offered to put his home up for sale.

And Darren was gone.

The police had searched the area again when they arrived, and had found no trace of him. A detective had called and left his number, saying he would be in touch soon.

The doorbell rang. Hector raised his head like a drowning man taking his last gasp for air and called out, "It's open."

The heavy screen door, and then the front door, squeaked as Marcos led Bev and Tony into the living room. All three moved with deliberate steps, as if entering a mine field.

"Hey, bro," said Marcos.

"Hey. Bev, did you bring the tapes?" Hector asked.

"Got it all right here."

Hector felt the first rush of energy course through him since Darren had disappeared. He rose from the couch and held out his hand.

Bev took a step back. "Hector, I need you to hear this first. There's nothing on the tape that shows what happened to Darren."

"What do you mean?" Hector asked.

"I was at the door trying to get it open. I looked back at the monitor and saw you two go flying. But I never saw anything in the ghost tank."

"Just let me see it." Hector motioned to the kitchen table.

Bev crossed the living room to the kitchen table and set the laptop down. She flipped it open and, after a few taps on the keyboard, rotated it until it was facing Hector.

"You have all the footage from the night?" asked Hector.

"Yeah, of course. It's all here; I just spliced this segment because I knew you'd want to see it first."

Hector noticed his finger trembling before he clicked the play button. The main hall of the Amador appeared in grainy black and white with a slight green tint. The ghost tank was standing there, empty. Hector squinted, and moved his nose to within an inch of the screen, but no shadow man appeared. The box was empty. Movement on the screen to his left caught his eye, but the tape fuzzed out a second after that. He hit rewind and replayed it. He rewound the tape again and again, each time concentrating on a separate part of the film.

Darren's face was between Marcos's and Hector's shoulders one second, and then gone as Marcos and Hector were thrown backwards. He slowed the film down and watched frame by frame. It looked as if Marcos and he had been shoved aside. He replayed it frame by frame, eyes fixated on Darren's face. Although at first glance it looked like he just fell backwards, Hector's eyes widened as he realized Darren's face didn't move. Instead, a dark shadow rose up below his chin and eclipsed it.

"Darren didn't run away," Hector announced, without taking his eyes off the screen.

"What do you see?" asked Marcos. The kitchen chairs squealed across the tile floor, and then warmth encircled Hector as his three friends drew close.

"Watch this. There. Did you see that?" When no one replied, Hector looked at each one in turn. They didn't see it. "Watch it again in slow motion. See: right there."

"I see him disappear, Hector."

"No, Marcos, look." Hector glanced back to make sure Marcos was watching the screen. "There! Right there."

"He disappears."

Hector pushed back his chair and stood up. "The shadow covers his face. Don't tell me you didn't see that."

Concern furrowed Marcos's brow. Hector dreaded what was coming next.

“Hector.” Marcos pronounced his name as if he were trying to wake him up. “Darren might have run away.”

“How can you say that? You were there. You saw what I saw.”

“I did.” Marcos placed his hands on Hector’s shoulders. “But you have got to start thinking and acting as if Darren might have run away.”

Hector twisted away from Marcos and balled up his fists. Hector punctuated each word. “What good would that do, since he didn’t run away?”

Beefy hands clamped down on Hector’s arms, pinning them to his sides.

“Take it easy, Hector. Listen to what Marcos has to say,” Tony soothed.

Marcos rubbed the spot on his forearm where Hector’s blow had connected. “The police have been grilling us about you.”

Hector searched Marcos’s eyes. “And? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But things weren’t going well. Darren was having a hard time settling in. You said so yourself.”

Tony’s grip now kept Hector from sinking to the floor. “You told them that? You told the cops Darren was having problems?” When Tony released his grip, Hector plopped down hard onto his chair. His eyes clouded over with tears.

Bev’s face came into focus as she squatted in front of him. “Hector, we did not tell the police anything they didn’t already know. They talked to your ex, and they think Darren took the opportunity that night to run away.”

Hector knew there was nothing worse than seeing a grown man cry, but he slumped forward and buried his face in Bev’s shoulder to let his grief flow.

When he could sit up, Bev walked over to her purse on the couch, and pulled out a USB stick. She brought it back to the table and set it down. “This is everything that happened that night. Tony and I also went through and highlighted anything

that even remotely looked or sounded out of the ordinary. That's in a separate file."

Hector laid his hand on top of hers before she could move away. He looked at her, and then Tony and Marcos, and realized for the first time they all looked haggard, and appeared to be running on little sleep.

"I'm sorry," Hector said.

Bev smiled. Tony clapped him on the arm, and Marcos said, "I've got kids, Hector, and I don't think I'd be holding it together as well as you."

"I had no right to act like that."

"Pfft, you hit like a girl." Marcos tipped his head toward Tony. "Now, if it had been Tony...."

Hector tried to smile, but failed.

"The police believe Darren is a runaway because the two of you were on shaky ground. And there's a chance that what Darren saw freaked him out so bad that he did run away." Marcos held up his hands as Hector started to interrupt. "We'll figure this out. Tony and Bev have already gone over the evidence once. You study it, and then we'll meet up and go over it again. Okay?"

Hector took in The Paranormal Posse—his friends. He nodded his head and said, "Thanks."

Marcos placed his hand back on Hector's shoulder. "We'll find him," Marcos promised. "No matter where he went."

THIRTEEN

Nobody realizes that some people expend tremendous energy merely to be normal - Albert Camus

Detective Rodriguez gave Hector a blank face, but Hector knew something was wrong.

"Has Darren tried to run away since he's been living with you?"

"No; he snuck out of the house, but he never ran away." Hector sat across from Detective Rodriguez in Hector's living

room. Deep breaths had not calmed Hector's nerves. He rubbed his palms together. When he saw the detective's eyes glance at his hands, Hector willed himself to stop.

"Does he have a car?"

"No."

"Does he know how to drive?"

"I'm not sure." Hector leaned forward. He wanted to give the impression that he was listening intently. "Darren bragged about driving with a friend in Utah. I let him back out of the driveway once. He had trouble finding reverse. My car's a standard."

"Were you following up with his treatment?"

Hector leaned back. "What treatment?"

The detective glanced down at his palm-sized notebook. "He was hospitalized for seventy-two hours by his parents: mother and step-father. While there, he received treatment for ADHD, and needed further evaluation for APD."

"What's APD?"

"Antisocial Personality Disorder."

Hector paused to take a deep breath to keep his anger at his ex-wife in check. "His mother never mentioned any of this to me. Darren said he was kicked out of the house."

"Do you and your ex-wife discuss issues regarding Darren?"

"It was not a.... No, we try to talk to each other as little as possible." Hector stabbed his index finger in the air in front of him. "The only thing Lydia told me was that he was out of control. She even said as much on the court papers when she gave me custody. She never mentioned anything about this alphabet-soup diagnosis."

"Are you aware that he has a juvenile record in Utah that includes assaulting an officer?"

"But nothing like that happened while he was here with me."

The detective kept his blank face in place. "When he was here, and you two disagreed, did you ever hit him?"

Hector straightened. "No."

“Did he ever hit you?”

“No.”

The pen clicked in the detective’s hand as he hovered it over his notebook. “Any friends he might be staying with?”

“He just moved here, so there were only a couple of kids to call. No one has seen or heard from him.”

“May I have those names and numbers?”

“Yeah, sure.” Hector pulled out his phone, and rattled off the two names and phone numbers. “What happens next?”

Detective Rodriguez finished writing in his notebook. “Well, I’ll write up a statement and send a copy to you and Darren’s mother. I’ll also file a report with the Department of Family Services.”

“What will they do?”

“It’s just police protocol when a minor runs away. Then I’ll send you some information about declaring Darren a ‘youth in crisis,’ so that when we do find him, we can get him some help: court-ordered if necessary.”

Hector held his hands out. “That’s it?”

“We’re going to enter Darren’s information in our database, which will notify all police officers on patrol.”

Hector waited. “That’s it?”

The detective’s face softened for a moment. “Yeah, that’s pretty much it. Keep your phone on and available. Encourage anyone else he might contact for help to do the same. Talk to your neighbors; maybe they can keep an eye on your house when you’re gone in case he tries to sneak back in for his things.” The detective reached into his shirt pocket. “Here’s my card. If you think of anything else, just call that number. When we find him, we’ll contact you.”

Hector stared at the card in his hands.

The detective flipped his notebook closed, put his pen on top of the notebook, and stood up. “I can see myself out.”

“How bad is this APD? I mean, is it common?”

The detective paused behind the sofa. “You know the serial killer, Ted Bundy?”

Hector stood up and faced the detective. “Yeah.”

“He had it.”

FOURTEEN

There must be a line in all of us, a very clear one, just like the line that divides the light side of a planet from the dark. -

Stephen King, *Rage*

Darren wrapped his arms around his legs to keep warm. He remembered a rare trip with his father to Carlsbad Caverns. Hector had talked Darren into staying to see the bats, an event where thousands of Mexican Free-tail bats would fly out of the mouth of the cave. To kill time, his dad had signed them up for a spelunking tour. Darren groaned aloud when the guide led them down into the cave again. The small group cleared the ‘daylight zone,’ the last area where sunlight reached into the cavern. As Darren stared ahead, he saw a blackness he never knew existed. A perfect line was formed on the trail where the light ended and the darkness began.

Once the small group crossed into the darkness, the guide led them to stone benches, where everyone sat down. The guide held up his flashlight. “I’m going to turn this off, and I want everyone to sit quietly. If the lights were to go out while you’re in a cave, the safest thing to do is to sit and wait for someone to come and get you.”

This place felt like the inside of the caverns; Darren couldn’t see his hand in front of his face. He had to touch his eyelids to tell if his eyes were open or closed. A chill ran through him, rattling his teeth. He pressed his legs to his chest. The air was sucking the heat from him.

Hector woke with a start. “Darren?” His eyes darted around until he realized he must have fallen asleep at the dining-room table. His joints popped and cracked as he stretched. He had placed his hands flat on the table to stand up, when the recorder jumped in front of him. The ear buds were still stuck in his ears. He pulled them out, and let them drop to the table. The inside of his mouth felt as if he’d been licking stamps. He had dragged himself around the table and into the kitchen for some water when the doorbell rang.

Hector looked at the kitchen, the front door, and then past the dining-room table through the sliding-glass door. Outside, the light was dim, but since he didn’t wear a watch, he had no idea if it was day or night. Hector rubbed his hands over his face a few times, and then headed toward the front door.

The doorbell rang again. “Just a second.” Hector pulled the door open, and came face-to-face with Father Eugenio. “Father?”

“Hi, Hector. I’m sorry to show up unannounced, but your parents were very worried and asked me to visit.”

“Huh; why?”

“Isn’t Darren missing?”

“Yes, but....”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.” Hector backed up to let Father Eugenio pass.

“Father, I fell asleep at the dining-room table, so I’m not fully awake yet. I appreciate you coming over, but I’m not sure why my parents thought you could help.”

Father Eugenio shook his head. “To be honest, I’m not sure what I can do either, Hector, but offer support.”

“I need some water; can I get you anything?”

“Water would be fine.”

“Okay, two waters coming up.”

When Hector returned, he handed a glass to Father Eugenio. “What did my parents tell you exactly?”

“They said you organized some ghost-hunting slumber party and Darren disappeared.”

“Well, we never got to the slumber party part. I want you to take a look at something for me.”

“Of course.”

Hector led Father Eugenio to the dining-room table, and played the video where Darren disappeared. He played it several times.

“What do you see?”

Father Eugenio rubbed his chin. “It looks like he just disappears. Almost like he was wiped away.”

Hector nodded. “That’s what I see. Listen to this.”

Next, Hector played the audio clip where his group, along with Darren, asked questions during the EVP session. After he stopped the recording, he said, “We heard the number ‘three’ three times, and took that to mean there were three spirits, but now I remember something about the number 333.”

“Ahhhh, Hector.” Father Eugenio slid onto a chair, his face collapsed with fatigue. “Did you ever stop to think that the veil between this life and the next is there for a reason?”

Hector felt a spark of anger smolder in his chest. “No, Father. I never threw away those pesky questions like why or how. I want answers, not faith.”

“With all this ghost hunting, I believe you are weakening the divide that has separated us for a reason. And you know what else I’m seeing more of? Exorcism. I’m being asked on a daily basis to tend to someone.”

“I saw something. Something I’ve never seen before and can’t explain. You may be able to keep people from thinking about it on this side, but what if the ones on the other side aren’t playing along?”

“Hector, you’ve accepted my help before. I did that house blessing downtown.”

“Mr. Harris wasn’t even Catholic, but he believed a blessing would help. He believed something would happen, but nothing changed. In fact....” Hector froze in mid-sentence. “I’m sorry, Father; I have to call a friend. What time is it?”

“It’s after seven.”

“In the morning?”

“No, evening.”

Hector scrambled to find his phone. He didn’t notice that Father Eugenio had finished his water and was headed toward the front door until he heard his name. “Hector, the number 333 is half of the number 666. It’s the devil’s consort, a mockery of the Holy Trinity; it is the symbol of the queen of hallucinations and chaos.”

FIFTEEN

That’s what a shrink is for, my friends and neighbors; their job is to fuck the mentally disturbed and make them pregnant with sanity. - Stephen King, *Rage*

Hector took a moment to sit down and absorb what Father Eugenio had said before leaving. Then he hit the speed dial button for Marcos. “Marcos?”

“Yeah, Hector. Did they find Darren?”

“No, not yet. Hey, I have a question. Do you remember that building we investigated downtown a while back?”

“The Harris Building?”

“Yeah, you remember what we saw at the end of the tape?”

“Yeah, a... it was a shadow.”

“Right, a shadow like what we saw at the Amador and in that photograph.”

Silence ticked by.

“Marcos, are you there?”

“Yeah. Hector, listen: I’m really not trying to sound sarcastic, but there is no way that we’re going to be able to do some kind of police line-up of dark shadows. I mean, they’re just shadows.

There's no way to tell if it's the same one, and an entity following someone is extremely rare."

"I know that. But, I've been telling you—Darren was taken."

"By who?"

"Did you hear the part on the EVP where the number three is repeated?"

"Yeah...."

"Father Eugenio stopped by, and he said the number 333 belongs to the better half of the devil. I think that's what took Darren."

There was a pause on Marcos's end. "Or he might have run away."

"He didn't run away, Marcos!"

"Okay, okay. But listen to what you're saying. Have we ever heard of something like this happening before? Other than UFO abductions, I can't think of any case where someone was taken—scratched, hit, bit, hair pulled, yes. What you're suggesting..." Marcos took a deep breath. "I want to help, but I don't know if I can follow you on this."

"I have to get back inside the Amador," Hector insisted.

"You know that's not going to happen. Ms. Armendariz is hiring a lawyer as we speak."

"I didn't say I was going to ask for permission," Hector said.

Darren rubbed his eyes and blinked rapidly. A dim, hazy patch of light, no bigger than a postage stamp, drifted off to his right. "Hello?" his voice croaked.

A voice, warped and raspy, replied, *Can you hear me?*

"Yes! I'm over here."

The voice drifted closer, but he couldn't make out the words. "Can you get me out of here?"

Follow me.

Darren's eyes itched as he strained to keep them open and staring at the patch of light. He didn't trust himself to stand, so he crawled, sliding his hands in front of him before moving the rest of his body forward. The surface underneath his hands was smooth as glass. Then it started to wrinkle, as if he was trying to run his hands over plastic wrap, when he drew closer to the light.

It's okay. Keep coming this way.

A bigger patch of light appeared ahead of him. He crawled faster. The surface sucked at his hands and knees for a second before letting go. The light turned into a window a couple of feet taller than Darren, and at least six feet wide. The window looked like it was covered with a gossamer fabric like his mother had used once to decorate.

He peeled his hand from the floor, and probed the material in front of him with a finger. The fabric gave a little. He pushed harder, and then dug at the surface with his nails. It looked like fabric, but felt like a steel-plated window.

"How do I get out of here?"

Silence. Then the voice whispered, *I don't know.*

Darren began to think he was not meant to survive.

Hector didn't hear Marcos walk up behind him. When he felt a hand on his shoulder, he jumped out of the chair, sending the digital recorder crashing to the floor.

"Dammit, Marcos!"

Marco held up his hands. "I'm sorry. I've been calling your name ever since I opened the door."

"If you came here to talk me out of anything, it was a wasted trip."

"Hector, you cannot get back into the Amador Hotel. You'll be in worse trouble than you're already in."

Hector leaned over and picked up the recorder. "If I'm paying for the damages, then what does it matter?"

"You want to end up in jail too? What if they find Darren?"

Hector sat back down, and straightened the equipment in front of him. "What if I find Darren? Then this will all be over."

Marcos plucked the ear buds out of Hector's ears. Hector was up in an instant, ready to fight, but his friend grabbed him by the shoulders and looked him in the eye. "Talk to me," Marcos said. "Tell me what's going through your head."

The fight drained from Hector, and he slumped in his chair, elbows on the table.

"Look, I'm going to the kitchen for some drinks and something to eat. When I come back, we're going to sit down and talk, okay? Okay, Hector?"

Hector stared at the recorder in front of him. "Yeah, fine."

Marcos returned from the kitchen five minutes later. He set down the food and drinks, and pulled a chair up next to Hector. "Whenever you're ready."

"I don't think it is the demon 333 that took Darren. I think a spirit or apparition or shadow man, whatever you want to call it, managed to invoke that power to help possess someone. In this case, Darren."

Marcos's mouth twitched. Hector appreciated that Marcos was trying to keep his skepticism to a minimum. Hector continued, "Of the three of us, Darren was the easiest target. He was having problems. From what the detective told me, he was on some pretty strong antipsychotic drugs at one point. As far as I know, he doesn't have faith in anything."

"What do you mean? You haven't been to church in a long time."

Hector cracked his neck, and took a tentative bite of the sandwich Marcos had brought him. "But we all belong to the Masons. We believe in a power bigger than us. I may have a grudge against the church," Hector sighed, "and I should

probably just get over it, but I grew up a Catholic. I like to think I know what good feels like, that I'd know it when I see it."

"And because Darren didn't have a sense of right and wrong...."

"Or not a well-developed one. I'm sure he was still a mixed-up kid in a lot of ways. We were straightening things out, and Darren didn't run away like the rest of the group that night, but yeah, he still had a ways to go."

"... that made him easier to possess." The chair creaked as Marcos leaned back.

Hector turned and stared out the sliding-glass door. A hummingbird darted into view and hovered for several beats before zooming off. He heard a plunk behind him. When he turned around, Marcos had his backpack on the kitchen table, and was pulling out devices. "I will not help you get back into the Amador. But I brought all the spare gear I had lying around the house. Try contacting him from here."

When Hector reached for a K2 meter, Marcos placed his hand on top of his forearm. "You're talking about someone who's alive being physically pulled to the other side. I'm not sure I buy that." Marcos pulled back his hand. "You've got a week to use my equipment. If nothing comes of this, you're going to have to start thinking that Darren was a messed-up kid that ran away."

For a week, Hector recorded continuously at his house. He would record his questions and play that ???, while running another recorder to try and pick up any EVPs. He ran the K2 meter, changing the battery when necessary.

Ms. Armendariz and the Restore the Amador Foundation were going through with the lawsuit, to make sure The Paranormal Posse paid for the damages. Hector contacted a real-estate broker about putting his house up for sale.

With nothing solid to go on after conducting EVP sessions from home, Hector became convinced that he had to get back into the Amador Hotel.

Hector woke up again at the kitchen table after reviewing the recordings from the Amador for at least the twentieth time. He dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. His stomach cramped, reminding him that he couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten.

The doorbell rang. That must have been the sound that woke him up. Hector stood up, and then fell to his hands and knees, his vision clouded over with gray and black snowflakes, while the world tilted to one side. He'd gotten up too fast.

The doorbell rang again.

"Just a minute." Sight seeped in at the corners of Hector's vision. The person at the door knocked hard.

"I'm coming!" Hector made it the rest of the way with no problems, and opened the door.

Detective Rodriguez filled the doorway. A look of concern crossed the detective's face. Hector figured he must look like death warmed over when the detective asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." His stomach tightened into a knot with fear. "Did you find Darren?"

"Yes."

Hector stumbled against the door frame. "Is he... Is he...."

The detective smiled. "He's all right. We found him early this morning."

Hector looked over both shoulders of the detective. "Where is he?"

"He's in protective custody."

"What? Why?"

“He’s fine. There’s nothing to worry about. I need to finish my exit interview with him, clear you through Family Services, and talk to his mother.” The detective held Hector’s gaze. “Darren claims there was abuse, and he doesn’t want to come home.”

Hector felt his eyes start to burn. How could Darren have accused him of something like that? “That’s not true.”

“I’m not saying it is, but I have to clear everything, and then possibly refer him as a ‘youth in crisis’ in case he needs some help.”

“Needs help with what?”

“Mr. Guzman, I told you about the Antisocial Personality Disorder. If we need to get a court order to help get him on medication....”

Hector shook his head. “No, no. I can take care of all that once you bring him home.”

The detective stared hard at Hector. “All right; then I think everything will be ready before five o’clock this afternoon.”

SIXTEEN

You couldn’t get hold of the things you’d done and turn them right again. Such a power might be given to the gods, but it was not women and men, and that was probably a good thing. Had it been otherwise, people would probably die of old age still trying to rewrite their teens. - Stephen King, *The Stand*

Hector left the front door open, and every time someone walked by he would jump up and look out the screen door. When the Detective finally arrived with Darren, he pulled the door open all the way, and stepped to the side to give them plenty of room. The detective gave a nod and walked to the couch. Darren followed, refusing to look at Hector, and took a seat next to the detective. Hector sat across from them in the loveseat.

“Darren, you are being returned to the custody of your father. We have a hearing set with the judge to discuss whether or not

we need to follow through on a ‘youth-in-crisis’ request. I explained this to you earlier. Do you understand what that means?”

“Yes,” Darren replied, not taking his eyes off the floor.

“Mr. Guzman, I have two referrals here for a psychologist and a psychiatrist. In Texas, you are required to follow up with treatment. He was on Abilify and Risperidone, and an experimental drug for ADHD.”

Hector took a moment to let the information sink in. “I have no problem with providing any treatment he needs. His home is different here, so I want him to be re-evaluated, and to continue with his GED studies.”

“That’s no problem.” The detective then turned to Darren and said, “Your dad was not aware that you had been hospitalized and were given these medications. Now that he is aware, he has to follow up on it. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

The detective paused. “Your father also knows about your complaint that you were physically abused. We didn’t find any evidence of that, so we’re going to start fresh. Okay?”

Darren nodded in the affirmative.

“All right, that’s it for me. Do you have any questions, Darren?”

Darren shook his head, no.

“How about you, Mr. Guzman?”

“No. We’ll be fine.”

The detective handed over two sheets of paper. “Here are the referrals. The psychologist deals exclusively with teenagers.”

“Mr. Rodriguez, thank you for all your help.” Hector rose and offered his hand.

“Not a problem. Darren?”

Darren stayed seated. The detective gave a curt nod to Hector.

Hector walked him to the door and closed it, pressing his hand flat against the surface until a small whoosh told him the

door was shut completely. The lock turned with a whisper of a click. With measured steps, he walked up to Darren, who was still sitting on the couch. He bent down and stared at the top of his head until Darren raised his eyes to meet Hector's.

"Who are you?" Hector asked.

SEVENTEEN - Limbo Part 1

It takes a son of a bitch to change a habit. - Stephen King,
Cat's Eye

Darren's expression remained slack. "What?"

Hector moved closer. "Who are you?"

"That's real funny, Dad. Can I go to my room? I'm tired."

Hector backed up, keeping a wary eye on Darren. "We'll talk later."

Darren stood up, and moved toward his bedroom as if his joints were stiff from sitting in one place too long.

"Where were you hiding?" Hector asked.

Darren paused and looked back. "Here and there."

"How did they find you?"

"Who said I didn't want to be found?" Darren entered his bedroom, and closed the door behind him.

Hector was standing on the front porch watching the realtor back out of his driveway when Marcos pulled up to the curb in front of his house. Weeks had passed, with Hector growing ever more uncomfortable over Darren's change in behavior.

"Who was that?" Marcos asked, as he walked up the driveway.

"My realtor. Turns out, it's someone I went to high school with."

"What did she say?"

"The market is a little soft right now, but not as bad as in other parts of the country. All-in-all, she said I should have it sold within a couple of months."

“We’re all pulling money together to help. There’s no reason you should take the fall for what happened.”

“No. This is my deal.” Hector said firmly. “I bought this house back when Lydia and I were married, so I almost have it paid off. If I get the price I’m asking for, I should have more than enough to pay off the damages to the Amador, and still have some left to start over.”

Marcos leaned in, and looked Hector in the eye. “We’re still helping you. Even my kids want to throw in their pennies for ‘Uncle Hector.’”

Hector grinned for the first time in weeks. “As soon as your wife is over being mad at me, we really need to get together. I miss those guys.”

Marcos sucked in his breath. “That’s going to be just a little while longer. But, we are really happy to hear Darren’s back. The gang thought it would be best if we didn’t all show up at once, so naturally, they sent me to check on you two. So?”

Hector glanced back in the house, and then looked down at his boots. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“You’re going to get pissed at me for saying this.” Hector looked up at Marcos. “I don’t know if it’s really him.”

Marcos groaned. “Jesus, Hector. You can’t be serious.” Marcos studied his face. “You are serious. Take him to the psychologist first. If he really has that antisocial whatever, Darren could just need medication.”

“Darren hasn’t been on any medication for a year. He refused to keep taking it after three months. I called Lydia and talked to her about it. There was a big fight over the summer, and they did put him in the psych ward. You know that asshole husband of hers dislocated his shoulder?”

“So, he hasn’t been on meds recently? Then what happened—why’d he run away?”

“He’s possessed.”

“That’s out of my league.” Marcos looked lost. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I know. I know it sounds crazy, and I should just be happy to have him back.” Hector passed his hand over his face. “Father Eugenio said he thinks we’re weakening the line between the living and the dead. Making it easier for them to cross over. He said he’s doing more exorcisms than ever before. I listened to this lecture by a priest from the Archdiocese of New York on the Internet, and he’s saying the same thing.”

Marcos shook his head. “Like I said, Hector, this is not something I can help you with.”

“Father Eugenio is going to pay us a visit, and I’m taking him to the bBehavioral clinic on the northeast side of El Paso this afternoon to be assessed. If something really is wrong, they’ll evaluate and treat him.”

“What is he doing that’s different?”

“He’s withdrawn. Since he’s been home, he sleeps all day, and I can hear him moving around at night. Skating was an obsession, and now he hasn’t even touched his board.” Hector kicked a stray stone off the porch. “Marcos, he told the police I hit him. I have never laid a hand on him.”

“What can I do?”

Hector shrugged. “Nothing. I’m doing what I can. I’m just afraid to leave him alone.”

“I’m sure Tony would help watch him after work. He has a medical background in case anything happened.”

“That’s a good idea. I may ask him.”

“All right. Keep in touch.” Marcos laid a hand on Hector’s shoulder. “Call; even if my wife is upset, call me if anything happens.”

Father Eugenio said his hands were tied until Hector had Darren assessed, so they drove thirty minutes to the El Paso Behavioral Center on a typically bright, sunny, southwest-Texas day. A large, blue building in the foothills of the Franklin Mountains, on the northeast side, stood out from the surrounding brown of homes, rocks, and sand. The Center was open twenty-four/seven, and Hector and Darren advanced through several waiting rooms before being called one at a time into a small conference room to speak with a counselor.

When Hector, Darren, and the counselor sat down together, Hector already had an idea of what the counselor was going to recommend.

The counselor was named Diane. She looked practical, from her short haircut to her low-heel shoes. “We have several levels of treatment here: from being admitted to the hospital to daily therapy. I know the medication Darren was taking seems out of the ordinary, but medications are used for a wide variety of reasons and treatments. Right now, I don’t see a reason to admit him or suggest intensive therapy, or put him back on the medication. What I am going to do is give you the names of several therapists we work with outside the Center, so that if either one of you ever feels the need for counseling, you’ll have someone to contact.”

Hector noticed Darren was polite and courteous to Diane. When they left the building, Hector and Darren both blinked in the piercing sunlight.

“You happy now?” Darren asked.

Not by a long shot, thought Hector.

Father Eugenio placed his hand on Hector’s shoulder and, for the first time in several weeks, Hector relaxed. “True possession is

extremely rare. But demonic oppression, depression, infestation, or obsession is just as distressing and painful.”

Hector nodded. “I understand, Father, but he is different now. He won’t tell me how he got out of the Amador or where he went. All the police know is that they found him sleeping on a park bench in Old Mesilla. That’s still a long walk from the Amador. Whenever I try to press it, he says he doesn’t remember, or he gets upset and storms off.”

“Has he been speaking in tongues?”

“No.”

“Shown unusual strength?”

“No.”

“Does he know things that he shouldn’t have a reason to know?”

“No.” Hector sighed. “He’s not depressed or suicidal or even aggressive. His habits have changed. It’s simple things: like, he loved cheese quesadillas when he first got here and now he can’t stand them. He used to love being outdoors on his skateboard, now he’s a night owl, and hasn’t touched his skateboard since he got back.”

“I think you should see a counselor. Whatever happened was traumatic, and he may just need time.”

“But Father....”

“I will say a prayer and bless the boy if he will allow me to, and please bring him to church: have him take confession.” Father Eugenio’s eyes softened. “I know you’re concerned, but I don’t think you realize what you’re asking. I can’t just go around performing exorcisms; I need to see a real reason, and then I need to ask permission.”

Hector stood up. “Let me go get him and see if he’ll let you bless him.”

Hector entered Darren’s bedroom. The curtains were drawn tight against the waning daylight. At least the room smelled familiar: stinky socks and sweaty clothes. “Darren?” The covers

stirred on the twin bed. “Darren, there’s someone I want you to talk with for a little bit. He baptized you when you were a baby.”

“Mmmm.” Then after a couple of seconds, Darren asked, “What?”

“Father Eugenio. Our family has known him for years. He married your mother and I, and baptized you. Come on, I want you to meet him.” Hector reached up, and pulled the cord that turned on the light that was attached to the ceiling fan. Darren groaned, and then moved the covers back and sat up.

Hector returned to the living room and, five minutes later, Darren entered. Father Eugenio got up and shook his hand. Darren mumbled a hello, and then plopped down on the loveseat. Hector suffered through Darren’s monosyllabic answers to Father Eugenio’s polite questions for a few minutes, and then told Darren, “The Father here wants to bless you. Maybe we’ll even go with your grandparents to church this Sunday.”

Darren’s mouth dropped open, an incredulous look on his face. “You’re kidding?”

“I don’t think it would hurt anything. And this week we’ll probably go see one of those counselors that the Behavioral Center recommended.”

“That’s fine. I’d rather just take the medication and have you think I’m crazy.”

Hector paused, so he could present himself as the rational parent. “Darren, I don’t see what it would hurt.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Darren sat up. “I don’t believe in religion. I think that a virgin giving birth to a baby is bullshit. I’m happy for your religious change-of-heart, Dad, but I’ll pass.” Darren rose, and Hector rose with him.

“Darren, sit down.”

Darren cocked his head to one side. “No.”

Father Eugenio rose. “It’s fine, Hector.” He turned to face Darren. “I hope you’ll reconsider coming to church.” The Father reached into his pocket, and took out a small plastic bottle. He

flipped open the cap, and poured a dab on this fingers. "This is simple enough." Father Eugenio brought his hand up and started to make the sign of the cross in front of Darren. "In the name...."

Darren slapped his hand away from him.

"Darren!" Hector commanded through clenched teeth, stepping in front of the Father.

"You want to medicate me, fine. But I don't want any part of this." Darren brushed past Hector, stormed off to his bedroom, and slammed the door shut.

Hector turned back to Father Eugenio, who held up a hand and said, "I'm fine."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Visit the counselor. I think you need to have a heart-to-heart with Darren about religion. Find out why he feels the way he does."

Hector escorted Father Eugenio to the door, and promised he would keep in touch. He leaned his forehead against the door for a moment to collect himself before talking to Darren about seeing a counselor.

A low, chest-rattling growl made him spin around. He hadn't owned another dog since the cocker spaniel Hector had brought home when Darren was born had died of old age a couple of years previously. He searched through the house, and ended up in front of Darren's bedroom door.

"Darren?" Hector asked as he cracked open the door. Darren was back in bed. A light snore filtered up through the covers.

He crossed to the sliding-glass door and stood out on the porch. The only neighbor who owned a dog was catty-corner from his backyard. The St. Bernard barked, but he'd never heard the dog growl.

A cool breeze rustled the branches of the mulberry and mesquite trees. A few strands of music from a couple of blocks away drifted by. Someone was having a party. A car coming down

the street, with a powerful sub-woofer turned all the way up, made Hector's chest vibrate for a moment.

Hector took a couple of steps to a patio chair, and sat down. The chair creaked, metal against metal, as he rocked back and forth. Doubt passed over him in a wave. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. What was he doing? What was he thinking? His son needed help. That's all there was to it. Maybe Darren had just run away after the encounter with the shadow man. That would be traumatic enough for anyone, let alone a messed-up sixteen-year-old from a broken home. And the growl? His imagination. He was tired and he was stressed.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow would be better.

The counseling sessions dragged during their once-a-week visits. Darren's new habits continued, but he didn't seem to be getting any worse, and for that Hector was thankful. Religion made him irritable, so Father Eugenio had stayed away. When Darren saw his grandparents, he seemed shocked into civility, unsure of how to behave around them, which in turn made Darren seem perfectly normal to his grandparents.

Weeks passed.

Their counselor, Hal, opened the last session with Darren and Hector by saying, "This story is a myth. But I think it explains how people need to go through a change, getting rid of old habits in order to live in the present."

He went on to explain that an eagle, at age 30, must make a hard decision. It can die, or go through a painful period of rebirth. The process requires that the eagle fly to its nest. There, it will knock its beak against a rock until it falls off. When a new

one grows back, the eagle uses its new beak to tear out its talons. When the new talons grow back, it plucks out its feathers, and when the new feathers grow back, it takes flight again, reborn and ready to start anew.

He ended the story with, "I hope you'll leave here with a deeper awareness."

Hector nodded, as if he would make the same choice if he ever happened to be a mythical eagle. He glanced over at Darren, who had one eyebrow cocked in a you-can't-be-serious look.

Hal seemed nonplussed, wished them well, and instructed them that, if they ever needed his services again, not to hesitate to call.

Hector pulled into the driveway. The For Sale sign rocked back and forth. The wind never stood still in El Paso. Except in the spring, when seventy-mile-per-hour winds kicked up enough sand to blot out the sun, the constant wind made living in the desert bearable.

The house had been shown to several families. One couple stopped by twice, and the realtor assured Hector the property would sell soon.

"Hey," Hector said when he stopped the car. "How about I cook up some *fajitas* with all the trimmings?"

"I don't like a lot of that stuff, the peppers and onions."

"I tell you what. I'll cook everything on the side, and you can add whatever you want."

Darren shrugged. "I guess."

When they entered the house, Darren retreated to his room. Unfazed, Hector continued to the kitchen and washed up.

Fajitas were one thing Hector could cook. Bite-sized pieces of beef sizzled in the skillet while he chopped up peppers, onions, and mushrooms. He added a little grated pile of cheese, and set

out a small container of sour cream. The *comal*, a round disk from an old, wood-fire stove, was warming up to heat the flour *tortillas*.

“Darren,” Hector called out from the kitchen. “It’s almost ready.”

No answer.

“Darren?” Hector took a deep breath. *I am not going to get upset*. He walked to Darren’s bedroom door and knocked. A couple of seconds passed. *He couldn’t be asleep again*. “Darren,” he said, opening the door. “Did you hear...?”

The smell hit him first. It smelled as if someone had defecated in the room. Hector pushed the door all the way open. At the sight of Darren sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands, rocking back and forth, Hector thought, *So much for the counselor helping us*.

A rush of words spilled forth from Darren.

“As I’m walking I’m chopping bitches
 My goal isn’t to give you stitches
 It’s to leave you in ditches
 I’m a sociopath
 Going down a fucked-up path
 You get in my way
 You’ll feel my wrath
 My homeboy will put a hatchet up your ass
 While I soak you in gas
 Light you on fire
 I don’t give a fuck if you stink
 I’ll feed you to my shrink.”

Hector saw Darren grimace as he looked up and said, “Your son has this stuck in his head.”

Time slowed to a crawl. “What did you just say?” Hector whispered.

Darren’s eyes took on a cunning edge. “I have this song stuck in my head.”

“That’s not what you said.”

Darren gripped his head with both hands. “I have a headache. I’m skipping dinner, okay?”

“No, it’s not okay.” Hector wrinkled his nose. “Darren, why does it smell like crap in here?” He stumbled over clothes strewn on the floor, and then reached up to click on the light.

“No!” Darren yelled. “Just leave me alone.”

Darren was on his feet and shoving Hector back through his bedroom door. The lock clicked shut. Hector rocked back against the kitchen table. Regaining his feet, Hector lifted his leg and kicked in the bedroom door.

EIGHTEEN - Limbo part 2

In the Name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, strengthened by the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of our Savior, of Blessed Michael the Archangel, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul and all the Saints, we confidently undertake to repulse the attacks and deceits of the devil. - Exorcism prayer

Tying Darren up had not been as big of a challenge as Hector thought it would be. Hector kept an eye on him, sitting cross-legged on the floor, while he hustled through the house gathering items, and shoving them into the black backpack he used for his ghost-hunting equipment.

“Will you please listen?”

Hector ignored him, as he had all the other pleas.

“Dad, please!”

Hector whirled around and jabbed a finger. “You are not my son. I don’t know how you did it, but you took over his body.”

“And I’m the one you want to put on medication. Okay, enough, joke’s over. Come on, my hands are falling asleep.”

Hector turned around and kept packing. “You start telling me the truth and I’ll untie you.” He paused for a response. When the ‘fake Darren’ didn’t respond, Hector snatched the backpack,

walked over to the living room floor, and pulled Darren to his feet. "That's what I thought."

The combined lights of El Paso and Juarez, Mexico would have stretched outward forever if the mountains weren't there to stop them. The El Paso City Limits sign flew past at seventy miles per hour. The lights used to end, but the smaller cities clustered along the Rio Grande had grown, until it seemed as if El Paso melded with Las Cruces. Even if the cattle paddocks he passed on the left were not lit, the smell would have told him he was about halfway there.

Hector fidgeted in his seat and rubbed his forehead. No, there was no doubt that the boy next to him was not entirely Darren. Maybe he should have waited for Father Eugenio to call back, but for over a month he had been doing what everyone else said would fix the problem. Hector slammed his palm down on the steering wheel. What if he was too late? What if he'd abandoned his son in the Amador?

The fake Darren yelled and tried to throw himself against the door when Hector passed a car. Hector reached out and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck to keep him still. There were few cars out after midnight. Once they were on the stretch of highway past the west side of El Paso, Hector kept the car in the right-hand lane. Darren had quieted down, except for the occasional, "Dad, let me go."

That one word kept Hector driving on to the Amador Hotel. Darren had never once called him 'Dad' since he arrived. In fact, even during their infrequent phone conversations, Darren had never used the word Dad. Hector gripped the steering wheel. He prayed his son was still alive.

When they neared the Amador Hotel, the fake Darren became agitated. Hector felt his glare from the passenger car seat. “What do you think is going to happen?”

Hector circled the area twice. Several banks and office buildings surrounded the hotel, and only one car had passed Hector’s. There was a side street in the back of the hotel parking lot. On his third pass, Hector swung in and clicked his car lights off. The car entered the parking lot. He drove it right up to the back of the building, parked alongside the back wall, and shut the car off.

Hector turned and locked eyes with the fake Darren. “You tell me.”

“Dad, let me go, or you will never be able to make this right.”

The car door opened with a creak. Hector reached up and flipped the interior light off, and then grabbed the backpack. He looked at the fake Darren. “You are going back to wherever the hell you came from.”

Hector placed the backpack on the hood of the car, and rummaged through it until he pulled out a hammer. He checked one more time. Darren was slumped down in the front seat, eyes staring out the window. Hector turned toward the plywood over the window, and jammed the hammer under a corner. The hammer caught on the wood, and small splinters flew off in all directions. If teenage boys could get this off, then so could he.

A click behind him made Hector look over his shoulder. The fake Darren had managed to unbuckle himself, and his head poked out from the open passenger door. “Don’t...,” Hector began, but the boy’s head disappeared for a second. Hector had dropped the hammer and started for the passenger side when he saw Darren pop up past the open door and start running. Hector sprinted after him, and leaped to catch his legs just as Darren started to yell, “Help...” They both landed with a ‘woof’ of air. Knees, elbows, and hands scraped the pavement.

Hector dragged himself up the boy's body to clamp his hand across his mouth, pinching his cheeks inward. Muffled shouts tickled his palm. He looked left and right, breathing hard, before hauling Darren up by his tied hands. Hector was too winded to say anything. He dragged Darren back to the car, and sat him down again in the passenger seat. Hector grunted when Darren brought a foot up and his knee jabbed him in the stomach. While keeping one hand clamped over Darren's mouth, he snatched the ankle, wiggled the shoe and sock off, and then stuffed the sock in Darren's mouth.

The car was filled with the sound of Darren breathing hard through his nose. "You are leaving my son's body tonight. Make no mistake: I will do whatever it takes to get him back." Hector backed up, and lunged over the hood of the car to snag the backpack. He dropped it in Darren's lap, and gave a grunt of satisfaction when he found what he was looking for. He pulled out several white zip ties used to secure cables. This time he used them to hobble Darren.

Making sure everything was in place, he gave a stern look to Darren before backing out of the car. Hector dropped the backpack on the hood of the car as he made his way back to the plywood-covered window. He wiped his brow with the sleeve of his t-shirt, and then picked up the hammer and started working the plywood loose.

Thumps behind him made him stop and spin around to see Darren trying to reach the car horn with his head. Hector strode to the driver's side, opened the door, whispered, "I'm sorry, Darren," and brought his fist down on the side of his son's face. He watched the body go limp. "Goddammit," Hector croaked. He sank to his knees. His breath came in shallow gasps. Once Darren was back, he would forgive him.

Hector straightened and hurried back to the window. He worked the hammer under the last corner of the plywood. It gave way, and the hammer clattered to the pavement as Hector caught

the plywood before it too hit the ground. "Son of a...." Hector grimaced as splinters from the sides of the rough board dug into his hands. After a couple of deep breaths, Hector lifted the board and set it to the side.

The rest was relatively easy. He deposited the backpack and Darren through the now-open window, and then returned to the car and drove it to a parking spot at the side of the building. He scurried back across the parking lot and across the window ledge, reached over, and dragged the plywood in with him. He then used the windowsill to lean the plywood against the window frame, so that a person glancing in this direction wouldn't notice the difference.

Hector flicked on his flashlight, reached down, and pulled the sock out of Darren's mouth. He was certain no one would hear Darren now.

NINETEEN

When his life was ruined, his family killed, his farm destroyed, Job knelt down on the ground and yelled up to the heavens, "Why God? Why me?" and the thundering voice of God answered, "There's just something about you that pisses me off". - Stephen King, *Storm of the Century*

In the main hall, Hector arranged his equipment. Darren stirred. Hector let him be, and concentrated on the instruments in front of him. All of them were older models, since The Paranormal Posse had lost almost everything during the Lockdown. The K2 meter was on his left, but registered no activity. A DVR camera was pointed at Darren's body and recording. On his other side lay an earlier version of a spirit box and a digital recorder.

Hector glanced at his watch: it was almost three o'clock, dead time. He cleared his throat. "Darren? Darren can you hear me? I'm here and I know you may be trapped. I need you to try and use these devices to speak to me."

The body in front of him came alive, and bent in the middle to try and use his head and knees to swipe at the instruments. Hector threw out his hands to stop Darren. "Stop it. Nothing you do is going to change anything. Not tonight."

The theme from the X-files echoed in the empty building. Father Eugenio was calling Hector back.

"Answer it," Darren demanded. "You answer it, and try to explain this."

"Father, I'm sorry I called you so late." Hector had paused to listen when Darren started screaming.

"Help! Help me! He's gone fuckin' nuts. Somebody help me!"

Hector slapped his hand down on Darren's mouth.

"Hector, what's going on? Just let me get dressed and I'll be right over," Father Eugenio said.

"Everything's fine. I just have a couple of questions."

"Why is Darren yelling? Are you two fighting?"

"No, we'll be..." Hector yanked his hand back. Darren had managed to sink his teeth into the meat of his palm. "Dammit!" he hissed.

Darren took a deep breath and screamed again. "Help me!"

Hector groped around behind him until he felt the damp sock. He leaned across Darren's chest and shoved the sock into his mouth in between protests. Darren nipped his fingers, and then sat up and screamed muffled curses at Hector.

Father Eugenio's panicked voice yelled on the other end of the phone. "Hector, what in God's name is going on?"

Hector held his fist up as Darren tried to work the sock out of his mouth. "What can you tell me about an exorcism? I need a crash course."

"Hector, you cannot perform an exorcism. Only a specially trained Catholic priest can. Where are you? Please, let me come and help you."

"I need to force this thing out of my son's body."

“Listen to me, Hector. We perform exorcisms in Jesus’s name. He never used force to cast out demons.”

Hector stilled. He pressed his phone to his ear, fist still threatening to strike Darren. “I’m not Jesus. Sorry, Father.” He took the phone away and, as his thumb tapped his phone to hang up, Darren strained forward and screamed.

Hector knew he was running out of time. Father Eugenio would keep calling until he figured out where Hector had taken Darren, if the Father hadn’t guessed already.

“Darren, can you hear me?” Hector said, for the hundredth time, into the spirit box. He rocked back and forth. “Please, Darren, I need you to answer me if you’re here.”

Hoarse, muffled words came from the Darren who was lying in front of him.

Hector leaned forward and ripped the sock out of Darren’s mouth. “Where is he?”

Darren worked his mouth and lips together, and then muttered, “Gone.”

“Gone. Gone where?”

Darren raised tired eyes to meet Hector’s glare. “I mean, gone as in dead.”

“You’re lying.”

Darren chuckled. “Okay. I’m lying.” Darren cocked his head as if listening to distant music. Or was it sirens? “The cops will be here soon. Who *they* think is lying will matter more. Right, Dad?”

A tremor passed through Hector’s body. He leaped on the body in front of him; his hands found the boy’s throat and throttled him. “You will tell me where my son is or *you’ll* be gone.”

The body underneath Hector went still. “You can’t have a resurrection without a death.”

“You’re not my son. Get out of him now. I want to talk to my son.”

Laughter turned into coughing as Hector put pressure on the boy’s throat. “I have nowhere to go.”

“Darren! Darren, can you hear me?”

“He’s dead.”

The spirit box in front of Hector crackled and a flat, metallic voice said, “Hello?”

Hector leaped off of Darren and leaned over the spirit box. “Darren, is that you? It’s me; I’m here to get you back. Can you see us?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not him,” Darren sputtered. “I told you: he’s gone.”

“Shut up,” Hector spat. “Shut the fuck up.” Hector willed himself to relax as he leaned closer to the spirit box. “Darren, we don’t have much time. I need you to come as close to us as you can.” Hector paused. “Are you close to us?”

“Yes.”

“You...,” Darren whispered.

Hector ignored the impostor in his son’s body. His best guess was that there was a tear or weak spot on the inside of the Amador Hotel. Unlike the time Marcos and he had created a white-magic portal, Hector didn’t want to seal off this spot, but he didn’t want to fling it open either. There was only one more thing to try.

“Darren, listen carefully: I want you to get as close to your body as you can. When I say ‘now,’ try to get back in. Push him out as hard as you can. Darren, do you understand?”

A pulse of loud static came out of the spirit box.

“Darren, I have to make sure you understand. Light up the K2 all the way to red, two times, if you understand.” Hector’s eyes

stayed glued to the K2 meter, willing it to light up. “Darren, I have....” The K2 meter burst to red once, and then twice.

Hector’s face went blank as he steeled himself for what he planned to do next. He reached into the backpack and drew out a small kitchen cutting board, and then a knife.

“No!” Darren roared and kicked the floor hard with his feet, sending himself hopping on his bottom backward a couple of feet.

Hector lunged over the items on the floor, and caught him easily. He flipped Darren over onto his belly, and straddled his legs.

Darren arched upward and continued yelling. “You don’t have to do this. Dad! Dad, I’m back. Stop. Stop it! You don’t have to do this. I’m back. I’m back!”

All through this tirade, Hector worked the cutting board under Darren’s hands. He gripped the knife, and pressed it against the top knuckle of the left pinkie finger. Darren was right-handed. The idea had popped into his head from the scene in John Carpenter’s *The Thing* where the creature’s blood had shrieked when a hot piece of metal had touched it. Whatever possessed his son, Hector was going to treat it like an alien, and use pain to force it out.

Hector leaned close to Darren’s ear and whispered, “Don’t make me do this to my son. Just get out. Dead is dead. You can’t come back.”

Hector straightened. “Darren, get ready.”

“He’s dead!” Darren screamed. “He’s dead and gone. He didn’t linger. He passed on. Your son is dead. This is not going to matter. He is gone and nothing you do to me will bring him back, so just stop!”

Hector pressed down and, with a wet thunk, the knife struck the cutting board.

“No, no, no!”

Hector heard Darren suck in a ragged breath to scream again. There was a pause, and then he heard Darren say in awe, “You bitch!”

A burst of tiny lights, like a swarm of fireflies trapped in soap bubbles, appeared overhead. Hector gazed upward as they floated by and blinked out, one by one.

Darren made a strangled noise underneath him. Hector knocked the cutting board out from underneath Darren’s hands and dropped the knife. “Darren?” Hector flipped him over. Darren’s mouth hung open, his throat bulging, eyes rolled back into his head. “Darren!” Hector yelled, shaking him by the shoulders.

Hector tried to roll his son over onto his side to cut the zip ties, but Darren seemed to weigh a ton. Hector grunted with the effort of balancing him against his shoulder as he fumbled for the knife. The blade looked black from Darren’s blood as Hector swiped at the plastic. He cradled Darren in his lap as he fumbled for a towel in his backpack to wrap around the severed finger. Darren convulsed once, twice, and then went very still.

TWENTY

The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure your enemies would love to steal away. And you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you've said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried while you were saying it. That's the worst, I think. When the secret stays locked within not for want of a teller, but for want of an understanding ear. - Stephen King, *Different Seasons*

Once I figured out that this was not any ‘afterlife’ or ‘lingering place’, I was able to get the other spirits trapped here to talk to me. That man had created a cell for himself and dragged us, his ‘energy,’ in here with him. We were just balls of light now, some brighter than others.

There was nothing I could do for the boy, though; even after I figured it out, he faded away until he was gone. I will be forever sorry that I couldn't help him get back where he belonged.

I was surprised when the spirit returned. I felt his presence long before they entered the building. The boy's father was with him, and I heard him, like I had heard voices before when groups of people would gather.

I hovered close by. He kept asking for his son. His father looked so desperate. I drew closer and...it happened. The shadow lost his hold on Darren's body. One minute I was floating above, and the next I was learning how to breathe again.

I was in pain and hurt and crying, and it was wonderful. For the first time in many, many years, I was alive. Really alive.

I wasn't allowed to stay with the father. No one bothered me for weeks because of the 'ordeal' that I had been through. I was whisked away, to a place called Utah to be with my 'mother' and 'step-father'. They are confused why I don't hate him for what he did to my finger. I know it wasn't his fault, and he was only trying to save his son. I wish I could have guided his son back to him.

When I turn eighteen, I'm going to go see Hector again. No one can stop me. You're considered an adult then, and can pretty much do anything you want. I want to go back and try to make things right. Let him know that what happened was not his fault.

I think Hector—Dad—is the only one who will listen and understand.

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