

Hidden fortunes. Con men. Possessed furniture.

Nearly Departed



Max Patrick Schlienger

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by Max Patrick Schlienger

OBOOKO Edition

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A Note from the Author

This book wouldn't have been possible without the help and support of several people. My talented editors, Joy and Amy, were quick to tell me when an idea was stupid. Corinne, who served as my first proofreader, used her real-life accent to help me get my characters' British vernacular right.

So, if you're mad that this book exists, blame them.

Nearly Departed is a work of fiction, at least as far as the main characters and their interactions with each other go. However, all of the locations – except for Thoreau's Tavern – are real, as are many of the events, historical accounts, and bizarre Californian laws. Of particular note is the San Francisco Ghost Hunt Walking Tour, which leaves from the Queen Anne Hotel every Wednesday through Sunday at 7:00pm. It is guided by Jim Fassbinder, who is (despite appearing in this book) also a very real person.

Chapter One

It was a dark and stormy night. While the darkness could probably be taken for granted, it took a certain amount of good fortune for the presence of the rain to complete the evening's mysterious setting. A flash of lightning would have been nice, but the San Francisco Bay Area was not known for its impressive storms. There was actually a decent chance that the weather would undergo a drastic change at any second, and begin to imitate a climate with a decidedly less ominous nature. For now, at least, the regrettable absence of thunder was an annoyance, but an expected one. If nothing else, it called attention to the sound of rain on the sidewalk and its muted echo as the drops spattered on the shingled roofs of nearby houses.

Contrary to what the scowl on his face would have lead a passerby to believe, the lone figure standing in the rain was secretly grateful for the evening's weather. It meant that the mood for his work was already set, which would limit the amount of effort he'd have to expend in creating the necessary atmosphere. A cloud of thick smoke billowed from his mahogany pipe, and he watched as it drifted towards the unimpressive house across the street. Even in the dim light, he could see the paint was old and marked with cracks, and a section of the front porch slumped despondently, having long since succumbed to the effects of gravity.

The figure rummaged in his pocket and came away with a silver pocket watch. His gloved hands fumbled with the catch, and he muttered something indistinct in an irritated whisper. Finally, after glancing around to make sure that he was alone, the figure replaced the pocket watch and instead looked at the time displayed on the glowing screen of his cellular phone. Satisfied, he replaced the phone in his overcoat's inside pocket, having first checked to make sure that it had been programmed to remain silent. The last thing he needed was for it to start playing that ridiculous song which indicated that someone was calling him.

A sputtering hiss emanated from the damp sidewalk as the figure tapped out the contents of his pipe and crossed the street towards the house with the cracked paint. Then, cursing silently, he hurried back and retrieved the slim black briefcase from where he had set it before digging for his watch. Once again, he glanced around to make sure that his behavior had gone unseen, taking particular care to examine the illuminated windows of the house in front of him. There was no visible movement, which he took to be a good sign, and he approached at a slightly more hurried pace than he had the first time. After reaching the door, the figure stopped for just long enough to quickly inspect himself, and then reached forward and knocked on the door with three slow, steady hits.

Several seconds passed, and the figure wondered if he should have just used the doorbell. Before he could knock again, however, there was a sound of movement from the other side of the door, and it swung open to reveal a heavyset woman in a pleated skirt and a homemade brown sweater. Her long hair, which probably would have been graying if not for the unrealistically red dye, did very little to hide the gaudy earrings and necklaces that framed her face. She stared through the doorway, squinting in an effort to pierce the shadows cast by the figure's black fedora.

"Doctor September?" the woman asked hesitantly.

The figure stepped forward, allowing the light from within the house to slowly climb up his body. His attire was completely black, save for the brown tweed sport coat and

cream-colored tie worn beneath his duster. He placed his pipe in his coat's pocket, and removed his oblong glasses, which he wiped on his sleeve to clear the droplets of water still clinging to the lenses.

"Yes," the figure replied finally, replacing the glasses on the bridge of his nose, "I am Doctor Darvyn Luciano September. You may call me what you wish." Without waiting for an invitation, he stepped forward again and looked around the interior of the house. He stroked his neatly-trimmed beard as he moved, running his fingers along where the edges were streaked with gray. After a moment, he turned back to the woman, who had closed the door and was watching him with a look of simultaneous nervousness, excitement and – he suppressed a shudder – lust.

"Well, then," said September. His voice was not especially deep or forceful, but it was rather compelling and tinged with a mysterious accent that may have been German in origin. At least, he hoped it sounded mysterious. "Why don't we sit down," he suggested, "and you can tell me a little more about your problem."

"Oh! Oh, yes, of course!" the woman said, rushing forward. There was a duck-like quality to her gait, which was still surprisingly quick for a woman of her build, and her excessive jewelry jangled discordantly as she walked. She gestured to a table, bare save for a steaming white mug of something or other. It stood in the middle of a room that was almost maze-like as a result of the numerous pieces of eclectic artwork adorning much of the available space near the walls. September walked cautiously, holding his briefcase in front of him so as not to accidentally knock over a cheap wooden sculpture which may or may not have been of some kind of cat. He placed the briefcase on the table, and pulled off his gloves as the woman looked on. Her gaze held more interest than one might have expected given the situation, but then again, the situation wasn't strictly a normal one.

"Can I take your coat?" the woman asked. "Or your hat?"

"That would be most kind of you," replied September, removing both articles. His brown hair was streaked with gray in much the same way as his beard, and he ran his fingers through it once to smooth it out. The woman draped September's overcoat on one of her many sculptures and then placed his fedora on the head of another before hurrying back to the table and sitting down opposite him.

"Now, Mrs. Bennett –" September began as he sat down, but the woman interrupted him.

"Oh, no, call me Moon." That was a new one, thought September. He cleared his throat quietly.

"Very well, Moon. I understand you've been having some problems of the supernatural variety."

"Oh, I don't know that I'd call them *problems*," the woman laughed. "It's just something I hope you can fix, is all."

"I will certainly try," said September. He opened his briefcase and started removing objects from within it. "While I am preparing, perhaps you can explain things in a little more detail." He was consciously avoiding the use of the woman's name, for fear of sounding insincere. She had been listed as Alberta Bennett, a forty-six-year-old waitress from Pacifica, a few miles south of San Francisco. The house had belonged to her ex-husband who had, at least by her telling, left her many years ago when the mystical energy that surrounded her had gotten to be too much for him. Since then, she had been single, although a range of failed romances had marked the time. It was another detail

that September would have preferred to ignore, but it was also likely to be his best chance for success with the woman. He continued to pull things from his briefcase, paying little attention to the story he was being told, which was remarkably similar to the one she had offered him on the phone earlier in the week.

"The way I understand it," September said, jumping in when the woman paused for a breath, "is that you feel there is a malicious entity that is attracted to your power, and that this entity has been driving people away from you."

"It's been really terrible," the woman replied, sounding almost giddy, and not at all like she thought the situation was terrible in the least. "I've been on three dates this month, with guys who asked me out at the restaurant. That's where I work, did I tell you? At a restaurant?"

"You told me," answered September. "Go on."

"So, I've been on three dates," the woman said again, "and every time, when I tell them that I'm a witch, the spirit scares them off."

"I see." September set a black candle in the center of the table. He had chosen it not so much for its dark color but for its tendency to sputter and crackle predictably while lit. "How, exactly, does this spirit scare these men away?"

"It sneaks into their minds and tells them to avoid me," the woman responded. She watched with wide eyes as September took a box of matches from the assorted items on the table and lit the candle with a quick and practiced motion. It threw off a light shower of embers before settling into a burn that was more or less steady, punctuated only by the occasional hiss of smoke.

"Why do you think this spirit is doing this to you?" He replaced the matches in his briefcase, then set about arranging the various remaining objects around the candle. There was a tiny pewter pyramid, an ornate metal box, two silver chopsticks and what looked like it might have been an ancient medallion of some kind, but was in fact a buffalo nickel that had been flattened with a hammer. September looked up at the woman over the rims of his glasses. "Moon?" he prompted, still feeling silly.

"Oh, oh, sorry!" she replied, shaking her head quickly. "Yeah, I think he wants me for himself, and he doesn't like competition."

"So this spirit is a male, then."

"Oh, yes!" the woman replied enthusiastically. "Yes, he's definitely a man. Sometimes he shows himself to me. He's very handsome, very muscular, and he's very, *very* attentive." She giggled to herself.

"When did he first show up?" asked September hastily. The response came as though he hadn't said anything at all.

"I'm pretty sure he's been here for a long time. He might have been here for the Gold Rush, even, but I couldn't sense him until I started trying to date again. The other women in my coven told me that it would be good for me to have a companion."

"Do these other women have spirits following them, too?" September thought about reaching for the notebook he kept in his inside pocket, but waited to hear the answer to his question first.

"Oh, no..." the woman replied. She had a smile on her face that might have given her the air of having some forbidden secret, but only if one didn't look too closely. "None of them have the *gift*. They're too involved with other things. Why, one of them even has a husband who is Jewish, and they didn't even have a handfasting!"

"How horrid," September answered flatly, keeping his face neutral.

"I know, it's awful, isn't it? They think that I'm missing the point by talking to spirits and doing my spells, but they're not the ones who have to deal with this!"

"That... really doesn't make any sense," said September hesitantly.

"What?"

He bowed his head. "I'm sorry; I was meditating on your situation."

"You said I didn't make any sense," the woman said with a hint of suspicion. September's face gave no indication as to his thoughts, but he was hastily trying to recover the situation.

"I think you may have misheard me, Moon," he said calmly. "I merely said that I agree with you, and that it doesn't seem to make sense for you to have to deal with this on your own." It might have been a stretch, but he had learned some time ago that many people had a habit of going along with things if they thought it had been their idea. As he expected, the woman's skepticism quickly dissipated.

"You're absolutely right," she said. She took a sip from the mug in front of her. "Oh, I'm sorry, would you like some tea?"

"Thank you, but I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" she pressed. "I make it myself."

"I'm fine."

Several minutes passed in awkward silence, during which time September rearranged the objects on the table, more or less at random. Moon watched with fading interest, seemingly intent on some result that was threatening to remain absent. It might be prudent, September thought, to keep her talking, but just as he was about to launch into another string of practiced patter, the candle let out a sharp crack, and a glowing ember danced into the air. September adjusted his glasses and followed the glow with his eyes, putting on an expression of intense concentration.

"Oh, my..." He turned one of the chopsticks to face the candle, then slowly rotated the pyramid.

"What?" asked the woman excitedly, her curiosity suddenly returned. "What? What is it?"

September held up a finger for silence, continuing to turn the pyramid as he stared at the candle. Usually, the sparks came in groups, and he probably only needed to wait a few more seconds before –

"Oh my god!" the woman exclaimed, as a sudden outburst of sound and light erupted from the candle.

"Now!" September shouted. He reached forward and opened the silver box, and then slammed it shut. The candle sputtered once or twice more before going back to burning quietly and steadily. September leaned forward and lightly blew it out, leaving a thin trail of smoke rising towards the ceiling.

"What was that?" the woman asked. "What did you do? What happened?"

"Nothing significant," September replied, pulling the box towards him and opening it. He pretended to examine the contents – or lack thereof – and did his best to ignore the reflection of his own blue eyes staring back at him from the polished silver interior. After a moment of silence, during which the woman anxiously folded and unfolded her hands, September looked up.

"I have found the source of your problem," he declared. He adjusted his glasses and met the woman's stare straight-on. "However, this is not a matter of eliminating the spirit or of dealing with him directly. The two of you have become linked, and so it is you who must stop him from driving your suitors away."

"Hah, my suitors," the woman laughed.

"Ma'am... Moon..." September began. "I am not supposed to do this, but I can sense that you are a special case, and it is my desire to help you." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a business card. "Your situation is not in my area of expertise, but I do have a friend who can provide you with much better assistance. He is both well-qualified and trustworthy." He held the card out to the woman, who took it eagerly at first, but then scowled with anger and suspicion.

"A shrink?" she scoffed. "You want to send me to a fucking shrink? God, they all want to send me to fucking shrinks..." September leaned forward and removed his glasses, willing his gaze to appear both stern and piercing.

"He is no mere psychiatrist, Moon. This man will help you learn how to control your spirit, and how to keep him from upsetting your life any further." He gestured with his glasses. "I do not have the ability to help you here. I am an investigator and a consultant, nothing more. If you wish to continue on your own, that is your choice. However, if you have any desire to bring this spirit under your power..." He trailed off and let the sentence hang in the air. It had the calculated effect. The woman's look of suspicion was replaced by one of interest and greed, tinged only slightly with the sort of apprehension one would expect from a more... a more sane person, he supposed.

"Really?" she asked. She looked down at the card again. "How come you're not supposed to tell people about him?" September returned his glasses to their place on the bridge of his nose and stood. He retrieved his briefcase from the floor and carefully packed the objects on the table back inside it.

"He does not often take on new clients, but with my recommendation, he will undoubtedly be willing to speak with you." He snapped the briefcase shut and went to take his overcoat and hat from the sculptures where they had been hung. He hoped that the woman wouldn't realize that he had not actually answered her question, and he donned his outer clothing as quickly as he could manage without seeming rushed.

"Oh, I'll let you out," the woman said. She hurried past September, nearly knocking him into one of the cat-like statues, and opened the door. Even in the brief few moments he had been inside, the rain had mostly dissipated, leaving a damp coating of water on the ground and a thin mist blurring the air. September walked forward, pulling on his gloves and trying not to appear clumsy as he wrestled with his briefcase.

"I sincerely hope that things work out for you," he said as he stepped outside. The woman leaned against the doorframe and watched him leave.

"Goodnight, Doctor September." He winced even before he answered, but saw no way of avoiding it at this point.

"Goodnight, Moon."

Then, with a nod of his head, he turned on his heel, walking up the street and into the night.



The man called September arrived at his beat-up green car with the unpleasant feeling of cold water running down the back of his neck. His attempts at locating the source of the drip had proved futile, and had left him with a stiff shoulder rather than a dry spine. He shrugged off his overcoat and tossed it into the back seat, followed shortly by his hat. A few seconds after climbing in himself, he remembered that his phone was still trapped in one of the overcoat's pockets, and he reached back to try and find it. Outdated though it was, he fervently hoped that the phone had not fallen out while he was in Alberta "Moon" Bennett's house, and he felt a sense of relief when his fingers finally closed around its shape. A quick check of the display showed that he had missed a few calls from "Thoreau's," but that was probably just Luke calling him in an effort to impress some girl he had met.

Twenty minutes later, the car pulled into the driveway of a small house on the southern edge of San Francisco. The highways had been all but deserted, save for a few police cars and one very angry-looking teenager, and the trip had been otherwise uneventful. September set the car's parking brake, grabbed his briefcase, hat, and coat, and walked up to the front door, which swung open as he reached for the handle. An attractive woman in her late twenties glared out at him, brushing a curl of chestnut-colored hair from her face.

"How many times have I asked you to tell Luke to stop calling past nine?" she said. "If he has to call, he should call you on your cell phone. And he should learn to get dates without your help." She reached out to take the briefcase, and pulled September into the house.

"I missed you too, Alena," he replied jokingly. The house was warm and inviting, particularly after the rain. Matching couches in a relaxed off-white color flanked the spacious area, and the marble coffee table at the living room's center was piled high with dog-eared novels.

"Still not enough to wear your ring, I see," Alena joked back. She tossed a silver band at him, and he fumbled to catch it. "Honestly, Dennis, would it be that bad if people knew you were married?"

He slid the ring onto his finger. Then, wincing, he reached up to peel the fake beard from his face. Tiny flakes of glue still clung to his skin, but he was immediately more recognizable as himself.

"September can't be married," replied Dennis. "I mean, half of these women want to hit on him."

"On you, you mean." She gave him a warm smile. Alena and Dennis Gufehautt had been married for nearly a year now, and she wasn't showing any signs of losing her youthful beauty. Luke, Dennis's best friend (and best man) had warned him that marriage would "Turn that fox into an elephant," and was always quick to encourage Dennis to spend more time at Thoreau's, the bar where Luke worked. In truth, his friend was mainly interested in using Dennis' presence for his own prospects, since Dennis had been bestowed with minor celebrity status after mentioning the bar in his recently-published book. He wasn't bothered by it, although Luke's late-night phone calls did have the unpleasant effect of irritating his wife.

"Me, him... It's all relative. Hell, do you remember that hag from last week? She actually mentioned me by name."

"You, or you?" Alena asked jokingly. She shoved Dennis' shoulder good-naturedly. "Go wash your hair. I don't want any more gray stains on the pillowcases." Dennis touched his temple experimentally and examined the tips of his fingers. The label on the spray he used claimed that the color would stand up to quite a bit of wear, although the pale ring that had been forming on the inside of his hat said otherwise. He smirked as he moved towards the bathroom, picturing a gray residue on the head of a wooden cat sculpture. No doubt it would be attributed to spiritual essence or something.

"So, how did it go?" came Alena's voice from the other room. Dennis waited before answering, fully aware that her interest was only for his benefit. Alena had never spoken against Dennis' profession – which was more of a hobby, anyway – but he was well aware that she disapproved. In her opinion, his time was better spent writing, rather than in the presence of delusional and occasionally deranged followers of the occult. There had been times, he had to admit, when he had felt like he had gotten in over his head, and more than one occasion where the validity of his advice had been called into question. Secretly, though, it was the thrill of the act that Dennis enjoyed, and it was something that he just couldn't find while sitting in front of a keyboard.

"It went well enough," Dennis answered finally. He opened the medicine cabinet and removed a small bottle of fluid, the contents of which he rubbed on his face. The oily substance made tiny clumps out of the clinging flakes of glue, and he plucked at them with a piece of wadded-up tissue. "I got the idea that she just wants someone to talk to." He dabbed more of the fluid onto a portion of his skin that was still sticky. "Actually," he continued, "I think what she *really* wanted was for someone to tell her more about her own haunt. I'm sure that there was more to her story than she told me, but since she doesn't really believe it, it wouldn't have been as satisfying if she had thrown all the details out there."

"Like what?" asked Alena. Dennis could hear her doing something in the kitchen, and felt a brief stab of guilt for having missed dinner that evening.

"Well, she said that the spirit had been in her house since the Gold Rush, even though it couldn't possibly have been that old."

"The house, or the spirit?" asked Alena.

"The house," Dennis replied. "But it means that she had a backstory worked out, and she didn't tell me much of it." He paused, trying to recall. "Or, if she did, then I wasn't listening. Anyway, she was hoping that I would give her more material, or tell her something that she hadn't already thought of."

"Did you?"

Dennis tossed the used tissues at the garbage can in the corner, missed, and bent to pick them up. "No," he replied. "If I had, then she would have been satisfied, and there wouldn't be any reason for her to call Sam." Samuel Harding was the name listed on the business cards that Dennis distributed. The two had met at Thoreau's on the night of Dennis' bachelor party, and Dennis had taken a hesitant liking to the man. He tended to be a bit overzealous in his desire to help people, whether they wanted to be helped or not, but he had a genuine concern that Dennis was both amused and impressed by.

"So, are you going to shower, or should I get started on making dinner?" came Alena's voice from the kitchen.

Dennis paused. "You didn't eat already?" he called back.

"I was waiting for you."

“Oh.” He felt another pang of guilt. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Dennis, it’s fine, just don’t take too long.”

Dennis stood for a moment, then reached over and turned on the faucet. He caught the faint scent of pipe tobacco as he stripped off his clothes, and made a mental note to brush his teeth before exiting the bathroom. In another few seconds, he was standing beneath a warm cascade, which was a welcome change from the cold precipitation he had been caught in earlier. As he bathed, he played through the night’s events in his mind, augmenting them and adjusting them for later, when he would write them down, and in all likelihood, never think of them again. He let out a short sigh and ducked his head under the stream of water. The entire thing – the act, the business cards, the persona of Doctor September – had all started as a way for Dennis to get ideas for his next book. He had soon discovered that every alleged haunting he encountered was a predictable version of the same story. The details shifted and the characters went by different names, but for the most part everything else was identical. He would never admit it, except possibly to Alena (and *definitely* not to Sam), but when he had started with the façade he had secretly hoped that he would encounter a real ghost or specter or... something. The closest he had come had been his visit to a séance-holding psychic with an electrical problem, and that trip had only taken place because she had misinterpreted Dennis’ cryptically-worded advertisement.

There was a mild sting in Dennis’ eye as a trail of dye-laden soap passed by, and he splashed some water at his face to clear it. He occasionally wondered when he had finally become disillusioned, but always concluded that it didn’t really matter. Sam paid a small finder’s fee for each new client that Dennis brought in, but the act alone was enough to keep him interested. Granted, it wasn’t quite the exciting story of a ghost-busting adventurer that he had hoped for, but the intrigue of masquerading as a pseudo-supernatural con artist was almost as good. Dennis smiled in spite of himself as he washed the last traces of gray dye from his hair. Out of everyone he knew, his friend Luke had been the most supportive of Dennis’ idea, and that had been largely out of a sense of personal pride. When Dennis had first moved back to California after a romantic misadventure, it had been Luke’s prompting that led Dennis to experiment with schemes such as this. Although his attempts had been few and hardly profitable, they had provided him with the necessary confidence and material to pursue Alena, get his book published, and move out of Luke’s tiny apartment. It was ironic, he thought, that a man whose hobby was essentially an extended con had found his greatest degree of success in writing a novel about the subject.

The smell of spices and cooking fish greeted Dennis as he exited the bathroom. Although technically a vegetarian, Alena was nonetheless very skilled in concocting meals which Dennis found quite appetizing. He took a moment to peer into the kitchen before hurrying towards the bedroom with his armful of damp clothing, intent on dealing with the articles before sitting down to eat. He carefully hung the coats, shirt, and tie, and then tossed the remaining pieces at the hamper in the corner of the room. As with the tissues earlier, he missed, and spent a grumbling moment on his hands and knees as he tried to locate an errant sock. His search was interrupted midway through by Alena shouting that dinner was ready. He made another mental note to find the escaped clothing later and hastily pulled on a shirt and sweatpants.

The table was set with two plates, each piled with a generous helping of salmon and rice. Dennis sat down across from Alena, who was already patiently waiting for him. As soon as his fork was in his hand, she began ravenously swallowing her food, pausing only when she saw Dennis staring at her quizzically.

“What?” she asked through a mouthful of fish. Dennis shook his head with a grin.

“Nothing.”

Alena put down her fork and swallowed. “I know it’s something. What?” she asked again.

Dennis shrugged and picked at his own food, peeling a small bit of skin away from the salmon. “I just haven’t seen you eat like that in awhile. Busy day?” Alena rolled her eyes and resumed eating, but at a subdued pace.

“I shouldn’t have taken that extra class on. I know Antonio needs the time, but it’s getting to be a bit too much. I might have to hire another instructor.”

Dennis nodded noncommittally, knowing full well that his wife preferred to work through her troubles on her own. She ran a small dance studio in downtown San Francisco, which kept her active both physically and otherwise. Her partner, a man named Antonio Cortez, had recently been offered a job as a supporting character in a local film, and much of his time over the past few months had been spent in rehearsal and preparation for the role. As a result, Alena had taken over the task of teaching his classes when he was unavailable, but the added effort was having an effect on her free time. Also, Dennis mused, apparently on her lunch breaks.

“Well, I could stop by and bring you something if you want,” Dennis offered. Since the success of his book, he had nothing but free time, which was also a likely contributor to his habit of donning a fake beard and an old hat. Alena continued to eat, shaking her head as she scraped the rice together on her plate.

“Thanks, but don’t you have to see Sam tomorrow?” she sat back and flopped her napkin onto the table.

“That will take fifteen minutes, tops,” replied Dennis. “I can visit afterwards. How about I bring you one of those sandwiches you like? You know, from the place with all the birds painted on the ceiling.”

Alena smiled, but there was a certain weariness to her expression. “I’ll just grab something from the market down the street.” Dennis shuddered inwardly as he pictured the place in question. Like so many similar establishments in the city, the shop Alena was referring to advertised its presence by the means of a large, broken sign that spelled out the words “LIQUOR, FOOD, PRODUCE,” and seemed to cater more to drunks and derelicts than famished dance instructors.

“No, really,” Dennis pressed. “I insist. I’ll just swing by and drop it off, and you can eat it on your break. You won’t even know that I’m there, I promise.” This time, when Alena smiled, the warmth crept back into her eyes, and Dennis could see her relaxing.

“I bet you use that line on all the girls, don’t you?” Of the many things he liked about her, Alena’s wit was probably top on Dennis’ list, and the fact that her jokes frequently caught him off-guard was rather appealing. True to form, it took him a moment to recognize the suggestive tone in Alena’s statement, and she laughed at the expression of dawning comprehension that crossed his face. She continued to tease him as they left the dining room, where the dishes remained on the table until the next morning.

Chapter Two

No matter how many times Dennis visited the office of Doctor Samuel Harding, he always managed to get lost on the way there. Allegedly, its placement in the fifteen-story building had remained unchanged during the duration of Harding's career, but Dennis had always held the vague suspicion that it relocated when he wasn't paying attention. Still, his confusion upon looking at the building's directory was always replaced by a sense of amused shock when he entered the office's waiting room. Harding had a strange habit of hanging large pictures, painted by his wife, on the far wall. Although they were purportedly of the abstract variety, the assemblages of shapes and colors always seemed to Dennis to have vaguely sexual undertones. The current piece, for example, might very well have portrayed two obese men playing leapfrog in the nude.

There was no receptionist present, which was odd for Harding, who touted an unrivaled hatred of telephones and paperwork. Also, the door leading to his personal office was closed, which only happened when Harding had a patient. Dennis checked his watch, and confirmed that this was when Harding usually took his lunch break. Although he had been warned to never knock when the door was closed, Dennis considered breaking the mandate on the possibility that Harding had merely forgotten about their weekly meeting and had dozed off on his couch. The absence of the receptionist, who Dennis knew to be both young and attractive, also brought forth suspicions of a more sinister nature. Then again, there was always the possibility that one of Harding's sessions was simply running late, in which case a knock at the door would be an unwelcome interruption.

Not that it wouldn't in the other case, Dennis thought. He sat down in one of the few chairs that lined the walls of the waiting room, and pretended to browse through a newspaper that had been folded on the receptionist's desk. He thought that he could hear voices coming from behind the closed door, but it could just as easily have been the sounds of conversation from one of the offices down the hall. With a sigh, Dennis flipped through the paper until he came to the one section he ever actually read, and was disappointed, as he usually was, by the poor quality of the comics that he found there.

The sudden sound of footsteps and the click of a lock being turned called Dennis' attention back to the office door, which opened to reveal both Harding and a man whom Dennis had never seen before. Harding was lean and fair, with a gaunt frame and a receding hairline. He was rather spry for a man in his mid-seventies, and the knowing glimmer in his pale blue eyes did quite a bit to offset his moderately frail appearance. The other man was a stark contrast, with dark skin and eyes, and a closely-trimmed mustache that was shot through with coarse gray hairs. He appeared to be in his late fifties or even older, but the way he moved showed a rippling of muscle beneath his collared shirt.

"I'll be in touch," the man said to Harding. He looked briefly at Dennis, who had the strange feeling that he had just been scrutinized in much greater detail than the passing glance had implied.

Once the man had left, Harding stepped forward. "Dennis, I'm glad to see you. Sorry about the delay." He gestured back at his office, and Dennis stood to accept the invitation.

"That guy didn't look like one of your clients."

Harding closed the door behind them and locked the deadbolt. He didn't answer until he had almost reached his chair, situated behind a large brown desk. Even under the man's light weight, it creaked and groaned loudly. Dennis moved to sit opposite him, his own chair mute.

"They're patients, Dennis, not clients." Harding put on a pair of large glasses with thick lenses, which only intensified his grandfatherly appearance. He blinked a few times as his eyes adjusted, and then peered at Dennis with interest.

"Okay, well, he didn't look like a patient, then," Dennis said. Harding waved a hand as though brushing at an invisible fly, and let out a snort that was both irritated and dismissing.

"He's nobody of importance. A retired detective with a vendetta. Don't worry," Harding said, cutting off Dennis' next question, "it has nothing to do with you. You're not doing anything illegal."

"Actually," replied Dennis, "I was going to ask if you were in trouble." He smirked at the slight confusion on the other man's face. It was true enough that Dennis had been plagued by a measure of uncertainty about his portrayal of Darvyn September. Harding had suggested it upon hearing of Dennis' past attempts at confidence schemes, and had needed to convince Dennis of the legality of the concept. He had explained that because Dennis would be receiving no money from the people he visited, he would be well within the boundaries of the law. Whether or not that detail was true was something that Dennis had never been entirely certain about, but he went along with it nonetheless.

"No, no trouble, just a former patient of mine with an overactive imagination," Harding explained. "She made all kinds of outrageous claims about her daughter seeing ghosts, so now the girl's uncle – that's the cop you saw – thinks I'm behaving inappropriately."

"Are you?"

Harding's mouth tightened until he seemed to realize that Dennis was joking. Then he smiled, and shook a scolding finger across the desk. "You would do well to watch your tongue, Dennis, or I just might!" He added another jerk of his fist for good measure, and then leaned to open a drawer in his desk. "Now, you have spoken to six people, two of whom have made appointments, and one who actually showed up. Sadly, I can only pay you for results, which currently nets you fifty dollars." He placed an envelope on the desk, which Dennis reached forward to collect. Inside, he found two twenties and a ten. Hardly enough to necessitate an envelope, Dennis thought. Harding sat back and clasped his hands. "And how did your little excursion go last night?"

Dennis shook his head. "She's not coming, sorry. Not unless you start offering a dating service for the departed."

Harding arched a bushy eyebrow. "Really? I was under the impression that she was a sure thing. Such was what you led me to believe, anyway." Dennis shrugged.

"She sounded desperate over the phone, but in person she didn't seem like she'd be interested. She just wanted someone to play pretend with her." He scratched his neck idly, mentally preparing for the explanation which Harding was certain to offer. As expected, the man began talking almost immediately.

"Those who look for reinforcement for their delusions are very often the ones who are least convinced by them. They're not interested in shifting their beliefs, only in perpetuating the fantasy. It lends excitement to an existence which may be lacking in it."

"Oh, she was definitely looking for excitement," Dennis replied, remembering the lustful way in which the woman's eyes had followed him. "Just not the kind that I wanted anything to do with." Harding smiled with a mixture of sympathy and amusement, and nodded once.

"Well," he said, looking around at nothing in particular, "I suppose that's it for this week, then. Do you have any appointments scheduled?"

"They're consultations, not appointments," Dennis replied with a sarcastic smirk. If Harding noticed the mockery, he didn't show it. "No, I don't have anything, but I'll let you know if something comes up. It's not like I'm running short on business cards."

"I assume you're discreet with them," Harding said. "It would hardly fare well for either of us if you mentioned the nature of our arrangement."

"Don't worry, Sam, I can hold my tongue when I need to. I'm strictly professional."

Some internal thought flashed past Harding's eyes, and his head tilted as though the force of its passing had pulled him off-balance. "Actually, Dennis," Harding said, tapping his chin with a knuckle, "perhaps a different approach would work."

"What do you mean?"

Harding smiled again, and Dennis bristled. The man was acting more like a father than a friend at this point, which left Dennis feeling uncomfortably young. "Your current method doesn't seem to be having much of an effect lately. I'm merely suggesting a change of tactics."

"Uh huh," Dennis replied, a touch irritably. "What is it that you 'suggest' I do differently?"

Harding continued, either oblivious to Dennis' shift in mood, or choosing to ignore it. "The next time you make an appointment, get to know the person. Spend some time with them. Don't treat it as an appointment, but rather as a social call from a concerned friend. Though I realize you are not a psychiatrist," he spread his hands, "you might try behaving like one."

"That will help, will it?"

"Perhaps," Harding said, nodding. "If you stay in close contact with me throughout the process, I'll be able to help you determine the best time to recommend my involvement."

"Sorry, I must have dozed off there, but it sounded like you were doubting my abilities."

This time, Harding's smile was much more genuine, and made the corners of his eyes wrinkle. "Alright, Dennis, I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget that you're not here for advice. Just give it a try, though?"

Dennis rolled his eyes. "Fine. The next appointment I set up, I'll do it your way, but only once. After that, I'm going back to my old 'tactics,' as you call them."

"Excellent." Harding gave a satisfied nod. "You know, Dennis, I got so caught up with business that I forgot to ask how you're doing. How is the book coming along?"

"Slowly."

Harding smiled sympathetically. "Well, keep at it."

"Sure," replied Dennis noncommittally. "How about you, Sam? Thinking of retirement yet?"

The question brought a warm laugh from Harding's lips. "It's on the table, yes. The time isn't quite right for it, though." He brushed at something on his glasses. "How's Alena, by the way? Anything you need to talk about?"

Dennis held back an annoyed retort, only barely realizing in time that his friend was joking. He forced himself to calm down, and gave Harding a stern look. "Watch it, Sam. Like you said, I'm not one of your clients. Sorry, I meant patients." Harding laughed at that, and checked the small clock on his desk.

"Well, we still have some time until my next one arrives. Would you care to join me for lunch? My treat, of course."

Dennis shook his head apologetically. "Thanks, but not today. I promised Alena that I'd stop by her studio with some food. She's been working pretty hard lately." He stood to leave as Harding leaned forward with an exaggerated motion.

"And how does that make her *feel*?" he asked. Dennis undid the lock on the door.

"Hungry, I'd imagine." He could hear Harding chuckle as he left the office.



Dennis was attempting to balance a sandwich and a container of soup in one hand and sign his credit card receipt with the other when he heard his phone vibrating in his jacket pocket. He hurried over to one of the restaurant's many tables and carefully deposited his items before digging for the source of the noise. Since the phone served as both his personal line and the means of contact for the people who wanted his services, he carefully considered the number it displayed before answering in his mysterious accent.

"This is Doctor September," he said quietly. He glanced around the restaurant, grateful for the current sparseness of inhabitants. Not only would his sudden change of voice likely draw unwanted attention, but the sounds of ambient conversation would have been anything but mysterious.

A female voice, very confident and matter-of-fact, responded to him in a light British accent. "Hello, Doctor. I understand that you provide supernatural counseling." Dennis bit his lip and wondered if he should ask the woman to call back later. The advertisement that he and Harding had posted was intentionally vague, although it did include the words "supernatural counseling." When they had written it, the intent had been to attract those individuals who might actually benefit from the services of a psychiatrist, but who were, save for fantasies about imaginary specters, mostly sane. Unfortunately, both the discreet wording and the nature of the business had attracted more than one person who was legitimately off their rocker, and Dennis had learned to choose his meetings with great care.

"Counseling and consultations are my specialty," he replied as September, "although my services are not for everyone." He checked his watch, wondering if he could conclude the conversation before Alena took her break, and idly brushed his sleeve where a droplet of spilled soup had darkened it. "What is the nature of your problem?" He intentionally neglected to ask the woman's name, since past experience had taught him to build an air of trust before requesting any personal details. His caution turned out to be unnecessary, however, as the woman introduced herself immediately.

"My name is Elspeth Palin," she said. "I've had a ghost, I suppose, for several years now. Is this something you can help me with?" Her direct wording left Dennis feeling unsure of how to proceed, as did the conciseness of her question. Usually, those who called him with the claim of being haunted were only too eager to divulge as many details as possible, which made it considerably easier to get a bearing on the situation. Of course, they were far from the only parties interested. Many of the calls he received were from

people hoping to contact a deceased friend or relative, or less often, who were trying to locate some missing object. On those occasions, Dennis would patiently explain that he dealt only with existing haunts, and could not help them find either dead loved ones or lost car keys.

"Ms. Palin," Dennis hesitantly started, "I would be quite happy to discuss this matter with you at length, if you believe that I could be of some help. Please, when would be a good time for us to converse?" He wouldn't normally have been so rushed, but the diminishing temperature of Alena's soup had given him something of a time limit.

"You can call me this evening," the woman replied. Dennis suppressed a sigh of irritation. He disliked calling his clients, since there was no way to be sure that the timing would be right. If he caught them at the wrong moment, or in the wrong mood, the entire act could fall apart. Although he suspected that Ms. Palin would be fairly gracious, he still had no desire to find out, although she hadn't left him with much of a choice.

"Very well." Dennis checked his watch. "Expect my call at seven. I look forward to speaking with you, Ms. Palin."

"Thank you, Doctor," came the reply, and the line promptly went dead. Dennis rummaged through his various pockets, but the notebook he usually carried was absent, having been left in his overcoat the night before. He made do with scribbling the woman's name on a napkin, along with a bold number seven beneath it. Once finished, he stowed both the napkin and his phone, and stood up to leave.

The motion brought a man into view through the restaurant's side window. That on its own was hardly noteworthy, since pedestrians were anything but rare in the city. Dennis was often one of them, although he didn't count himself among the number who stopped to photograph sandwich shops, as this one seemed to be doing. Strangely enough, the man moved on as soon as Dennis spotted him, pulling a gray baseball cap down over his face.

Well, there were weirder things in the city than restaurant-watchers, and Dennis didn't have time for any of them right now. He grabbed Alena's food and hurried out the door, turning uphill as soon as he hit the sidewalk. It was a fairly short distance to Metro Moves Dance, the studio that Alena ran, although Dennis had to stop several times along the way and switch the hot container of soup from one hand to the other. By the time he arrived, the Styrofoam felt like a lump of molten iron, and he was grateful to see Alena rushing out to greet him.

"Hi," he said as the door opened. "This is hot. Take it away." He thrust the items forward, shaking his hands as they were freed from their burdens. After a moment of comical flapping, he noticed that Alena had been watching his antics with a look of amusement. "What?"

"Nothing," Alena replied, shaking her head.

"I told you it was hot!"

"Yes," she answered, lightly pressing the container against her cheek. "It's downright scalding." She held the door open with her hip, waiting for Dennis to step inside before moving towards the back of the room. The studio was deserted, although the lingering smell of air freshener indicated that Alena had just finished cleaning after a class. As they always were when he visited, Dennis' eyes were drawn to the full-length mirror that adorned the entirety of one wall. Its presence always gave the room an occupied feeling, despite the fact that usually only he and Alena (and sometimes Antonio) were present for

his visits. Alena's reflection never bothered Dennis, but lately the sight of his own, for whatever bizarre reason, had become slightly unnerving. He did his best to ignore it as he followed Alena towards the door at the back of the studio.

The private office was unchanged from the last time Dennis had visited, and it still looked much more like someone's living room than an administrative area. Only the presence of a small filing cabinet and an even smaller safe gave any indication that it was a place of business, and the rest of the space was furnished with a large red couch and two matching recliners. The desk in one corner, usually bare save for Alena's laptop computer, was piled high with notebooks and scraps of paper, all of which were shoved to the side as Alena deposited her lunch next to them.

"So, how's your day going?" Dennis asked. He sat down on the soft seat of the couch, which sank under his weight and wrapped itself gently around his legs.

"Well, it was going fine until some idiot forgot to bring me a spoon," replied Alena. Dennis' brow furrowed in confusion until he realized that her words had been a joke at his expense.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Dennis started to rise. "Would you like me to run back and get one?" Alena smiled and shook her head, removing the lid from the soup as she answered.

"Nah, I'll be fine." She took a slow sip over the brim of the container before replacing it on her desk and reaching for the sandwich. "How about you? How's Sam doing?"

"Actually, it was a bit strange over there today," Dennis said.

"More ugly artwork?"

"No." Dennis tilted his head to one side. "Well, yes, but that wasn't what I meant." He thought back to the man in Harding's office. "He was talking to a retired detective when I got there."

Alena looked up from her sandwich. "There was a cop at Sam's office?"

"An ex-cop," corrected Dennis. "Yeah, apparently one of his patients started seeing ghosts awhile back, so this detective came by to investigate Sam for something."

"I thought you said he was retired?" Alena asked. She went back to eating, although her eyes remained focused on Dennis'.

"Sam said he was the patient's uncle or something. No, wait, it was his patient's daughter who was seeing ghosts." He shook his head to clear the fuzz of details that had coalesced. "I didn't ask too much about it. It was nothing to do with me, so I didn't think I should make it into a big deal." Alena continued to thoughtfully watch him as she chewed.

"I don't know," she said, swallowing in mid-sentence. "Seeing ghosts? That sounds a little too close to what you do to be a coincidence. Are you sure she wasn't someone that you referred?"

"I've only referred, like, nine people," Dennis replied. "Or, rather, only nine of them have actually gone in to see him, and none of them were black." Alena furrowed her brow.

"So? Why does that matter?"

"Oh, the cop was black, so I'm guessing that his niece would be, too."

Alena nodded in understanding, and took another sip from her soup. "Well," she said when she had finished, "just promise me that you'll be careful. I trusted you when you said this game of yours wasn't illegal."

"It isn't." He sounded more sure than he felt. "Actually, I need to make a call tonight at about seven."

"More lonely women with dead boyfriends?" Alena teased. Dennis laughed along with her, but a slight uneasiness crept into him.

"Don't worry," he said, trying to shake off the feeling. "I don't think this is going to be anything like last night. She actually sounded..." he scratched his chin. "I don't know. Intelligent, I guess. Of course, it might have just been the accent."

"She was English?"

"Yeah," Dennis answered, surprised. "How did you know?"

Alena shrugged. "Americans always think that English accents sound intelligent. I mean, why do you talk with a German accent when you're playing Doctor September?"

"It's a Swiss accent, actually, and it's supposed to sound mysterious." He grinned sheepishly. "Anyway, you're just as American as I am."

"So clearly I know what I'm talking about. What time is it?" she asked suddenly.

Dennis looked pointedly at the clock on the wall, then down at his watch. "It's almost two," he said. Alena nodded and wiped at her lips with a paper napkin.

"Alright, you'd better get going. My next class starts soon." She carefully re-wrapped the remainder of her sandwich and replaced the lid on the soup. Dennis struggled to remove himself from the grip of the couch, and finally had to accept a hand from Alena when his efforts proved futile. He had only just gained his footing when the office's door swung open, nearly smacking Dennis in the face and sending him stumbling back.

"Hello?" A face with tanned skin and deep brown eyes peered around the door frame, smiling expectantly.

"Antonio!" squealed Alena happily "What are you doing here?"

Dennis recovered enough to watch his wife's partner pirouette into the room. He wondered, as he always did, if the term "impeccably tousled" could somehow be applied to the man's dark hair, as no other description seemed to fit.

"Well, I *do* work here, don't I?" Antonio pouted jokingly. He looked down at Dennis, still struggling with the couch's grasp, and flashed a bright smile. "Hi, Dennis! Look, I brought food!" He held a brown paper bag out in front of him.

"Oh, thanks, Antonio, but Dennis already brought me lunch." Alena gestured to the leftovers from her meal and shrugged apologetically. "Really, though, shouldn't you be at the studio?"

"I *am* at the studio!" protested Antonio. The indignation of his statement was betrayed somewhat by the unyielding giddiness of his smile, and even more so by the playful laughter that followed. "Oh, you mean the *movie* studio. They gave me three hours off."

"So, naturally, you came to work," Dennis murmured skeptically. "That's exactly what I'd do."

"Oh, do you have a *job* now, Dennis?" Antonio giggled and waved his hands. "I'm kidding, sweetie. I know you're a big-shot author." He sat down next to Dennis, causing the couch to sag even more and eliminating any hope that Dennis might have had of extricating himself from the cushions without assistance. "Here, have some food," Antonio added, dropping the bag into Dennis' lap.

"Dennis hates to fu," Alena said.

"I hate... Yes, what she said."

Antonio looked from Dennis to Alena, a look of exaggerated confusion on his face. "Oh, come *on*, am I *that* predictable?"

"Yes," answered Dennis. "Next you'll tell us that you went to a wonderful restaurant and just had to share whatever it was that you ordered, so you saved some."

Antonio let out an exaggerated gasp. "I *am* that predictable!"

"It's why we love you," replied Alena.

"Not my pleasant nature or my –" he struck a pose from the couch, "– stellar physique?"

It was a stellar physique that kept Dennis from answering, as Alena chose that moment to rise and remove her sweatshirt, revealing the form-fitting leotard she wore beneath it. Dennis stared in spite of himself, admiring his wife's slender form. Antonio continued to preen, his voice increasing in volume.

"Of course, now that I'm a *movie* star, I guess everyone will love me." Alena's head was caught in the recesses of her sweatshirt, and Dennis was too distracted to respond. "Hey!" Antonio nudged Dennis in the ribs. "Should I get out of here and give you two some *alone* time?"

"Ow," muttered Dennis. "I mean, no. She has to work and I have to..." he left the sentence unfinished, remembering both his conversation with Elspeth Palin and the sight of the man with the camera.

"You both have to get going before my next class gets here!" Alena said. She glanced at Antonio, who had reclaimed his paper bag and was pulling bits of unidentifiable food from within it. "Unless you think you can hang around and help?"

"Sure, I'll stay!"

"I'm going to head to Thoreau's for a bit," Dennis said. He struggled against the couch's grasp, ultimately needing to accept help from both Alena and Antonio before he managed to break free. To his slight irritation, both dancers seemed incredibly amused by his plight, and Antonio made a show of popping upright unassisted.

"Okay," replied Alena, planting a kiss on Dennis' lips. "I'll see you tonight." They quickly embraced, and Dennis left the studio, intentionally turning a cold shoulder to the mirror as he passed.



If there was one thing in the city that Dennis could count on as being forever unchanged, it was Thoreau's Tavern. The exterior of the dark brick building gave little indication as to what lay inside, although the neon signs in the shape of various beer logos provided a helpful hint. Stepping through the door, however, was often a bit of a gentle surprise to newcomers. Although the interior had much the same aged and weather-beaten feeling as the building that housed it, the atmosphere and furnishings were considerably more in keeping with an antiques shop than a dive bar. The tinted and shuttered windows kept all but the most tenacious rays of sunlight out, and the muted glow from the hanging lamps did little more than cast shadows on the mismatched assortment of chairs and tables dotting the establishment. A lingering scent, almost like cinnamon, tinted every breath drawn with a hint of both comfort and excitement, and the pristine, well-stocked shelves of expensive vodka and scotch made the entire room feel like something out of a scene from an old gangster film.

Dennis stood in the doorway, giving his eyes time to adjust. After a moment, he could see a familiar figure standing behind the bar, looking at him with a mixture of impatience and amusement.

"Where were you last night?" Luke asked as a means of greeting. "I tried calling you five times, and I got a lecture from your wife about politeness." Dennis had to smile. Lucas Colby had been his best friend for most of his adult life, and the two of them had often been mistaken for brothers. Personally, Dennis didn't see the resemblance, as Luke had bright blonde hair – which he had been growing out, Dennis noted – and a round, boyish face that shared almost no similarity with Dennis' own lean appearance. Only their eyes matched, and anyone who cared to look would see the difference in the way that Dennis quietly watched the world, whereas Luke made a point of staring it down.

"I was busy," Dennis replied, stepping further into the tavern. None of the regulars stirred, each of them intent on communing with their various intoxicating drinks. In another hour or two, Dennis knew, the room would be a bit less deserted, as Thoreau's offered an afternoon happy hour that seemed to draw all sorts of interesting characters out of their hiding places.

"Too busy to help your buddy get laid? Come on, man, she was a *model*." Luke threw a worn dishrag onto the bar and folded his arms.

"I'm sure you did fine on your own," replied Dennis. "Anyway, you really need to stop calling my house. I have a cell phone for a reason." He sat down on one of the cushioned barstools and fidgeted as it adjusted to his weight. Luke rolled his eyes and leaned forward, an expression of mock irritation on his face.

"If you weren't so obsessed with your crazy old ladies, you might remember that this place made you famous. You should be a little more grateful."

"I'm hardly famous," Dennis answered.

Luke snorted and jerked a thumb behind him. "Yeah, well, there's an autographed picture of you on the wall, so you're definitely something."

Dennis let out an exaggerated sigh as he looked in the direction of Luke's gesture. "I wish you'd take that down," he said, eying the black-and-white photograph in question. "That's not even my real signature."

"Maybe I wouldn't have needed to forge it if you had just signed the damned thing."

They leered at one another until Dennis' face finally cracked into a smile. Luke nodded once in satisfaction and placed a bottle of beer with a purple label in front of him.

"Still making this swill, I see," Dennis said, taking a sip. The beer, Matlock's, as its white lettering proclaimed, was brewed locally by Luke and a few friends, including the woman who owned the tavern. Dennis had never had much of a liking for beer, but the taste of the beverage he was currently downing was not at all bad. He'd never give Luke the satisfaction of hearing that he actually enjoyed it, but there were definitely worse things to be drinking.

"I'm sorry, did you just insult a free beer?" Luke asked. Dennis shrugged and took another sip.

"I didn't realize that you could actually get people to pay money for it." He watched as Luke fought to suppress a smile and busied himself with wiping down the already spotless bar. After a moment, he abandoned the act, and pulled out a bottle that was identical to Dennis'.

"So, let's have it," Luke said after taking a long swallow. "Old ladies, crazy ghost stories, what?"

"Just like every other time, really."

"She tried to brand you with a tuning fork, then?"

Dennis winced at the memory. "Okay, that was not a typical encounter." He rubbed the spot on his arm where he had nearly received the burn.

"And tell me, Doctor February, you keep doing this why?" Luke asked.

"It's 'September,' Luke." He took another sip of his beer and shrugged. "You're the one who told me to become a con artist. I'm just going with it while I write my next book."

"Being a con artist requires that you make some money at it. You're a con masturbationist, is what you are."

Dennis stopped halfway through his next retort, and a thoughtful look crossed his face. A few seconds passed before his eyes met Luke's again, and this time his expression was one of suspicion.

"On that note," Dennis said, tapping the lip of his bottle. He stared off into space.

Luke glanced around as though searching for a hint about what his friend was referring to. "What note? You being the lousiest con artist on the planet, or masturbation in general?"

"The former."

"Good, because I really don't want to know about your —"

"Why do they do this?" Dennis interrupted. "I mean, why do these people invent imaginary friends for themselves? And why do they like preaching about it so much?"

Luke's face adopted an incredulous expression. "Have you been going to church when I'm not looking?" His comment drew a sour glare from two of the other tavern's patrons, and Dennis could see their disapproving looks reflected back at him in the mirror behind the shelves. He continued speaking in a more subdued tone, reminding himself that they were not alone.

"I got this weird phone call today," Dennis explained. "This woman saw my ad, and she wanted to know if I could help. The funny thing was," he continued, cutting off Luke's attempt at another sarcastic comment, "she didn't sound like the normal sort of nut-job that I'm used to dealing with."

"Alright, I'll humor you," sighed Luke. "What, pray tell, made this woman so different?"

"I'm not sure," Dennis conceded. "She was just so direct, and she didn't even try to tell me about her..." he paused, searching for the right word.

"Spectral boyfriend?" Luke offered.

"That sounds like a bad name for a rock band."

"Whatever."

"Or a soap opera."

Luke rolled his eyes. "Remind me not to give you alcohol before you start telling a story. Would you make your point, please?"

Dennis cocked his head to the side, and his brow furrowed as he spoke. "I don't know. Maybe I've been at this too long, but she sounded like she was actually trying to hire me for something, instead of just talking my ear off about some fantasy." Luke did not respond, although his eyebrow had arched slightly. Dennis thought back on the

conversation again before another thought occurred to him. "You know, Sam had a cop visiting him this morning."

"Police work is tough," Luke replied. "A lot of them probably go to shrinks. I fail to see what this has to do with dead lovers."

"Now *that* would be a bad soap opera." Luke pulled his hand back as if to slap him, and Dennis laughed. "Okay, sorry, I'll stop." He took another sip of his beer, and his voice took on a more serious aspect. "I didn't think much of it before, or of the phone call, but I'm starting to wonder if the two of them are related."

"What, like a setup?" asked Luke. Dennis nodded, oblivious to his friend's sarcastic tone.

"Sam told me that the detective –"

"You said he was just a normal cop."

"The *detective*," Dennis said again, "was supposedly there because his niece had started seeing ghosts. That's the kind of person that I find for Sam, right? Then, while I'm setting up another job, some guy starts snapping pictures of the restaurant that I'm in." Luke stared for a minute more before answering.

"So, you're still paranoid, then."

Dennis' head bounced up. "What?" he said, laughing nervously.

"Come on, dude, you've always had these wild ideas about people being out to get you, and they're always ridiculous." He waved a hand around the tavern. "There was a whole crowd of people taking pictures in here the other night, and you don't see me getting all anxious."

"Luke, there was a topless woman on the table."

"So maybe there was some fun graffiti on the restaurant wall." Luke rolled his eyes. "Fine, when is she going to call you?"

"I'm supposed to call her at seven."

Luke appeared to squint into the distance. "Okay, well, if you're that worried about it, call her back sooner. That way if it *is* a setup of some kind, which I'm sure it isn't, you'll throw them off."

"How do you figure?"

Luke threw up his hands in irritation. "Because they won't be ready yet! Jeez, dude, let it go." He rubbed the back of his neck with a thoughtful wince on his face. "Seriously, if anyone has a reason to be paranoid, it's me."

Dennis gave his friend a speculative look. "Why do you say that?"

Discomfort darkened Luke's face, and he shifted his weight. "It's nothing, forget I mentioned it." Dennis raised an eyebrow, to which Luke scowled in response. "Alright, fine. I made a couple of bad bets recently, and I'm trying to scrape together enough to pay off the debt."

"Bad bets?" repeated Dennis. "What, you're gambling now?"

"Hey, I've never had a problem risking a bit of money in order to make some. That's *your* failing, dude, not mine."

"I'm not the one who owes a bookie."

Luke rolled his eyes. "Look, it isn't a big deal. Just a few thousand dollars. Like I said, forget it."

Dennis paused before answering. Luke valued his pride above almost anything else, and Dennis could never be sure if he would be offended by an offer of assistance.

Dennis' own financial situation was hardly glamorous, but he could probably afford to lighten the load. "Well," he said finally, "just let me know if you need any help."

"You're the one that needs help, dude," Luke replied, his blasé demeanor returning. "Being all convinced that there's a sting set up for you. The police have more important things to do than chase after two-bit authors with strange hobbies."

A smirk crossed Dennis' face as he relaxed. "Two-bit author, huh?" Luke folded his arms.

"You heard me."

Dennis pointed at the framed picture of himself above the bar. "Does that mean you'll take that thing down?"

"Go to hell."

Chapter Three

The sky was adopting a gloomy shade of gray as Dennis, feeling slightly tipsy, left Thoreau's. He silently cursed his low tolerance for alcohol, wondering how Luke managed to continually drain beer after beer without showing any signs of intoxication... and how only two bottles had left Dennis feeling more than a little buzzed. Although he was definitely sober enough to drive, he decided to wait until his head had completely cleared before journeying back to his house in the southern part of the city. Luke's words had given him something to think about, anyway. It was true that Dennis was prone to bouts of irrational paranoia, but something about his current fears seemed more well-founded than that. Of course, he thought wryly, they all did at the time, didn't they?

A light sprinkling of rain began to fall, and Dennis wondered if he wouldn't be better off just waiting in his car while his balance returned. Then, with a mild jab of irritation, he remembered that he had left the vehicle outside Harding's office. He quietly hoped it would remain untouched, not so much worried over the possibility of vandalism as he was concerned about harassment by the city's overzealous traffic department. Far too often, he had returned only a few seconds past a parking meter's allotted time and found an expensive ticket waiting for him. Although the private spaces behind the large building were usually safe, Dennis could never be certain that some uppity employee hadn't taken a chance disliking to his car's presence and seen fit to report his lack of a parking permit.

Halfway between the psychiatrist's office and the bar, Dennis spotted a small internet café. Similar establishments had sprung up everywhere over the past few years, and many otherwise innocuous businesses had begun overtly advertising free web access in response. The sight of the coffee shop gave Dennis an idea, and he figured that it was as good a place as any to wait out the rain. The door opened with some resistance, and gave way to a spacious room decorated with low tables and couches. Around the perimeter were a dozen or so smaller tables, each furnished with an identical computer. Dennis ordered a cup of tea from the lonely-looking barista, then selected one of the machines near the back corner of the space.

His tea arrived just as Dennis was discovering that the computer wanted some kind of code before granting him access, and he was grateful to see that the beverage had been accompanied by a small card with a password on it.

"For customers only," the barista explained. Dennis smiled in thanks, and waited as the young woman made a show of rearranging the various magazines on a nearby table. After she was apparently satisfied, Dennis entered his code into the waiting box on the computer's otherwise blank screen. It instantly flickered fully to life, showing him a webpage for the café. After sipping cautiously at his tea, he typed in a short web address, and pulled out his phone. A touch of a few buttons displayed the list of the calls he had recently received. At the top was the number of the woman who had spoken to him earlier, and he carefully typed the digits into the waiting page on the computer.

A brief moment passed as the directory search worked its magic, and Dennis smiled with satisfaction. He was not always up to date on the latest technology, but even he had to admit that this process was considerably easier than searching through a phone book. Seconds later, the page displayed its results, and Dennis felt his nervousness return. The number he had entered had returned no matches. He rechecked his phone, hopeful that an

error on his part had happened somewhere along the line, even though he was quite certain that it had not. Sure enough, both the number on the screen and that on his phone matched. He tried to rationalize that many people had blocked numbers, or that cell phones were often unlisted, but every attempt he made at calming down was thwarted by the image of the muscular detective looking him over in Harding's office.

Dennis stared down at his phone and considered. Then, almost of its own accord, his thumb jabbed the button to place a call. He had only enough time to raise the phone to his ear and clear his throat before a voice with a British accent answered.

"Hello?" came the strong, if somewhat suspicious greeting.

"My apologies for calling sooner than expected," Dennis said, affecting his accent. "I have had some good fortune with my time, and I thought perhaps you would like to speak with me now."

There was a long pause from the other end. "Doctor September?"

Dennis mentally kicked himself. "Again, I apologize. Yes, this is Doctor September."

"Oh, hello, Doctor." There was another pause. "I can talk now, yes, if you'd prefer." Dennis listened for any telltale signs that the call was being somehow recorded or traced, but he quickly realized that short of what he had seen in bad spy movies, he didn't have the slightest idea what such a thing would sound like.

"Perhaps you can begin by telling me a bit more about your problem," he said. Even from the few sentences he had heard from the woman, Dennis was certain that she would not be interested in meeting with Harding, but something about her calm and logical tone had intrigued him. Besides, it would hardly be good for his reputation if he dismissed her without first hearing her story.

"I suppose," the woman answered. Dennis felt a brief jolt of panic as he heard a loud click from the phone, but it quickly subsided when the woman loudly exhaled. Just lighting a cigarette, or perhaps something more noxious. "My sister has been here for close to ten years, and I thought it a good idea to have someone speak with her before I tried to sell the house."

"Your sister has been seeing this spirit, then?" Dennis asked.

There was another pause, and the sound of the woman both inhaling and exhaling. "No, Doctor, my sister is the spirit." She did not elaborate, and Dennis sensed that he would have to tread lightly if he was to appear at all credible.

"I see. My apologies for your loss," he said. "You say she has been haunting you for ten years now. Is there a reason for your interest in dealing with her now?"

"It's been eight years, to be precise. As I said, I am selling the house."

"Of course," replied Dennis. "I was merely curious as to why you have tolerated her presence for as long as you have." He grimaced at his choice of words, wondering if he had just inadvertently insulted the woman's deceased sister. If she was at all offended, though, her voice gave no sign of it.

"She was always a dreamer," the woman said. "If she wanted to come back, I suppose she had reason for it, and I wasn't about to argue with her."

"Go on."

"That's really all there is. I don't imagine the house's next owners would take too kindly to someone already living in it."

So to speak, thought Dennis. "May I be so bold as to ask the reason for your selling it, ma'am?"

"I'm dying."

The woman's answer sent chills down Dennis' spine. He breathed in silently and weighed his options. Perhaps the woman *would* benefit from a trip or two to Sam's office, he thought. At any rate, his fears that this was some sort of legal trap had all but evaporated.

"I see," Dennis said. "That is... I am sorry to hear that." He held the phone away from his face and quietly cleared his throat again. Then, as an afterthought, he dug into his pocket and pulled forth the crumpled napkin that he had scrawled on earlier. "Ms. Palin," Dennis began, hoping he had correctly deciphered his own handwriting, "I would like to meet with you in person. I feel that there is much I could learn about your situation upon conversing with both you and your sister." He held his breath. That was always the final test: Whether or not people – other than the ones who called him – could interact with the alleged ghost. Nine times out of ten, they would hastily explain that it either could not be seen, or could only be seen by them. The answers really didn't matter, since Dennis had a prepared response for any of them.

"Fine," the woman replied. "Shall I give you my address?"

Dennis blinked. "Yes, please, go right ahead," he said quickly. He carefully transcribed the address onto the napkin. "Would this evening be an agreeable time for me to visit?" he asked.

"Just use the knocker when you get here," the woman responded. After a short exchange of goodbyes, Dennis ended the call and sat, his eyes staring at the computer in front of him but his attention fixed somewhere beyond it. Only once before had he met with someone who claimed that others could see their haunt, and that particular individual had been spectacularly deranged. Still, she had become a regular patient of Harding's, and was evidently doing well. It had been tough to sell her on the idea of visiting a psychiatrist, but Dennis felt confident that he could pull it off again.

This time, though, he'd keep a close eye out for tuning forks...



Regardless of how often he did it, Dennis could never seem to get his makeup right on the first try. He regarded himself carefully under the glow of his bathroom's lights, determined as he always was to break the habit and be finished after only one attempt. He nodded once and set about with the necessary preparations. From a cabinet beneath the sink, he pulled out a metal box. He took a moment to unlatch it and unceremoniously removed various vials and packages from inside. First came a small bottle of spirit gum, the tacky glue he would use to affix his disguise to his face, followed by a disembodied beard in a plastic bag. Next he removed a can of spray-on hair dye and what appeared to be a short wooden stick, half of which was caked with a thick white substance. Dennis eyed the implement suspiciously, having learned recently that the material in question was little more than common soap, although it did the job of coloring his eyebrows quite well. Finally, he pulled forth several palettes of tinted face makeup, which he lined up according to their color.

His materials thus prepared, Dennis set to work on transforming himself into Doctor September. The process was strangely involved, especially considering the relatively minimal change in appearance. In another thirty years, Dennis mused, it wouldn't even be necessary. He dabbed at his face with the makeup, adding muted highlights and shadows

designed to give him a more aged appearance. After he was mostly satisfied, he pulled at his hair and sprayed the dye into it, paying special attention to where the roots met his scalp. Some of the color left a trail of sickly-looking fluid on his forehead, and he quickly dabbed it away, muttering under his breath. His eyebrows came next, their color altered by the soap-dipped stick, and then, admitting defeat, he applied a second round of makeup and covered the blemishes he had inadvertently created along the way.

The final touch was always Dennis' least favorite, but perhaps the most necessary. He unscrewed the bottle of spirit gum, and using the brush attached to the lid, applied a thin coating to his chin. After giving the glue a few moments to begin drying, he carefully pressed the false beard into place, forcing his lips not to wrinkle into an expression of distaste at the feel of it. The task finished, he replaced all of his various implements in their box, leaving only a container of makeup remover, which he would be only too glad to make use of later on.

Unfortunately for the sake of his comfort, Dennis discovered that his overcoat was still slightly damp from the evening before. He shrugged into it, snagged the chain of his pocket watch, and spent an irate moment trying to realign his pants. He had occasionally wondered if all of the bits and accessories were strictly necessary, even though he had taken great pains to assemble, and at times, create them. They definitely added to the character, but the process of removing his watch, silencing his phone, and tugging the silver ring off his finger always left him feeling more naked than dressed up, and the replacement items felt somewhat alien. Also, the wire-framed glasses made the bridge of his nose hurt.

Dennis took a moment to examine himself, glancing as he did at the place where his watch should have been. He rolled his eyes and checked the time on his phone. If he left right away, he would arrive at the house while it was still light out, and he preferred it to be past sunset before he went out to meet people. Not only did the presence of shadows help create the desired mood, but it kept people from examining his face too closely and discovering the nature of his charade. Unfortunately, he couldn't very well visit any of his usual hangouts dressed as he was, and he was not particularly keen on the idea of sitting around while in full costume. That left only one place where he could pass the time both inconspicuously and without too much boredom. After a final check of his makeup, Dennis grabbed his briefcase, donned his hat, and walked out into the evening.



“Doctor!”

There was, as always, a sort of ritual associated with entering the tiny curio shop, and enduring the enthusiastic greeting of its owner was Dennis' least favorite. Many similar shops could be found in the Bay Area, particularly in the right (or wrong) sections of San Francisco, but it was the man, standing behind a row of jewelry cases at the store's left wall, that made this one unique. He was well over six feet tall, maybe pushing seven, with the darkest skin that Dennis had ever seen. He wore a long ponytail of smooth dreadlocks bound together by a piece of hemp string. There was also something odd about the way that the man moved, but Dennis had never been able to put his finger on it. He was incredibly friendly, but there was an intensity to him which suggested, in no uncertain terms, that it would be a good idea to adhere to the rules he had laid down for the store. This was why Dennis would scuff his feet on the worn doormat, dip his fingers

in the shallow stone basin of water that was just inside the entrance, and breathe in some of the trailing smoke from the numerous sticks of incense that were perpetually smoldering atop a roughly-hewn wooden table. After the ceremony was complete, thus allegedly insuring that any demons that might have been clinging to Dennis were now exorcised, the giant of a man would come flying over and eagerly greet him with a rib-crushing hug.

“So good to see you, my friend!” he bellowed, his thick accent making his already resonate voice sound even deeper. He spread his hands above his head and grinned down with a mouthful of impossibly white teeth. “You are back for more tools, yes? More to help with the hunt!” He grabbed Dennis’ arm and all but dragged him further into the shop. His long, robe-like shirt billowed behind him as he moved to one corner, where a dusty glass case stood with locked doors. Like every other surface in the shop, its interior was lined with objects that managed to avoid classification. There were small woodcarvings, polished stones, bits of sculpted metal, and one or two items which were presumably ornate utensils of a sort.

“Actually, I only need another candle today, Draadtrekker,” Dennis replied, stumbling as he always did on the pronunciation of the man’s name. This shop was the one place where Doctor September did not speak with an accent, if only because it would have made any attempts at conversation sound more like a gargling competition.

“Oh, but Mister Doctor! Such things do I have today, things you would not believe!” He pulled Dennis around again, stopping in front of a bookshelf that had been filled with crystals of various sizes and colors. To the best of Dennis’ knowledge, the store’s inventory had never changed, but it was probably rearranged and reorganized more frequently than it made a sale. Draadtrekker pawed through the shelves with one hand, keeping the other fixed on Dennis’ arm.

“I just need a candle, and I’m in a bit of a hurry,” said Dennis, letting a trace of impatience drift into his voice.

“Time will wait, time will wait,” Draadtrekker responded. “One thing I am finding for you, only one, and – ah!” he exclaimed, pulling forth a thumb-sized black stone. He held it in front of Dennis’ face, displaying the finely-etched designs that covered its surface. “Great magic in this! Here, take, hold!” He thrust the stone into Dennis’ palm and held it in place. “You feel the power, yes? Such power it is!” He launched into a dramatic story of the stone’s origins, which Dennis tuned out for the most part. Normally, this was the sort of thing that made him choose Draadtrekker’s shop over the numerous clones that dotted the Bay Area. The man’s ability to tell stories was both gripping and impressive, and Dennis felt an odd sort of kinship with him, but at the moment he was more concerned with obtaining the necessary implements for his latest charade.

“I’m sure it’s great, but really, I only need a candle.” He met Draadtrekker’s gaze. Was that a trace of amusement there?

“A gift then, Doctor,” Draadtrekker said. “No, please, a gift for you, my favorite customer!” He finally released his grip, leaving the stone in Dennis’ hand, and hurried over to the cash register at the opposite wall. “You say a candle? Just one? And black, for you, always black.” He opened a drawer and dug through it, making a show of squinting at an invisible label on each of the paper-wrapped cylinders. Dennis sauntered over, taking the time to examine the black stone as he walked. It was smooth and cool to the

touch, and the symbols carved on it looked like an archaic depiction of wind, or possibly palm trees, if he held it at the right angle.

“Ah, a black candle!” declared Draadtrekker, holding out the object. “You are sure this is all you want? Perhaps I can show you –”

“Just the candle.” Draadtrekker’s smile broadened, if that was possible, and he held out his hand. Even his mannerisms were a bit off-putting, Dennis thought, counting a few bills out into Draadtrekker’s waiting palm.

“You take care of that stone, Doctor. There is much power in it.”

“I’m sure I’ll be able to put it to good use,” replied Dennis. He dropped the stone into his coat’s inside pocket and then took the candle from where it sat on the jewelry case. After exchanging a final nod with the shop’s owner, he walked briskly towards the door. Before he could open it, though, he was stopped by the sound of an impatient noise from behind him. With a sigh, Dennis reached over and snatched one of the smoldering incense sticks. He traced a wide circle of smoke through the air in front of the door, then replaced the stick in its holder. The ritual complete, he turned to look back at Draadtrekker’s smiling face.

“Never forget to say goodbye, Doctor!”

Dennis sighed again as he opened the door. “Goodbye, Draadtrekker,” he said, and then quickly exited. The feeling of the man’s enigmatic grin at his back followed Dennis all the way to his car.

Chapter Four

Directions, or the following of them, had never been Dennis' strong point, particularly when it came to locating places he had never visited. To make matters worse, he was becoming increasingly convinced that he had taken a wrong turn somewhere, despite the name of the street being the same as the one scrawled on the napkin. After all the time he had spent navigating San Francisco, he thought, finding his way through the suburbs to the north should have been a literal walk in the park. He squinted through the windshield, trying to make out the numbers displayed on the front of the houses he passed. If they were to be believed, then he was going in the right direction, although a nagging doubt was still present in his mind.

The neighborhood, although traversed by one of the more narrow roads Dennis had encountered, was far more upscale than any of the areas he had previously visited while masquerading as a paranormal investigator. Stone columns and well-kept gardens dotted the scenery, and the presence of tall, verdant evergreens gave the area a feeling of calm but active luxury. Black iron lampposts stood guard along the sidewalk, each of them still dormant in the fading light. It looked, Dennis thought, like a scene from an inspirational holiday movie, albeit without the snow.

Although he was driving slowly, Dennis slammed on his brakes as he nearly passed the house he was searching for on the opposite side of the street. The car bucked in protest as his foot slipped from the clutch, and the engine died with a pained cough. Dennis closed his eyes and turned the key again, restarting the car with a resounding roar that would have made even the most steadfast of rabbits consider looking up. He drove forward to the next block before parking, and took a moment to examine his destination in the rearview mirror.

The house was definitely one of the more lavish in the area, even when compared to some of the mansion-like places Dennis had passed earlier. A stone walkway led up from the street and ended at a set of low-rise steps, flanked on either side by thick marble banisters. The covered porch was furnished with an ornate swing seat, and even from his vantage point in the car, Dennis could tell that it had been painted expertly to match the rest of the house's white color scheme. The feeling that he was looking at a film set remained, only now he was convinced that it was taken from one of those horror shows that always seemed to afflict opulent neighborhoods.

After making sure that his cell phone was securely locked in the glove compartment, Dennis left his car and began a slow walk towards the house. He absent-mindedly removed his pipe from a pocket, and began filling it from a foil pouch with a practiced motion. There was something odd about this place, Dennis decided, although he would be damned if he could figure out what it was. It was clean, well-kempt, and very obviously the home of someone successful, or at least possessing respectable sums of money. Perhaps it was the symmetry of the place, or the way the windows seemed more suited for looking out of than letting light in. The translucent white curtains were far from a mark of something sinister, but Dennis nonetheless felt like he was being watched.

A trail of smoke followed him as he walked past the house once. There were spreads of winter flowers growing along the side of the path, no doubt maintained by a well-paid gardener. Even the mailbox, which was again white and emblazoned with gold numbering, appeared to have been recently polished. Dennis realized that he was stalling,

and reluctantly tapped out his pipe, leaving a pile of ashes and dry tobacco on the otherwise spotless sidewalk. He scuffed his shoe at the blemish. There should at least be some dry leaves on the ground or something, he thought. Anything to make this place less perfect.

He spied the gold knocker on the door before he had even reached the steps, and recalled being told to use it when he arrived. He squared his shoulders and took a breath, then reached forward and grasped the smooth metal. It let out a series of dull thumps as he tapped it, and there was a wholly dissatisfying thud as it fell back into place. Still, it seemed to have achieved its intended purpose, as the door swung open to reveal a small, thin woman with short white hair and piercing hazel eyes.

"Doctor September?" the woman asked. Dennis recognized her voice from the phone conversation. She was much more petite than he had expected, but the firmness of her tone was matched by her posture. Dennis bowed his head with what he hoped was a humble expression on his face.

"Yes, I am Doctor Darvyn Luciano September. You may call me what you wish. Ms. Palin, I presume?" he asked. She nodded, but continued to look up at him as though she were appraising a suspiciously-priced piece of fruit.

"Hm," she murmured, apparently in response to some inner thought. Elspeth Palin, Dennis decided, was a no-nonsense sort of woman, and he wondered if it might have been a better idea to simply have told her that he was already committed to another job. It would have saved him from feeling like he was talking to the principal of his old elementary school, anyway.

"Well," Elspeth said finally, "I suppose you should come in and see her." She moved to allow Dennis through. Behind her was a large foyer, furnished in the way one might expect a hotel lobby to be.

"In a moment, yes," Dennis replied, stepping through the door. "First, if you do not mind, I would like you to tell me some of your sister's history, and how she came to be haunting you." He had learned, via a rather embarrassing misunderstanding on his part, that it was always best to know a ghost's story right from the beginning. That way, when it came time to "communicate" with them, there was less chance of saying something stupid, or coming across as a necrophiliac.

"Suit yourself, I suppose." Elspeth led him to a circle of large armchairs arranged at the right side of the room. At their center was a round wooden table, and atop that, a silver tray of tea and cookies. "I don't imagine this is done steeping yet; I'd have thought that you'd want to talk after meeting her." Her voice echoed off the high ceiling, and Dennis struggled to keep his own from doing the same. He stared at the steaming kettle.

"How did you know that I would be arriving when I did?"

"I saw your car stall outside," replied Elspeth. Dennis winced, but quickly turned the expression into a smile. Elspeth regarded the kettle with a distrustful eye, giving the impression that she suspected it of having done something naughty.

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to meet her?"

"I think it would be better if I knew more about her, first. What was her name?"

"Her name is Evelyn."

There was no stress to the word, but Dennis made a mental note that Elspeth had used "is" instead of "was." In her mind, he thought, her sister had become an everyday part of her life. He sat down in one of the armchairs and stroked the edges of his beard.

"Evelyn, yes," Dennis repeated, nodding his head in thought. "You weren't twins." He phrased it as a statement instead of a question. If the two of them *had* been twins, then Elspeth would hear it as a question, and assume that Dennis – or, rather, Doctor September – was possessing of some supernatural knowledge. If they hadn't been, she would hear it as a statement, and think much the same thing.

Elspeth sat down opposite to Dennis. "No," she replied plainly.

Or maybe she wouldn't, thought Dennis. The woman wasn't rude or temperamental, he thought, she was just difficult to read. Or impress. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if she could take anything in stride, up to and including the manifestation of a real ghost. Maybe that was why she was imagining that she had one, he thought. It could be a way of adding an element of the unknown to her life.

"How did she die, may I ask? How did she come to be haunting you?"

Elspeth lifted the lid on the tea kettle and peered inside. "This will be weak, but it's probably good enough to drink by now." She poured two cups, and without consulting Dennis, dropped a cube of sugar into each of them. "I'm not avoiding the question, Doctor," she said, stirring the tea with the tiniest spoon Dennis had ever seen. "She was always fairly unhealthy, and one day she fell ill. They never told me any more than that."

"Who is 'they,' precisely?" Dennis asked.

"My parents. They both died about a decade back, which is when she first showed up."

"Ah."

Seemingly satisfied that the tea was to her liking, and thus would be to Dennis', Elspeth placed one cup on a matching saucer and handed the entire thing over. Dennis accepted it with another bow of his head, but did not immediately try to drink it. Doctor September was not the sort to spill hot beverages into his lap.

"Ghosts typically manifest immediately after death," he said. "Why do you suppose your sister waited so long to appear, Ms. Palin?"

"I don't know."

As far as providing backstory went, this woman was an abysmal failure. Then again, Dennis supposed, that might make things easier.

"I meant to comment earlier, Ms. Palin, that your front garden is quite lovely."

For the first time since meeting her, Dennis saw a hint of a smile cross Elspeth's face. "That's very kind of you," she said. "I tend to it myself." She took a quiet sip from her cup. "Does it have something to do with my sister?"

"I cannot be sure yet," Dennis replied. "I do not mean to pry, but knowing some of your own background would make this process easier." It was ironic how true that was. The more familiar he could make his own "findings," the easier it would be for the woman to believe him.

If Elspeth had any qualms about revealing details from her personal life, she did not show them. Instead, she treated Dennis to a story about being born in Britain, coming to America in her early childhood years, and never seeing much of her father. He was, she explained, an artist of some kind, and was contracted by individuals from all over the country to churn out works of intrigue and beauty. Her mother had been a simple homemaker, but had been incredibly sharp when it came to finances, and had managed to turn their modest earnings into something considerably more substantial. Throughout the entire story, though, there was little mention of the sister, Evelyn, apart from her being

ten years Elspeth's senior. It led Dennis to wonder if he had missed a crucial detail somewhere.

"When did you say your sister died, Ms. Palin?"

There was a tiny hint of movement in the vicinity of Elspeth's right eyebrow, but her expression remained otherwise unchanged. "She was seventeen," she responded. "That was forty-six years ago."

A discrepancy immediately jumped out at Dennis. "Forgive me, but I was under the impression that your family moved around quite a bit when you were younger."

"It was only my father who did any traveling," Elspeth answered. "I have lived in this house for most of my life."

"I see." He closed his mouth and silently counted to five, pretending to consider some internal thought. "And presumably, your sister now haunts it for that same reason?"

"Oh, no, Doctor," Elspeth replied. Maybe it was her accent, but Dennis thought he heard a touch of sarcasm in her tone. "No, she has never haunted the house." She took another sip of her tea, closing her eyes as she swallowed. When she opened them again, they were fixed directly on Dennis'.

"She haunts a chair."

The silence hung heavy in the air. Dennis felt his sense of paranoia returning with a vengeance, only instead of the fear that this was some kind of legal setup, he now had the growing suspicion that it was an elaborate practical joke.

"A chair?"

"A chair," repeated Elspeth.

Dennis stared across the table, searching for some sign of amusement on Elspeth's face. There *might* have been a hint of a smile there, but it was more a look of satisfaction than anything else. Satisfaction at what, though, Dennis could only guess.

"When you said that you were selling the house..." he began tentatively.

"I'm selling it furnished."

"But surely—"

Elspeth shook her head and placed her teacup on the table. "I told you on the phone, Doctor, I'm dying, and I don't intend to hang about. Not now, not ever. By the time I go, I intend to see that she has gone as well."

There was another moment of silence, although it was considerably more tense than the last one. Dennis brought his own cup up to his lips and peered down into it.

"How long do you have?" he asked quietly. His accent slipped slightly, but he didn't think Elspeth would notice.

"Six months, maybe less," she replied. "Cancer, before you ask." Dennis opened his mouth to speak, but Elspeth interrupted him. "And don't tell me you're sorry, Doctor. I've had enough of sorry to last me two lifetimes." She smiled then with the first genuine warmth that he had seen from her.

"Well," Dennis began, slipping back into character, "perhaps it is time that I met your sister." He started to rise, but paused midway through the motion and sat back down. "I really must ask, Ms. Palin... Why a chair?"

"You'll have to ask her, Doctor." She stood and walked across the foyer, her footsteps sending echoes from the tiled floor. Dennis took a hurried swallow of his tea, grimaced at the heat, and then set the cup down on the table before getting up to follow. He was led

down a darkened hallway to a closed wooden door, where Elspeth turned and looked up at him with an appraising half-squint.

"In here?" Dennis prompted, angling his head towards the door. Elspeth nodded and fished a key out of her pocket. "You lock her in?" asked Dennis. That was strange. After all, ghosts were famous for their ability to drift through walls.

"That's how she wants it," replied Elspeth, more to the doorknob than to Dennis. The latch opened with an audible click, and the door creaked inward – that was certainly ominous, Dennis thought dryly – to reveal a small bedroom. The hushed light filtering through the single curtained window cast a blue tint over the space, but it was still better lit than Dennis had expected. There was a bed pushed up next to one wall, and a dresser, as well as a mirror on top of a vanity against the room's opposite wall. In the very center, where it was undoubtedly going against some rule of feng shui, was a brown cushioned armchair. It was obviously worn and weathered, but still in surprisingly good condition, if one believed the story about how old it was.

"So, how does this work?" Dennis asked. Neither of them had moved to step into the room, and he felt a bit silly staring through the doorway. The question seemed to jar Elspeth out of a private reverie, and she walked forward, pulling a wooden stool out from the corner behind the door.

"Sit down and wait. Sometimes it takes her a little while to wake up." Elspeth placed the stool down in front of the armchair and motioned for Dennis to sit. He had a fair guess about how this would go: He'd sit down and wait, then Elspeth would make an excuse and hurry off. The room would get darker, probably by means of a shade being drawn outside the window, and the chair would start tilting around and shuddering. Hell, it might even start glowing, Dennis thought. He had been treated to this before, during one of the few occasions that he had visited an alleged psychic. It was really just a bad magic act, executed by means of hydraulics and well-placed hidden lights. Still, he was here now, and he might as well enjoy the show. He straightened his tie, and with a display of curious self-assurance, sat down on the stool and stared at the chair.

Nothing happened. Nothing continued to happen. Nothing went into an encore performance and kept its show going until well after the audience had gotten bored. Then, just as Dennis was about to greet the empty air, he saw something strange: The armchair was... blurred. He blinked a few times and tried to refocus his eyes, but the chair kept its wavering quality. It was almost as though there were heat waves playing with the dim light, making the chair's brown material shimmer.

"Here she comes," said Elspeth, startling Dennis. Thankfully, he'd resisted the urge to jump, even though the sound of her voice had come as a surprise. The chair must be on a timer, then, or she'd turned it on when they were still out in the hall. Hell, she might have even flipped a hidden switch while Dennis had been in his staring match with the upholstery. Really, though, it didn't matter how she had done it. There was probably a hotplate in the seat, and it had taken some time to warm up.

Well, I'll play along, thought Dennis. He cleared his throat.

"Hello, Evelyn," he said, speaking slowly and clearly. "My name is Doctor September. I'm here to talk to you."

The heat waves intensified, making the chair's center appear to bulge outward. Dennis suppressed a triumphant smile as he heard Elspeth shuffling behind him. She had a remote control in her pocket, he was sure of it. Well, it was disappointing that the woman

wouldn't be a candidate for Harding, but the act was enjoyable, at least. He wondered what she got out of it. Just the satisfaction of tricking people who made a living at playing exorcist? Dennis had met a few other folks in his line of work, and there were even a handful who truly believed that they had some otherworldly gift. He wondered if Elspeth had mistaken him for one of them, or if she played the prank on anyone who would sit still long enough.

Hello.

... That was odd. The voice hadn't really been audible, so to speak, but Dennis was still certain that he had heard it. Someone had told him once that it was possible to play sounds in such way that the ears didn't really hear it, but the brain did. He had never experienced it before. He stole a quick glance around the room, trying to spot the speakers. Well, you wouldn't expect them to be visible, would you? No, that would have been a mistake on Elspeth's part.

"She might be like that for awhile yet, Doctor," Elspeth said from behind Dennis. "One can never be sure. Would you like some more tea?" Dennis considered. When Elspeth left the room, she'd undoubtedly rush off to wherever she had the microphone stashed, and treat Dennis to a real two-way conversation with her "dead sister." If he refused the tea, she wouldn't have an excuse to leave, and the performance would likely drag to a halt.

"Perhaps later," replied Dennis. "For now, I would like you to stay here with us." There, he thought. If she leaves, she'll know that I'm onto her.

"Suit yourself."

Thin trails of smoke started to rise from the seat of the armchair, and Dennis felt a moment of concern. It hadn't occurred to him that the hotplate could start a fire, but now that he thought about it, the amount of heat necessary to bend the air was probably more than enough to spawn flames. Then again, maybe the smoke was part of the act. Elspeth didn't seem concerned about it, anyway.

"Evelyn," Dennis began, once again addressing the chair, "I'd like to talk to you about something important, if I may." As if in response, the smoke began to thicken and coalesce. From the right angles, it could almost be mistaken to be the shape of a person.

Dennis shrugged off the thought. The human mind was instinctively driven to recognize patterns, and it could find familiar shapes in almost anything. If he tried, he was certain that he could even see a face in the smoke. It would be a much younger, more attractive version of Elspeth's face, with more open eyes, shoulder-length hair and a curious smile. She would be slender, too, and clad in a short-sleeved day dress with a tight waist and a v-shaped neckline. In fact, if Dennis looked hard enough, he might even be able to pick out the subtle shape of a bracelet around her left wrist. Not that there was actually anything there, he chided himself. It was just a trick of the mind.

Albeit a very convincing one. In fact, the more he stared, the more he was unable to see anything but a girl, sitting with her hands folded on her lap. Dennis squeezed his eyes shut and tried to clear his mind, but when he looked again she was still sitting there, watching him with a look of puzzled amusement.

"Are you alright, Doctor?"

There was no mistaking it this time. He had heard a voice, and it had come from directly in front of him. As far as illusions went, this one was quickly moving beyond

impressive and into the realm of unbelievable. The girl seemed to cock her head, and her expression grew more quizzical.

“Doctor?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Dennis snapped, sounding impatient. Was it a hologram? Maybe there was an array behind him, casting an image into the smoke. That would make sense, and it meant that all he had to do was stand up and block the projection. He rose, but the image remained, following him with her eyes. Okay, it must be coming from somewhere else, then. He walked a slow circle around the chair, examining every inch of the room. The ceiling was much lower in here than it had been in the foyer, and there weren’t many places to hide a projector. The girl seemed to watch him in his path, going as far as to sit up on her knees and peer over the back of the chair. Elspeth stood by the door, saying nothing, an unreadable expression on her face.

I’ve had enough of this, thought Dennis angrily. He returned to the front of the chair and stood with his hands in fists. He didn’t appreciate being made into a fool, no matter how convincing a prank it was. With a defiant motion, he reached forward and slammed his palm down onto the seat of the chair, determined to reveal the location of the hotplate.

The chair was cold.

“Doctor September!” exclaimed the ghost, pulling her knees up to her chest. Her face was a mixture of shock and anger, but there was a touch of excitement there, too. It barely registered over the feeling of Dennis’ heart pounding in his chest, underneath the soft vibration of his cell phone, which had chosen that moment to go off. He reached in to silence it, but felt a wash of icy fear as he realized that he had left the phone in his car. With a sense of dawning horror, Dennis’ fingers closed around the stone that he had been given at the curio shop. It hummed in his grasp as he pulled it out, which he was certain was not a natural action for a piece of polished rock.

His eyes darted from the stone to the chair, where the ghost sat looking at him with an expression of aghast confusion. He reached out and waved his hand at her, making a last attempt at dissipating the illusion.

“Stop it!” the ghost snapped, holding up her hands. His fingers passed right through them. There was no heat, no smoke, and the image of the girl remained completely untouched.

Dennis slowly turned to face Elspeth. The mirror atop the vanity showed his face as an emotionless mask, and behind him, an empty armchair. Then, with as much poise and professionalism as he could muster, Doctor Darvyn Luciano September fainted.

Chapter Five

The splash of water came as a disorienting shock, and Dennis sat bolt upright, clawing at the ground. Elspeth was squatting in front of him, looking for all the world like a disapproving mother. "There's no use sitting around all day, Doctor. Now get up."

Dennis struggled to regain his feet, but slumped down again as a wave of disorientation hit him. He was surprised at how dizzy he felt. He had never passed out before and... Oh, god, he had passed out. He examined his surroundings through water-spotted glasses. He was in the hall outside the bedroom, and the door had been closed. Elspeth must have dragged him there after his sudden loss of consciousness.

"Is, uh... Is everything okay?" Dennis asked lamely. Elspeth put a hand on her hip, still holding an empty pitcher that was dripping onto the carpet.

"Well, your makeup is a bit smeared, but I daresay you can fix that pretty easily. Here," she said, holding out a glass. "I expect you could use a proper drink."

Dennis took an immediate gulp of the liquid, and realized too late that it was, in fact, gin. He coughed and sputtered, nearly spilling the rest of it. Not that it would have mattered, seeing as how he was seated in a widening puddle of water.

"I'm glad that one did the trick. I'd already splashed you once," said Elspeth. Dennis touched his face, and examined the tinted substance that came away on his fingers. He looked up sheepishly, but Elspeth held up a hand. "You don't have to explain anything, dear. Although you might want to use something waterproof next time."

"You're not... you're not mad?" Dennis ventured. Elspeth answered with a laugh that was both warm and full of wisdom.

"Doctor, I'm fifty-three years old, and I'm dying of cancer. I'm not about to waste my time with feeling cross. Besides, do you really think that you're the first flimflammer that Evy has done this to?"

"Flimflammer?" Dennis repeated. Then, upon second thought, he added "Evy?"

"Evelyn," replied Elspeth. "It's a family nickname. Now, come and have a sit-down." She took the glass from his hand and led the way back into the foyer. Dennis made a second attempt at finding his feet, and managed to pull himself to attention without falling over.

"I'll thank you to take your coat off first, so as not to get the seats all wet." Elspeth pointed at a wooden coat rack next to the entrance. Feeling wholly out of his element, Dennis shed the soaked garment and hung it on one of the pegs. Then, not seeing any other viable course of action, he joined Elspeth back at the table.

"Look, I," he began. He took a breath and exhaled as he sat down. "I'm sorry about the act, Ms. Palin, I just didn't..." He trailed off, looking down at the table.

"Call me Elspeth, dear," she said. "And I told you, there's no need to explain." She put the glass and the pitcher on the table, and then poured a cup of tea from the kettle. Once again, she dropped a cube of sugar into it, stirred for a moment, and passed it to Dennis. The tea was still warm, although not to the point of discomfort anymore. He drank it in two large swallows, trying to clear the stinging taste of alcohol from his throat.

"So," started Elspeth again. "Do you think you can help me?"

Dennis' eyes snapped up. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Do you think you can help me?" Elspeth asked again. Dennis shook his head in confusion.

"You know that I'm a fraud, and you still want my help?" he asked. "Why?" Elspeth poured herself another cup of tea before answering, and when she did, it took Dennis a moment to follow the shift in topic.

"She won't remember this tomorrow, you know. She won't even recognize you. Every day, her memory sort of... goes." She dropped a sugar cube into her cup and stirred it. "There's not much point in my trying anymore, since I've tried damn near everything. It seems to me that a fresh set of eyes might be able to come up with fresh solutions." She held up a hand as Dennis opened his mouth to speak. "Let me finish, Doctor. I saw the way you watched the room when Evy popped in. You don't miss much, save for maybe what's right in front of you, and who can blame you for that?" She finished stirring and replaced the spoon on the silver tray.

Dennis sat and stared. He had heard the term "deer in headlights" more times than he could count, but had never expected to find himself in the path of an oncoming truck. Elspeth met his gaze solidly and with confidence, patiently expecting an answer.

"I don't know anything about ghosts," Dennis finally confessed. "I just tell people what they want to hear."

"So tell me what I want to hear," replied Elspeth. "Say you'll help me."

There was no desperation in her voice, no pleading, only an open request. Dennis knew that if he refused, she would most likely bid him goodnight, and that he'd never hear from her again. He thought back on the events that had taken place in the bedroom. Part of his brain still insisted that this had to be a trick, but Dennis dismissed it. Everything had been too perfect, even including...

"My stone!" Dennis suddenly realized.

"Oh, yes, a neat little thing, that," said Elspeth. She pulled the object out of a pocket and put it on the table. "I wasn't sure what to make of it. It calmed down as soon as I pulled you from her room."

Dennis reached forward and tentatively held the stone between his thumb and forefinger. It was silent now, but the memory of it vibrating still resonated in his grip. Ghosts and magic rocks, he thought grimly. His clients suddenly seemed more sane. He slid the stone into his pocket and looked back up at Elspeth.

"Look, I meant what I said about not knowing anything about all of this," he said. "My name isn't even 'September.' It's --"

"Dennis Goofy Hat, I know," interrupted Elspeth. She nodded at the table, where Dennis noticed his wallet. "I hope you don't mind. I went looking for your ID when you fainted."

"Why?"

"To make sure you weren't allergic to gin," Elspeth said. Her smile said that she was joking, but Dennis couldn't be sure. He took his wallet from the table, not even bothering to check if its contents were intact.

"It's Gufehautt, actually," said Dennis. Admittedly, it did sound very similar to the way that Elspeth had pronounced it, but he had tried desperately to leave the mocking nickname behind when he left high school.

"What should I call you, then?"

"You may call me what you wish," Dennis replied automatically. "I mean... Sorry. Dennis is fine." He felt an odd sensation on his chin, and discovered that some of the

spilled alcohol had started dissolving the glue that held his beard on. Seeing no point in keeping an aspect of the ruined act, he reached up and pulled it off.

"Now, there's a shame, I thought you looked nice with a beard," said Elspeth. She sipped at her tea, her eyes not leaving Dennis'. "You still haven't answered me, though. Will you help me?"

He was bumbling through uncharted territory. Clearly, the woman wasn't in need of psychiatric help, and Dennis doubted that an explanation of his original purpose would dissuade her. Besides, Harding had made it clear that they should keep that bit of information as unmentioned. If he did take the case, so to speak, he would be on his own.

"Yes," Dennis said, surprising himself slightly. "Yes, I'll help you. I need a few days to get my head around this, but I'll help you." There, it was done, although he was still unsure if he had made the right decision. The last time he'd felt like this, he had just slid a letter under a prospective girlfriend's door. As with then, though, it was too late to take it back. He could only hope that this attempt would yield more favorable results.

"Thank you," said Elspeth. She reached behind the chair and brought out a white canvas purse, from which she pulled a thin checkbook. "Do you prefer to be paid by the hour?"

"Wait, what?" Dennis faltered. "I didn't... I mean... You're going to *pay* me?" Elspeth looked up again, and her face was a mirror of the incredulous expression that her sister had worn earlier.

"Of course I am, Dennis. I wouldn't dream of asking you to do this for nothing." She scribbled something on a check, presumably Dennis' name. "Will a thousand a week do?" Something caught in Dennis' throat, and he let out a strained cough.

"Look, not to be rude, but... That's very generous of you, but I really don't need –"

"You'll take it and that's all there is to it," said Elspeth firmly. Once again, Dennis felt like he was back in kindergarten. There was definitely something wrong with him, feeling like a check for a thousand dollars was some kind of punishment. Elspeth held it out for him, and he reluctantly accepted. "Now, when should I expect you back?"

"Uh... Wednesday," Dennis replied. "I'll come by first thing in the morning. Nine o'clock."

"How do you like your eggs?"

Today was just a day for getting caught off guard, it seemed. "I'm sorry?"

Elspeth smiled with a trace of impatience. "I'm about through with repeating things to you, Dennis. I asked how you like your eggs."

"Over easy," he replied. And then, just because the situation could not get any stranger, he added: "With sourdough toast."

"A man after my own heart," said Elspeth. "Well, I'll see you here at nine on Wednesday, then." She stood and walked towards the door, and Dennis scrambled to follow her. She took down his damp overcoat and held it out, then opened the door as Dennis struggled to get his arms through the sleeves. He paused in the doorway and shifted his weight awkwardly as he glanced back towards Evy's room.

"Should I say goodbye or something?"

"She won't remember anyway." The pair stood in the door for a moment longer. "Well, goodnight, Dennis." She closed the door after him. He made it all the way back to the street before he threw up.



Dennis hammered on the glass door of the curio shop, pausing only to peer into the darkened interior.

“Draadtrekker! Open up, I know you’re still in there!” He pounded harder, drawing concerned stares from an elderly couple that was walking by. He gave them what he hoped was a reassuring smile before turning back to the shop. “Draadtrekker!” he yelled again. He cupped a hand around his eyes and pressed his face up against the dusty glass. There was a dim light coming from somewhere at the back of the shop, probably through the doorway to a private room.

Dennis took a few steps back, almost into the street, and examined the building. There was an alleyway a few yards to the right, traveling into a refuse-laden maze of broken bottles and cardboard. He ran through the opening, hurdling over obstacles as he encountered them, and skidded out next to a collection of dented and stained dumpsters. There was an open door set into the unpainted brick, and a few wisps of incense smoke still drifted through the still air. Someone had been out here very recently, and Dennis was willing to bet that he knew who.

Under normal circumstances, he might have felt some hesitation about the prospect of trespassing, particularly at night. Normal circumstances, however, did not generally include the ghosts of British teenagers and magical buzzing rocks. He plunged through the doorway, ready to confront the shop’s dreadlocked owner, but encountered only an empty room. The ancient lights cast a muted yellow glow on a space that reminded Dennis of a school cafeteria, with a faux-tile floor and a collection of waist-high cabinets. There was a battered folding table, rather out of place at the room’s center, surrounded by four equally weathered collapsible chairs.

The door leading out into the shop’s main area was still open, and Dennis peered through. Everything about the store felt different in the dark, and not just because the merchandise had apparently been migrating again. He stepped into the room, his eyes moving from the front windows to the cash register, looking for any signs of life. The shop looked deserted. Dennis was about to turn and exit when he felt a sudden pain as a porcelain statue shattered over his head.

The blow came more as a shock than anything else, but it was enough to knock him off-balance. He quickly ducked away, staggering further into the shop, and he caught sight of his assailant. The giant figure stood silhouetted by the sickly light from the back room, its powerful arms raised to chest level. For a moment, Dennis thought that Draadtrekker had somehow managed to get behind him, but then he noticed that the figure lacked the storekeeper’s distinctive hair. Even through his quickly-rising panic, a voice in Dennis’ head sardonically commented about the irony of breaking in at just the right time to stop a robbery.

Dennis backpedaled away from the figure, fighting to stay upright. He collided with something behind him, and there was a clatter of objects smashing together. As he fought to steady himself, his fingers closed on a long wooden object, and he slashed it forward, brandishing it like a club. The figure let out a deep growl and advanced, his motions slow, as though he was trying to gauge his opponent. Dennis did his best to appear confident, despite knowing that he was likely outclassed in ability as well as size.

“Come on, you bastard!” Dennis yelled defiantly. His voice cracked, but it was apparently enough to give the figure pause. Although the dim light made seeing details

next to impossible, Dennis could make out the shape of the man's head as it turned, and he followed the gaze to a collection of wooden busts on the floor.

Some deep, primal sense of survival made Dennis' limbs tense. The man bent to snatch one of the sculptures, and Dennis rushed forward, bringing his own weapon down at the figure's head. The blow connected with the man's shoulder, and there was a sharp pain in Dennis' leg as the man swung a heavy statue at his knee. He hopped backwards and stumbled to the ground, his leg throbbing where he had been hit. He could see a shadow advancing on him, and lashed out with a kick at the man's midsection. There was a grunt of pain and a resounding crash as the figure was pushed back into one of the display tables, and Dennis scrambled to get to his feet.

Before he could rise completely, Dennis was battered by a fist coming down on his back. He felt his breath forced out of him and he fell back to the floor, his nose inches from the other man's feet. Again relying on instinct, Dennis dropped his improvised weapon and clawed at the man's shoe, pulling it forward with a desperate jerk. The man stumbled and fell sideways, barely missing a glass display case. A ring of darkness at the edges of Dennis' vision threatened to make him pass out for the second time in as many hours, and he gasped for air as he pulled away from his attacker.

The figure lurched into a sitting position and crawled forward, his breath audible over the roar in Dennis' ears. Dennis managed to wrestle his feet beneath him, and mustering as much strength as he could, he sprang at the man. The attack seemed to catch him by surprise, and he fell backwards, bringing his hands up in front of his face. Dennis landed heavily on the man's chest and started pummeling him with adrenaline-fueled blows. Most of them were deflected by the man's forearms, but one lucky strike connected with his jaw. The man's head jerked away, and his entire body rolled under Dennis' weight, throwing him to the side. Dennis held out an arm to catch himself, and landed painfully amongst the pile of toppled wooden busts.

There was a burning, pulsing sensation in Dennis' muscles as he rolled from the pile of statues, and he could feel his strength beginning to fade. He heard movement behind him, and he grabbed the first object that his fingers encountered. Dennis slammed the statue down, not caring where he hit. The blow connected, and the man let out a yelp of pain, curling into a ball as Dennis rose to his knees, bringing the sculpture up for a second attack.

"Stop, stop!" came a muffled voice from the floor. "No more, please!" Dennis halted in mid-swing, but stayed ready to deliver the blow. The man waved a hand, his arms still in front of his face. "Just take whatever you want and go!"

Dennis fell back into a sitting position. The voice, although devoid of any exotic quality and now colored with an English accent, was irrefutably familiar.

"Draadtrekker?" Dennis wheezed. The figure peered out from behind crossed arms. In the dim light, Dennis could barely make out the face of the shop's owner, staring at him with wide eyes.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Dennis did not answer, feeling both stunned and out of breath. He stared at the man huddled on the floor, his mind racing. The sound of his own heartbeat, which he had not even realized he could hear, gradually faded from his ears.

"I..." he stammered, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was you."

Draadtrekker's arms moved down a bit further, but he kept them defensively crossed. "Doctor September?"

"Yeah," replied Dennis. He let the statue fall into the pile of its brethren, held his face in his hands, and let out a shaking breath. "Christ, Draadtrekker, I thought you were a burglar."

Draadtrekker cleared his throat, a trace of confused panic in the noise. "What the fuck, may I ask, are you doing in my shop?" He stayed curled on the floor, his breath still panting between his arms. Dennis felt something rising in his throat, and held his own breath to keep from vomiting. After steadying himself, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the carved stone, which he set on the floor between them. Draadtrekker cautiously unfolded his arms, and reached forward to take the stone.

"What the hell is that thing?" Dennis asked quietly. Draadtrekker hauled himself into a sitting position and looked up from the stone in his hand.

"This is why you broke in?" His voice was wavering, and he swallowed once. "It's a trinket, September."

Dennis scowled between his fingers. "Look, the sooner you give me a decent explanation, the sooner you can go back to playing musical chairs with all this garbage." He gestured halfheartedly at the mess that the fight had caused.

Draadtrekker stared at Dennis, and his wide eyes narrowed with subtle disgust. "Are you drunk? Your breath smells like cheap spirits."

In spite of himself, Dennis began to giggle. "Spirits are exactly my problem!" he laughed, feeling slightly manic. "I just met a ghost, Draadtrekker! A real ghost! And that stupid rock of yours started buzzing as soon as she showed up!" He shook his head, feeling torn between laughter and tears. "I don't have a clue about what's happening to me today, but I have a feeling that you know more about it than I do, and I am not leaving here until I get some answers." Had he been in a more rational mood, Dennis doubted that he would have been behaving this way. As it was, though, his entire body was shaking, and he tilted his head up with a wild expression. "So *start talking*."

"Look, mate, I don't know what you're on about, okay?" He held up his hands, two fingers still grasping the rock. "I won't call the cops," the man continued, "just go home and sleep this off."

"No, that's not..." Dennis's voice caught in his throat. He swallowed, tasting bile. "Damn it, look, I'm sorry." Draadtrekker seemed to deflate somewhat, apparently confused by the apology. Dennis regarded him quizzically, still trying to steady his own nerves. The two men sat in silence, each of them catching their breath.

"You're not African, are you?" Dennis asked at last. Draadtrekker blinked in surprise.

"I'm from Greenwich," he replied. He slowly lowered his arms, watching Dennis carefully. "That's England to you, not Connecticut."

"So, you're British, then."

"Too right." He kept staring down at Dennis, his gaze slowly hardened. "I don't know what your problem is, September, but I think you had better be leaving."

Dennis held up his own hands. "Calm down, I can explain," he said, pulling himself together. "That's not really my name. It's just something that I made up."

The bigger man's expression had gone from seriousness to puzzlement. "What's your real name, then?" he asked.

"It's Dennis. I'm a writer. I didn't mean to cause a scene, I just came here to talk."

"I've met better conversationalists." The look on the man's face was wavering between curiosity and relief. After a long moment, he appeared to make a decision. "My name's Bobo."

Dennis arched an eyebrow. "Bobo?"

"Yeah," the man replied. "It's short for Barnaby, but no one ever calls me that."

"Well, Bobo," Dennis began, "it's nice to meet you, I suppose."

Bobo tilted his head from one side to the other, as though mulling something over in his head. When he finally spoke, the beginnings of a nervous smile showed on his face. "I think I'll stick with calling you September, if that's alright with you."

"You may call me what you wish," Dennis replied. Then he snorted and shook his head.

"Something funny?"

"Let me tell you a story, Bobo."

Over the next several minutes, Dennis did his best to explain the truth about himself. He started off hurriedly, still trying to make up for his earlier behavior, but he relaxed considerably when Bobo admitted that he had actually read Dennis' book. Although he had never made the connection with the man called September, he had no problems accepting Dennis' true identity. Midway through the story, Bobo invited Dennis into the rear of the shop, and the two men limped back into the room where Dennis had first entered. After retrieving two lukewarm bottles of soda from a sloshing cooler, Bobo sat down at the folding table, and Dennis joined him. Uncomfortable though the chair was, he could feel his limbs sag with relief.

When the story was finished, Bobo sat quietly for a few minutes before launching into his own tale. He had been born and raised in England. Having heard numerous stories of the world beyond his hometown, but never having seen any of it, he had decided to travel when he was old enough, and he had eventually wound up in California. "I came out thinking it'd be all beaches and models," he confessed. "It's what most blokes think of. Hollywood and all that. There's no mention of anything like the real thing." Still, despite his initial letdown, Bobo had decided that he liked the Bay Area, and had remained. He had been offered a job in the curio shop by the previous owner who, by Bobo's description, had been the sort of person that Dennis encountered while in the guise of Doctor September. "When she retired," Bobo explained, "she sold me the shop, and I've never had call to leave."

"So, where did this whole Draadtrekker thing come from?" Dennis asked. Bobo let out a short chuckle.

"It means 'wanker,'" he explained. "I thought it'd be funny. See, when I had my interview here, the lady thought I was putting on a show with my English accent." His head slumped between his shoulders, but his face stayed lit by his grin. "She told me that I was safe to be myself. She really meant that she thought I was someone else."

Dennis nodded knowingly. "Hence the act."

"Bloody ironic, that," replied Bobo, straightening. "But it stuck, and I had all sorts of business from people what thought they were dealing with some sort of shaman. Amazing what a wig and a poncho can do." He regarded Dennis thoughtfully. "I hope you realize I could still call the police."

"We both know that you won't," said Dennis. He looked towards the ceiling and let out a long breath.

“Yeah? Why’s that, then?”

Dennis looked back at the man. “Because we’re both frauds, and now we’ve both done something real by accident.”

“Real? What are you on about?”

Dennis eyed Bobo incredulously. “The rock? The magic stone vibrator?”

Bobo stared at Dennis in disbelief. “You’re serious, aren’t you?” He reached into his pocket and produced the stone. His big hands fumbled with it, hiding his actions from view. When they parted, Dennis found himself looking at two halves, and the metal seam that had been holding them together.

“See? It’s a bloody fake,” said Bobo. He placed the two pieces on the table. “It’s on a timer. Goes off every eight hours.” Sure enough, there was a small battery inside one of the two stone halves, as well as a miniature circuit board and what looked like a tiny motor.

Dennis reached out and gingerly took one of the pieces. “This seems like it would be bad for business,” he said. He received an affirmative grunt in reply.

“It’s the first of its kind. I wanted to try it out. Guess I won’t be doing that again, seeing the results I got.” Bobo drained the rest of his drink before continuing. “Of course, how was I to know it’d put you in a tizzy?”

“It wasn’t the rock that set me off.” Dennis lifted the other stone half and held it against its twin. He could see now where the seam blended into the carvings, making the entire thing look like a solid piece. “You made this?” he asked, impressed.

Bobo’s pride was evident. “Dad was an electrician. Guess I have the genetics for it.” He aimed a finger at the carvings. “The real bugger was making the rock, actually. Took me forever to get it right.” He looked up at Dennis again, suddenly appearing suspicious. “Hang on. You said the rock didn’t set you off. What did, then?”

Dennis coughed, cleared his throat, and sniffed in rapid succession, and then chewed on the corner of his lower lip. Bobo watched the act with an unchanging expression.

“Okay, look, this is going to sound crazy,” Dennis began, unsure of how to proceed.

“A real ghost, yeah?” Bobo smiled knowingly. “Come on, after that bit, the genuine article can’t be too bad.”

“Well, that *is* the genuine article,” replied Dennis. Bobo’s smile stayed frozen on his face, but the warmth left it. “I know it sounds nuts, but I just had a close encounter.”

“Are you saying you was abducted?”

“Different sort of encounter,” Dennis said, shaking his head. “There’s this lady who lives in Marin. She’s British too, actually.”

“Because everyone knows only Brits have ghosts,” Bobo stated. Dennis eyed him, unsure if the man was joking or not. He decided to continue as though he hadn’t heard anything.

“Anyway, she has this sister. A dead sister. And this dead sister haunts a chair.”

Bobo’s smile had diminished considerably, and his eyes roamed Dennis’ face. After a moment, his amusement returned in full force, and the man spoke through a guffaw.

“You’re putting me on!” he said. “Come on, September, you expect me to swallow that tripe?”

“I sure didn’t,” Dennis muttered, recalling his fainting episode. “Your stupid rock went off right when she showed up, so I came to the natural conclusion.”

"That someone was having a laugh at you?" Bobo asked. "Yeah, I'm familiar with the feeling."

Dennis felt his ire rising. "Look, I'm telling the truth." He tossed the pieces of the stone onto the table. They clattered together before one of them bounced off onto the floor. "I've been pretending to be a paranormal investigator for months, and I haven't seen anything to make me believe in ghosts." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Not before today, anyway."

Bobo had gone back to holding an uncertain expression. "Are you drunk?" he asked again.

"Do I seem drunk?" Dennis shot back.

"Well, as I mentioned, you smell a bit like it."

"Elspeth gave me some gin after I passed out." He interrupted Bobo as the man was preparing to speak again. "Yes, I passed out after seeing a ghost. So sue me."

"Who's that?"

Dennis blinked. "Elspeth Palin? The lady with the spectral sister?"

"What? You never told me her name," Bobo pointed out. "I'm not psychic, you know." He started pushing the remaining half of the stone around on the table, making a surprisingly loud scratching noise on the plastic surface.

"Her name is Elspeth. Her sister's name is Evelyn, but she goes by Evy."

"That's the dead one," Bobo said, not looking up. Dennis nodded.

"She's paying me to get rid of her. Elspeth is paying me, I mean," he added. "A thousand dollars a week."

The stone slipped out from beneath Bobo's finger and shot off the table. Dennis watched it slide across the faux-tile floor and disappear under a row of standing cabinets. When he looked back, he was met by Bobo's intense and disbelieving gaze.

"Bollocks," Bobo said.

"No, it's true." Dennis pulled the folded check from his pocket, and displayed the writing on its surface. Bobo leaned forward with an appraising look, and Dennis could see him counting the zeros. After he was apparently satisfied, Bobo's eyes went back to Dennis'.

"We're talking a real ghost, here?" he asked. His voice carried a tone that put Dennis slightly on edge.

"Yes," he replied hesitantly. "A real ghost."

Bobo examined Dennis' face for a moment longer. "I suppose," he said, making a show of carefully weighing his next words, "that if some lady is willing to pay you that much to help her, then it must be the real thing." He sat back in his chair, which creaked in protest. "It would explain a few items, too."

"I'm glad that a check is all it takes to convince you," said Dennis, a touch sarcastically. He refolded the paper and slipped it out of sight. "Explain what, exactly?"

Bobo shrugged. "Your reflection was watching you, is all." He looked back at Dennis, who said nothing. "Come on, now, you haven't heard of this?"

"Heard of what?" Dennis asked flatly. "Reflections always watch you, at least when you're looking at them."

Bobo shook his head. "It's a fairy story I heard when I was younger. Yeah, you're right, reflections look back at you, but there's a difference between looking and watching."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Come on, I'll show you," Bobo said, standing up. After a pause, Dennis rose and followed him back into the main section of the shop. A few minutes of rummaging through various merchandise revealed an ornate and tarnished silver mirror, which Bobo held out to Dennis. "Have a look."

There was nothing strange about Dennis' reflection, save for a few shards of porcelain still clinging to his hair. He grimaced as he brushed them out, then examined the sight of himself. With the flakes of dried glue and streaked makeup on his face, he did in fact look like a disheveled drunk. Other than that, though, the image appeared normal. He glanced up at Bobo.

"I don't see anything."

"They say that when a person is about to experience something magical, or sometimes when they're already in thick of it, that their reflection will judge their actions." He pushed the mirror closer to Dennis' face. "Look again, you're not trying."

"If I try hard enough, I'm sure I can make myself see Paris in there," Dennis replied. He looked around the mirror at Bobo. "Listen, this isn't a game."

Bobo carefully put the mirror down on the multilevel display table where he had found it. "Alright, suit yourself." He turned back to Dennis. "If you want my help, you're going to have to be a little more open-minded, is all."

"Who said I wanted your help?" Dennis asked, rather more rudely than he had intended. Bobo seemed unaffected by the question, and he gestured around at the shop as a response.

"Look around, September. I know all there is to know about this New Age mumbo-jumbo. I'm what you'd call a bona-fide expert."

"Hitting me with a porcelain Jesus does not count as expert advice," Dennis countered, but he considered Bobo's words. He was only too aware of the various bits of so-called culture that he had picked up during his numerous excursions, but he had to admit that he knew next to nothing about the myths and superstitions that surrounded them. Besides, Bobo was right about being an expert. Dennis had overheard him droning on to anyone who would listen about the secrets of the spirit world, and although he had always dismissed it as a sales technique, it seemed unpredictably applicable to the current situation.

"Okay, fine," Dennis conceded. "You can help me. I'm not going to ask Elspeth for more money, though, so you'll have to make do with a cut of my weekly payment."

"You can keep your money," replied Bobo. "I'll settle for seeing a real ghost!" He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "So, when do we start?"

"In two days," answered Dennis. "I'll pick you up at eight-thirty, and we can head over to the house together." A thought occurred to him. "Won't you need someone to run your shop?"

"I'll put a sign on the door," Bobo said. "Hey, in this business, my hours are whenever I bloody well feel like it."

"Right." Dennis looked around the shop again. "Well, I'll see you on Wednesday morning, then." He moved to the door, past the long-dead remains of the incense sticks. "Oh, and Bobo..."

"Yeah?"

"Leave the wig at home, okay?"

Bobo's smile widened as he answered. "You got it, boss."



Exhaustion was threatening to overwhelm him as Dennis approached the door to his house. He was certain that he had begun hallucinating at some point during the final stretch of his drive, although he couldn't be certain. It was San Francisco, after all, and it was quite possible that he had in fact watched two women clad only in orange paint chase one another with plungers. Still, he somewhat doubted it. The fact that they had vanished immediately after Dennis had nearly bulldozed a mailbox was another hint.

The lights were on when Dennis opened the door, which meant that either Alena was home or he was in trouble. His wife seemed to have a sixth sense about the electricity bill, and regarded unnecessary lighting as a crime punishable by death. It came as a relief when Dennis heard the sound of footsteps, even as he realized that Alena's presence did not in any way negate the possibility of his own forgetfulness.

"Where have you been?" Alena asked as she turned the corner. There was more curiosity in her tone than anger, but Dennis could still sense the irritation lurking underneath her neutral expression.

"A job," he answered.

"I tried calling you. I take it your phone was on silent?"

"No, it's..." he thought for a moment. "Actually, it's still in my glove compartment." He flopped down onto the couch and let his eyelids fall as he tried to relax, although the shaking that had started in his limbs seemed disinclined to fade.

"Are you going to go get it?" Alena asked. Dennis waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. He heard the sounds of motion, and felt Alena sit down next to him. "Okay, what's the matter? Still that thing with Sam?"

Dennis opened his eyes and looked into the concerned gaze of his wife. "You would not believe the day that I've had." Alena smiled sympathetically, and leaned in to kiss him, but pulled back and wrinkled her nose before their lips met.

"Ugh, Dennis, you reek," she said. He started to protest, but realized that the mixed odors of nervous sweat, alcohol, and pipe tobacco were not the best ingredients for a pleasant aroma. The lingering vomit stench probably didn't help, either.

"Sorry," Dennis replied. "I'll go shower. Just give me a minute." He closed his eyes again, but he could feel Alena still watching him.

"Did something happen?" she asked finally.

Dennis tried to laugh, but the sound came out as a gravelly cough. "You could say that."

"Tell me."

It was more difficult to open his eyes this time, but he managed it. Alena's expression was warm and open, although tightened with worry. Dennis was uncertain of how to explain the way his day had gone. Not only did Alena disapprove of his borderline-dishonest escapades, she was also a staunch realist, and not at all the sort of person who would believe a story about a haunted chair.

"Well," Dennis began, his eyebrows furrowing slightly, "the good news is that I won't have to go out in makeup anymore." He scratched at the flakes of glue still clinging to his face, and immediately regretted it. The itching sensation was bad enough, and the miniature snowstorm that the motion caused was an irritant of its own.

"You got caught, didn't you?"

"Sort... of..." replied Dennis slowly. "Not in the way that you're thinking, though. Oh, and Draadtrekker is a fake."

A look of confusion crossed Alena's face. "What is?"

"Not what," corrected Dennis. "Who. Draadtrekker, the guy who runs that store with all the crystals and stuff, is a fake."

"That's nice," Alena said, still clearly puzzled. "What does that have to do with you?"

"He gave me this rock that was supposedly a magical artifact," Dennis explained. "It started buzzing in my pocket, and I confronted him about it. It turns out that the guy isn't a half-bad electrician." He left out the details of their fight, although his leg ached at the memory.

"So, what, it was electronic?" Alena asked. Dennis nodded his affirmation. "Where is it?"

"Probably still under a cabinet somewhere in his shop," replied Dennis. He suddenly recalled his earlier visit to the store, and dug the paper-wrapped candle out of his pocket. The package had been resting there all day, and it felt oddly contorted. Dennis suspected that he had landed on it at some point.

"What's this?" Alena asked, reaching for something on the floor. She came up with a folded piece of paper, and Dennis immediately recognized it as the check that Elspeth had given him. It must have fallen out when he was digging for the candle, he thought.

"That would be the rest of my day." Alena opened the check slowly, and her eyes widened when she saw what was written on it.

"Dennis, what is this?" she repeated. Her voice was hushed and fearful. Dennis pulled in a deep breath before responding.

"Remember when I said that you wouldn't believe me?" he asked. Alena kept silent, her attention fixed on Dennis' face. He took another breath. "Well, this is the part where I prove it to you."

It took a surprisingly short amount of time for Dennis to recount his experiences from the day, beginning with his trip to the curio shop. Alena listened in silence, her expression never changing, even when he described Evy's appearance. Dennis stammered through an embarrassed moment as he talked about his fainting episode, and was intentionally vague about his altercation with Bobo, but eventually he finished the story, and slumped back into the couch as a means of punctuation.

Alena sat and stared at Dennis for what felt like hours. When she finally spoke, it was still in a subdued tone, but the fear had been replaced by something else.

"You're taking a thousand dollars a week from that poor woman?" Alena asked. The anger startled Dennis, and he rushed to defend himself.

"I didn't want to!" he said quickly. "She insisted that I take it. I told her that I didn't need the money, but she was relentless!"

"You make it sound like she held you down at gunpoint," Alena said coldly. She held the check out in front of her. "When you go back on Wednesday, you had better return this to her."

"I don't think she'd like that very much."

"Well, I don't like the idea of you conning a dying woman out of her money!" Her voice fell into a tone of disappointment. "Honestly, Dennis, you told me this was for your

book. What happened to that, huh? You're gone at least one night a week, and I hardly ever see you writing anymore."

"Maybe you're not looking hard enough?" Dennis ventured. He was trying to be playful, but the look on Alena's face made him regret it immediately. "I am writing a little bit," he asserted, "I just don't have much to go on yet."

"So make it up!"

"Hey, they say you should write what you know."

Alena made an aggravated noise and stood up. She looked like she was about to storm out of the room, but she stopped and brought her hands to her temples.

"Look," she said, turning and staring into the air like she was reading from an invisible script. "It's bad enough that you're still going out dressed like a character from a bad TV show." Her eyes snapped down to glare at Dennis. "Honestly, I could deal with that if you didn't expect me to believe this garbage about some half-dead teenager."

"She's all-dead, actually," Dennis murmured.

"Whatever! It's bullshit, either way!"

There was a pause between them. "Is it the hat?" asked Dennis.

Alena's livid expression contorted with bewilderment. "What?"

"The hat," he said again. "You said that I looked like a character from a bad television show. It's the hat, isn't it?"

"Dennis, would you forget about your costume?"

"Because, frankly, I always thought that the hat was a bit much."

Another noise emanated from Alena's lips, but some of the anger had subsided. She let out an exasperated sigh and held her face in her hands.

"You know, I married you because you were silly, but sometimes it gets to be a little much." Her voice was muffled by her palms, and sounded a bit like she was talking through a traffic cone.

"The glasses are okay, though, right?" Dennis asked, pretending not to hear. He pulled out the spectacles, which were bent but still intact. "I think they make me look distinguished." He put them on and looked up at Alena, an innocent expression on his face. She moved her hands and finally, thankfully, a smile broke through her hardened frown.

"God, Dennis," she groaned. She sat down on the couch at the opposite wall. "You are impossible to argue with." She rested her elbows on her knees, and held her chin against the knuckles of her clasped hands.

"I guess that's why I always win," Dennis replied. He took off the glasses and adopted a more serious tone. "Listen, I don't have to cash the check. I can just throw it away, and Elspeth will never know."

"Thank you," said Alena quietly. She looked up at him imploringly. "Dennis, you don't really believe all this nonsense about ghosts, do you? It's just an act, right?"

Dennis didn't answer immediately. If he was honest about what he had seen, Alena would undoubtedly take it very badly. She was under enough pressure at her studio, and Dennis didn't like the idea of adding any more weight to her mental load. On the other hand, he liked the idea of lying to her even less, but he didn't see much choice.

"Come on," Dennis said, waving his hand dismissively. "I have to pretend to go along with this stuff, and sometimes I get carried away, but you know me better than to think

that I'm actually buying any of it." He gave Alena a lopsided smile, and watched as she relaxed.

"You had me worried for a minute," she replied. She closed her eyes and sighed. "I'm sorry, Dennis, it's just that things are pretty crazy right now. I don't need to think that my husband is, too."

"Rest assured," said Dennis, "that my sanity is not being called into question." Even as he said it, Dennis wondered if he had told a second untruth. Any sane person would know better than to believe in ghosts, and yet there he was, scrambling to cover up the fact that he found their presence to be considerably more likely than he ever had before. His gaze drifted towards his feet as his brow furrowed in thought. The situation also brought to mind a second question: What if he had encountered a real ghost before, but had been too closed-minded to see it? He doubted that any of his past clients had actually been plagued by a spectral stalker, but the possibility that he was wrong had been made horrendously apparent.

"Are you okay?" Alena asked, shaking Dennis from his musings.

"Yeah," he answered absent-mindedly. He shook his head, still staring at the floor. "Sorry, I was just thinking about this whole thing."

"What whole thing?"

"I think," Dennis said, choosing his words carefully, "that this might be the last job I do for Sam." He looked up at Alena. She said looked curious, albeit skeptical. "I mean it," Dennis continued. "I'm not really getting any material for my next book, and if he's in some kind of legal trouble, then I don't want to get involved." He neglected to add that his encounter with Evy seemed like it would probably provide him with all the inspiration he would need.

"If you're sure that's what you want," Alena answered. Dennis struggled to keep his face even as he met her gaze.

"I promise," he said firmly, "that once this business with Elspeth is done, I'll hang up the hat forever."

"I'm glad to hear it. Just so you know," Alena continued, a hidden smile tugging at the corners of her eyes, "you're right about the hat."

"Yeah," Dennis agreed, turning the object over in his hands. "It does look pretty silly on me, doesn't it?"

"I would have used a different word," she hinted wryly.

"Don't say it."

Alena's mischievous grin stretched to show her teeth. "Don't say what?"

"You know what I'm talking about," Dennis muttered.

"Why, Dennis, are you saying you think your hat looks..." she trailed off, but kept an eyebrow raised in expectation.

Dennis growled under his breath. "Fine," he said. "You're right." He took a deep breath and glared into Alena's impish smirk. "My hat looks goofy."

Try as he might, Dennis couldn't keep a straight face in response to Alena's laughter.

Chapter Six

Anyone who referred to the internet as “The Information Superhighway” had clearly never used it. Dennis had been sitting at his computer for the better part of the day, trying to find some reference to haunted furniture. When that pursuit had ended without any useful results, he had expanded his search to include haunted houses, and finally, ghosts in general. Although there was a plethora of pages dedicated to every aspect of the supernatural, each of them had been as unhelpful as the next. The only common point they shared was to state that ghosts were, with few exceptions, dead.

He halfheartedly clicked through another set of search results. Up until then, he had browsed through countless articles, each claiming to be the only “expert knowledge” on the subject. There had also been several collections of stories, and more than a few online shops with stores of junk that rivaled Bobo’s. The few times that Dennis thought he might have stumbled on a piece of pertinent information, he had been quickly disappointed.

With a sigh, he pushed himself away from the screen. He had taken a few notes, but his natural skepticism had kept him from amassing more than half a page. The so-called spiritual world was apparently a popular topic, especially amongst individuals with a religious devotion to black clothing and gaudy jewelry. Despite his best efforts to keep an open mind, he was still having a difficult time believing that Evy would be affected by a few verses of bad poetry and the waving of a stick. Feeling frustrated, defeated, and fairly grouchy, Dennis decided to take a break from his inquiries and visit Thoreau’s.



As usual, the tavern was sparsely populated. A lemony scent of wood cleaner added to the usual spicy aroma, making Dennis feel oddly hungry. An attractive blonde-haired girl named Christina, with whom Dennis was casually acquainted, scrubbed at the bar with a stained cloth. She was humming an upbeat tune to herself and didn’t look up when Dennis slid onto one of the barstools.

“Is Luke around?” he asked.

The girl continued to polish the wood. “Who?” Dennis rolled his eyes and tried to stay patient. Christina was nice enough, but her brain often seemed about as functional as a cardboard lifeboat.

“Luke Colby,” clarified Dennis. “Blonde hair? He’s worked here for something like six years.” Christina looked up with an expression that teetered between confused and absent-minded, the wheels in her head clearly working in high gear to process this new and complex information.

“Oh,” the girl replied. She looked down at the spot on the bar she had been polishing, made a thoughtful noise, and then jerked her head back up with a bright, triumphant smile. “You can ask the manager! He’ll know!” She dropped the rag and skipped through a doorway behind the bar.

“He *is* the manager!” Dennis called after her. “Oh, never mind...” He drummed his fingers on the bar, and received an annoyed frown from an obese man in a sweat suit. Dennis gave him a humorless smile before turning his attention back to the doorway, just as Luke came sauntering out.

"Hey, Luke," Dennis greeted him. Luke said nothing, but looked his friend over with an expression of detached scrutiny. "I could use a drink, if it's not too much trouble."

"You look like you've had enough," muttered Luke. He pulled a squat glass from a cabinet and splashed some brown liquid into it from what looked like an opaque beer bottle. "Seriously, dude, I've seen suicide victims looking less depressed than you."

"I'm not depressed," Dennis countered, pulling the glass towards him. "I'm incredibly frustrated, rather tired, and a little bit irritated, but I'm not depressed." He took a tiny sip of the chocolate-colored fluid and let it roll down his throat, rather than actively swallowing it.

"Gosh, and here it is, almost two in the afternoon. What a horrible day you must have had." He picked up the rag where Christina had left it and set himself to finishing the task of polishing the bar. Dennis ignored his friend's sarcasm and regarded his drink suspiciously.

"Luke, what is this?" he asked.

"Root beer."

"It's not bubbling."

Luke looked up. "That's because it's flat."

Dennis sat for a moment with an arched eyebrow. Then, despite Luke's indignant protests, he climbed over the bar and pulled down a bottle of expensive rum.

"Damn it, now you got the bar all dirty again!" Luke complained. He threw the cloth at Dennis' head, where it landed with a happy flopping noise and filled his nostrils with the smells of lemon and dust. "If you want free drinks, you can work for them." He turned his back and rummaged through a drawer at the opposite end of the shelves, muttering audibly.

Dennis peeled the cloth from his head with a smirk, well aware that his antics had caught the attention of everyone in the tavern. Despite there being only half a dozen or so people present, he felt a psychological spotlight pointing at him, and kept the performance going. With a look of feigned seriousness, he removed the cap from the rum and dumped a liberal amount onto the bar. Luke turned at the sound of the liquor splashing onto the wood, and made a noise like a choking foghorn. Dennis fought to keep a straight face as he started rubbing at the sodden area with the rag, sloshing the spilled alcohol across its entire surface.

"Hey!" Luke yelled. He rushed over and snatched the bottle from Dennis' hand. "Do I come in and mess around at your job?" he demanded. "Oh, wait, that's right, you don't have one." He replaced the cap on the bottle and gingerly returned it to its place on the shelf. "Some of us have to work for a living, you know."

Dennis continued to suppress any traces of amusement from his face as he scrubbed at the bar, sopping up the rum with the already dripping cloth. "What about that time that you glued all the pages of my manuscript together?"

Luke went slightly red in the face. "That hardly counts."

"Or the time that you changed all of the characters' names to 'Carlton'?"

"Hey, that was funny..."

Dennis leveled his gaze at Luke. "Of course, there was also the time that you replaced all of my notes with excerpts from --"

"Alright, alright!" Luke exclaimed, throwing his hands up. "Jeez, you're completely intolerable sometimes, you know that?" He jerked his head towards the spot where Dennis had been seated. "Go sit back down, you'll get your goddamn drink."

Dennis responded with a polite smile and a nod, and then went back to his stool, although he walked around the bar this time rather than climbing over it. By the time he arrived, there was a second glass waiting for him, this one filled with an amber liquid. Luke snorted dismissively, and went back to cleaning up Dennis' mess. Dennis waited until there was a dry spot on the bar, then placed a small stack of bills down on it. Luke eyed the money suspiciously.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Dennis shrugged. "Adding insult to injury, I suppose."

"Fine," Luke growled. He swept the cash into his hand and dumped it into the old-fashioned register. "But the joke's on you."

Dennis took a sip of his drink and eyed his friend coolly. "Oh yeah? Why's that?" The twinkle of mischief in Luke's eye betrayed his otherwise stoic appearance, and his lips twisted into a wicked smirk as he answered.

"Because I wrung out the dishrag into your cup."

There was a snicker from further down the bar, and Dennis caught sight of the overweight man in the sweat suit sneering at him with a snotty expression. Dennis' right eyebrow crept higher than its twin, and he turned to directly face the man, who let out a hissing laugh from between putrid teeth. Without saying a word, Dennis brought his glass back to his lips. Then, his eyes not leaving those of the piggish man, he drained all of the liquid into his mouth, and grinned evilly.

The man's neck quivered as he gulped, and the color drained from his face. For a moment, it looked as though he would simply turn back to his drink and ignore Dennis' obviously deranged expression, but some inner thought seemed to persuade him to do otherwise. He pulled a wad of bills from a pocket, tossed them onto the bar, and then trundled towards the door, staring straight ahead. Luke watched the exit with an expression that was a mixture of satisfaction and irritation.

"So, you're scaring away my customers now," he said, turning back to Dennis. "That's nice." He stooped beneath the bar, and came up with a blue plastic bucket. "Here. Spit."

Dennis leaned over the bucket and emptied the contents of his mouth into it. "Yuck," he said, smacking his lips. "I guess that's why people don't order rum-and-wood polish very often."

"It's called a Jamaican Lumberjack, actually." Dennis couldn't tell if his friend was joking or not, and decided that he really didn't care either way. Luke emptied the bucket into the nearby sink, lazily washed it, and then returned it to its unseen home beneath the bar.

"Is there any chance of you giving me a real drink?" Dennis asked.

"Fine, I'd say you've earned it," replied Luke. He collected the cash that the fat man had left and stuffed it into the register. "What do you want?"

"Actually," Dennis murmured, "I think I'd like a root beer."

Luke dropped his hands to his sides and stared. "Okay, you are going to go sit in a booth now. I'll be over in a minute." He disappeared into the back doorway, and returned a moment later with Christina in tow. She retrieved the cloth and resumed wiping down the bar, frowning her brow as she moved.

"Why is it all wet?" she asked.

"It rained," Luke replied. He knelt to rummage for something and missed the look of utter bewilderment that his comment brought to Christina's face.

"Oh." She continued to stare at one spot on the bar. "That's weird." She cocked her head and shrugged, and seconds later was humming again as she mopped up the remainder of the Jamaican Lumberjack.

"I thought I told you to go to a booth!" Luke's voice barked. Dennis watched as two brown bottles appeared on the bar. He grabbed both of them and moved towards the tavern's back corner, where he maneuvered into one of the surprisingly spacious alcoves. Luke followed a moment later with a third bottle clutched in his hand, this one sporting the label that marked it as the beer that he brewed. He slid into the seat opposite to Dennis and regarded him with a thoughtful expression.

"Okay," Luke said. "Spill."

"I did that already." Luke rolled his eyes and took a swallow from his beer.

"You know what I mean. You look like shit, and you're taking it out on everyone."

"I'm taking my appearance out on everyone?"

Luke made a motion as if to slap him. "Would you stop being so difficult? Seriously, what's going on?"

Dennis took a sip from one of the bottles in front of him. "Alena caught me with a check for a thousand dollars in my pocket last night. It didn't go over well."

Luke let out a low whistle. "Something tells me that it wasn't a royalty payment." Dennis shook his head.

"Remember that lady I told you about? The one who called me yesterday?"

Luke nodded. "Yeah, the one you thought was an FBI agent or something. What happened?"

"She offered me a thousand dollars a week to help her."

"What, are you a gigolo now?"

Dennis snorted at the comment. "Let's just say that she's pretty serious about getting rid of her ghost problem."

"I've never heard it called that before." Luke drank some more of his beer, slurping at the lip of the bottle. Dennis leaned back and rubbed his eyes.

"Have you ever tried to research anything about ghosts?" he asked. "It's bloody impossible. Everyone has something different to say, and nothing has even the slightest basis in reality." He dropped his hands and looked back at Luke. "I found an article that said that the only way to deal with a 'marauding spirit' is to seduce it. There was another claiming that I should bake some kind of almond cake and leave it as an offering."

"Hey, dude, I've had your cooking. That shit would scare off a horde of marauding Vikings, much less spirits." Luke paused for a few seconds and tapped his fingernail against his drink. "What are you going to do with the money?"

"Nothing, apparently," Dennis replied. "I told Alena that I would tear up the check."

"That hardly seems fair," said Luke, a hesitant tone in his voice. Dennis only shrugged.

"As far as she knows, I'm conning Elspeth."

"That's the lady?"

Dennis nodded. "The thing is, I didn't even want to take the money. She forced me to, more or less."

"Let me see if I have this right," Luke said. He folded his hands in front of his face, reminding Dennis of what seemed to be Harding's default pose. "You got mugged by an old lady who forced you to take a thousand dollars, and now your wife thinks that you should just throw it away?"

"I'm... not sure that I'd put it quite like that," Dennis responded. "But sure, that's about the size of it."

"Dude, what planet are you from?"

Dennis ignored the comment. He looked out across the tavern and watched as Christina, apparently oblivious to the eyes on her, cupped her breasts and examined herself in the mirror behind the shelves. When he turned back, Luke had averted his eyes, and was staring intently at the surface of the table.

"So, you're not going to cash that check, then?" he asked.

"No, why?"

Luke shrugged. "Well, I mean, if you don't need the money..." he trailed off. For a few seconds, Dennis felt that he had missed something. Then, realization dawned.

"Are you still in gambling debt?" Dennis asked.

"Yeah," Luke replied miserably. "I have to pay up pretty soon."

"How did you even get into this?"

Luke drained the rest of his beer before answering. "There were a couple of guys in here awhile back that had some inside information on something or other. They were regulars. They asked if I wanted in on the action, and I figured, well, what the hell. It went well, I made some money, and it turned into a bit of a habit." He regarded his empty bottle forlornly. "Then it stopped going so well."

"What happens if you can't pay?" Dennis asked.

"Bad things," replied Luke. "This wasn't strictly legal, you know? Anyway, I talked to Sam about lending me some cash, but he says he needs a few days to get it together. I think that's a shrink-talk suggestion that I handle it myself."

Dennis shook his head. "I know Sam. If he says he'll help you out, he will." He dug out his wallet and pulled the check from its hiding place. "I didn't think you guys were that close, though."

"He came in last night and wouldn't stop asking what was wrong," Luke explained. "I figured there was no sense in lying to a shrink, so I told him."

"Well, here, take it," said Dennis, thrusting the check forward. "I'll sign it over to you. Just don't tell Alena about it."

Luke hesitated, but then hurriedly took the check and examined it. "She's pretty steamed about this, huh?"

"You could say that. To make matters worse, I still don't know what's going on with that detective," Dennis said. He glanced back at Luke, and felt a subtle rush of fear at the look on his friend's face.

"Dude, don't you check your voicemail?" Luke asked quietly. Dennis started to answer that he hadn't received any phone calls, but remembered that his phone was still in his car's glove compartment.

"Why? What happened?"

Luke licked his lips and took a breath. "What did he look like?" he asked. "The guy you said was a cop, I mean." Dennis struggled to picture the man from Harding's office.

"Uh... He was big, as in muscular. Dark skin, and he had a short mustache."

"Yeah, that's him," Luke said, looking worried. "He was in here yesterday at about seven. He asked about your picture."

Dennis felt his face tighten angrily. "How many times have I asked you to take that thing down?" he demanded. Luke leaned forward slightly.

"Hey, don't lose your head, dude," he said firmly. "The guy obviously knew where to look for you. He would have asked whether he'd seen the picture or not."

Dennis took a breath and tried to latch onto one of the thoughts that were making kamikaze runs through his brain. "What did he want?" he asked. "Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, he just asked who you were, and if you came in here a lot. It was right after Sam left." Luke wrapped his hand around his bottle, but didn't move it from the table. "I could tell that he wasn't one of your fans, though. Remember that lady with the suitcase full of board games?"

"Can we focus here, please? Tell me about the cop." Luke made a skeptical face.

"For starters, dude, he's not a cop."

Dennis shook his head, confused. "What? What are you talking about?"

"I asked him as a joke, and he told me that he wasn't."

"What does that prove?" Dennis asked, his tone going sour.

"Come on, dude. Everyone knows that cops have to say yes if you ask them that. There's a law or something."

"You've been watching too many action movies." Luke shrugged, but didn't reply. "Besides, Sam said that he was retired." Dennis breathed out and tried to steady his nerves. "What happened next?"

"Nothing much," Luke responded. He released his empty bottle and shook his hand a few times. "He had a drink, made some small talk, and then he left. I remembered what you said about that guy from the shrink's office, so I called your phone. You'd know all this if you checked it once in awhile."

Dennis sighed and slumped backwards in his seat. He took a drink and grimaced as the cold beverage stirred a mild cramp in his diaphragm, but continued to swallow until the bottle was empty. Luke looked on with an expression of concern.

"Do you want something stronger?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Dennis replied, shaking his head. "Why the hell would he come looking for me here? How did he even find this place?"

Luke shrugged. "Maybe he followed Sam. Hell, he might have even come in on his own. It was pretty crowded last night." He leaned forward and looked at Dennis with an uncharacteristic amount of compassion in his eyes. "Look, don't let this get to you. We've both done crazier things than your Doctor September act, and nothing bad ever happened."

Dennis nodded inattentively, still trying to calm the storm of urgent warnings in his head. He *hadn't* done anything wrong, and even if he had, he doubted that a retired detective would be the one to pursue him. Still, something felt suspicious, even if he couldn't put a finger on what it was.

"I think you had better get back to the bar," Dennis sighed. Luke arched an eyebrow.

"Oh, really? Are you my boss now?"

"No." Dennis smiled weakly. "But I think that I could use a drink after all."

Several rounds of liquor and a package of stale chips later, Dennis was feeling moderately better. Luke had managed to juggle his bartending duties with frequent attempts at jovial commentary, following each new witticism with another offer of free alcohol. It seemed pointless to wave him off, and Dennis had – not entirely unwillingly – imbibed far more than he was accustomed to. The effect was both pleasant and disconcerting, especially when the room seemed to spin each time he moved his head. A crowd of blurred faces rushed through the room, as though Dennis was watching animated frames from a slide show of time-lapsed photographs. More than once, a patron recognized him from the picture above the bar, but on each occasion, Luke was quick to distract the inquisitive customer and rescue Dennis from the impending threat of intoxicated conversation.

The evening rush rolled in just after five, and suddenly the tavern was a fashion show of suits and business wear. The change in pace also heralded the arrival of another bartender, a spry young man whose name Dennis had never managed to catch, leaving Luke free to dedicate himself to bothering Dennis full time.

“Here’s an idea,” Luke said, plopping himself down in the chair adjacent to Dennis’. “Why don’t you bring Alena along with you tomorrow? She can meet this Ellen lady –”

“Elspeth.”

“Yeah, her. She can meet this Elspeth lady, see that you’re not up to your old tricks, and you can accept any further payments with a clean conscience.”

Dennis shook his head and immediately regretted it, the motion having disturbed his increasingly delicate equilibrium. “Bad idea. Alena doesn’t believe in ghosts.”

“Neither do you, dude.”

“Well, I do *now*,” snarled Dennis. He played with his eyelids, alternating between blinking, squinting, and opening them as wide as he could manage. Around anyone else he might have been more wary of making such bizarre expressions, but he was confident that Luke had seen far stranger staring at him from across an empty glass. “Yeah, I believe in ghosts now, and I don’t know the first thing about killing them.” He pointed a finger in Luke’s general direction. “Don’t say it.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Because I *know* that ghosts are *already* dead. You know what I meant.” He suppressed a burp and adopted a serious expression. “I think,” he added thoughtfully, “that I may throw up.”

“You’ve been doing that a lot lately, huh?” Luke was smiling, but Dennis didn’t share his good humor. Apparently sensing as much, Luke tried a different tactic. “Well, look, I still don’t have the whole story here. Maybe I can help.”

“She’s a memory-impaired ghost haunting a piece of antique furniture,” Dennis replied. “What more is there to tell?”

“Are you sure you’re an author? How about *why* she’s a ghost, or something about what makes that chair special?”

“I don’t know. And neither does Elspeth.”

Luke seemed ready to respond, but a sudden look of realization crossed his face. “Oh, shit, I forgot about that. Hang on a second, okay?” He stood and rushed towards the bar, where he pawed through a drawer beneath the cash register. When he returned, he was carrying a birthday card-sized flyer emblazoned with bold, dripping text.

“What’s this?” Dennis asked, looking over the paper. “‘The Golden Gate Ghost Tour?’”

Luke nodded enthusiastically. “Some guy dropped it off the other day. Apparently you get taken around to all of these haunted mansions and stuff. Good thing I didn’t throw it away, huh?”

“Why? Are you out of toilet paper?”

“Come on, dude!” Luke flicked the top of the flyer. “It says the guy in charge has been hunting ghosts for thirty years. I bet he’d know how to deal with a possessed armchair.”

Dennis considered. He was skeptical, to say the least, that any self-proclaimed ghost hunter could possibly be legitimate, but he had seen things at Elspeth’s house to make him doubt his original assumptions. Not everyone, he reasoned, was necessarily a con artist, and if there was even a chance at finding some information that was actually useful, he would probably do well to pursue it.

“Alright, fine,” he said finally. He dug into his pocket and pulled out his keys. “But you’re driving.”



The so-called “ghost tour” was advertised as starting at an ancient hotel just outside of Japantown. The building was unimpressive from the outside, but a single step through front door revealed a breathtaking interior done up in red draperies of Victorian design. Gold mirrors and vibrant portraits adorned the walls, and the soft, welcoming lighting was provided by a series of simple chandeliers and wall lamps. The layout seemed strange for a hotel, being more along the lines of what one would expect from a family-run bed and breakfast, and Dennis suspected that the building had once been an expansive mansion.

He followed Luke through an adorned archway into what could only be a common area, furnished with hardwood chairs and ornate cushioned benches. A group of about twenty people had already congregated at the far side of the room, next to a large stone fireplace. Near the back wall stood a man, and even had it not been for the ink characture on the flyer that had brought them there, Dennis would have immediately recognized him as the ghost hunter. He was likely in his late fifties, and the clothing he wore seemed to have been carefully chosen to match the Victorian theme of the hotel, although the ankle-length leather trench coat was somewhat at odds with the rest of the ensemble. The man’s long silver hair curled outward from beneath the brim of a black top hat, and the wispy beard surrounding his lips gave him the air of a storyteller from centuries past. Whether he proved to be useful or not, Dennis decided that he liked the man.

“You should have worn your September outfit,” Luke whispered jovially. “You’d match.”

“Wrong kind of hat,” replied Dennis. Their hushed exchanged drew the attention of the ghost hunter, who called out to them in a friendly voice.

“Getting cold feet, gentlemen?” He smiled broadly, making his eyes twinkle beneath his half-moon spectacles.

“Hardly!” Luke answered, raising his voice to match the man’s tone. “We’re just a little *spooked*.” A chorus of lighthearted groans came from the rest of the crowd, and Luke beamed appreciatively.

“Do me a favor,” the ghost hunter said. “When we start the tour, let me tell the jokes.” His eyes jumped to Dennis, and his smile became a look of recognition. “You... I know you, don’t I? You’re a writer?” Dennis only nodded, hoping that the assembled group would ignore him. “I thought so. We’ll talk later.” He clapped his hands once, making a surprisingly loud noise, and launched into a stream of practiced patter. “Well, folks, welcome to the Golden Gate Ghost Tour! My name is Jim, and I am – as it says on my business card – a professional ghost hunter!”

There was a smattering of applause, which was quickly silenced as Jim raised a spindly finger into the air. “Now, some of you might have the mistaken impression that a ghost hunter’s job is eradicate vengeful spirits. That’s not what I do. You’ll see me interact with a variety of haunted items and objects, but you won’t catch me wearing one of those proton packs!” He paused for laughter, of which there was little, before continuing, undaunted. “No, a ghost hunter’s job is to *find* ghosts, and to *understand* them. I’m a researcher and an historian, and I’m also – this might surprise you – a *skeptic*.”

“You’re not the only one!” Luke called.

Jim laughed and aimed a finger at Luke. “I can tell I’m going to have to watch this guy!” Then he nodded and addressed the crowd again. “But, he makes a valid point. How many people here believe in ghosts?” Two or three hands shot up, with a half dozen more tentatively following. Dennis remained still, unsure of how he should answer, but it wasn’t long before the ghost hunter was talking again.

“Well, I’ll tell you what my goal is,” he said. “My goal here, tonight, is to do everything I can to personally guarantee that each and everyone one of you will have a supernatural experience. I’m going to take you to some of the most notoriously haunted places in all of San Francisco, and I’m going to show you things that have *no other explanation* than to be called ‘paranormal.’ For those of you with cameras, I encourage photography, and you can feel free to ask any questions that you might have. Do we have any now?” He smiled invitingly.

After a few seconds, a young woman to Dennis’ left raised her hand and spoke in a hesitant French Canadian accent. “How far will we be walking?”

“It’s about a mile in total,” Jim replied. “A quarter mile up, half a mile around, and a quarter mile back.”

“Convenient that the ‘most haunted’ places in the city are all within a four-block radius,” Luke muttered.

Dennis shrugged. “Maybe that’s why he chose this place.”

“Did you have a question back there?” Jim asked. Dennis looked up to see the man’s eyes locked on his own.

“Uh, I was just wondering if that was why you chose this place. To start the tour from, I mean.”

Jim smiled and nodded. “As a matter of fact, that is why I chose this place. Some of the most powerful and reliable haunts in the area are right around here. But, that’s not the only reason. I also start the tour here because...” His voice adopted a quavering quality, like that of a ghost from a cartoon. “...This hotel *is haunted!*”

To Dennis’ mild disappointment, there was no flickering of lights or crash of recorded thunder to accompany the statement. Instead, the ghost hunter gave a brief history of the hotel’s history and origins as a wealthy merchant’s mansion, paying particular attention

to the story of a woman who lived there. As Dennis suspected, this character soon became the central focus of the story, and was revealed to be the friendly, nurturing spirit that haunted the hotel. After allowing the group a moment to take in the story, Jim suggested that they all explore the building, stating that they would meet up again in ten minutes.

“Well, this is all very interesting,” Dennis said once he and Luke were alone. “I’m not sure how helpful it’s going to be, though.”

Luke nodded in agreement. “What I can’t tell is whether this guy actually believes any of it or not.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, dude. He just seems too...” Luke trailed off, scratching his cheek. “Too sane, I guess. I mean, yeah, he tells a good story, but it’s like he thinks it’s normal or something.”

“It probably is to him,” replied Dennis. “Besides, you didn’t exactly question my sanity when I told you about the haunted chair.”

“Sure I did. I just didn’t say anything.”

The pair wandered aimlessly through the hotel, occasionally meeting other members of the group and exchanging polite conversation. The ten minute deadline turned out to provide exactly enough time for everyone to visit each of the hotel’s four floors and be back to the common room for the beginning of the tour. Jim stood waiting by the fireplace, holding a brass lantern and a leather satchel.

“Before we head out,” he said, “there’s a little ritual I want each of you to do.” He gestured the opposite side of the room. “Just inside the front door, there’s a mirror. On your way out, I want you all to look yourself in the eye and repeat this oath: I, your name, will be open-minded, safe, and respectful of the dead.” He smiled again. “If that doesn’t keep you safe, then you can always run away screaming!”

The group laughed politely, and with Jim leading the way, made their way towards the door. The mirror they had been instructed to stop at was much like the others Dennis had seen nearby, with an ornate gold frame and slightly foggy glass. He was the last to approach it, but before he could begin repeating the oath, he felt the same sensation of being watched that he had experienced in Alena’s studio.

“Damn it, Bobo,” he muttered. “Why did you have to say anything?” He glared at his reflection – which glared back, predictably – and stalked out the door to where everyone else was waiting.

“What’s the matter?” Luke jibed. “Find a blackhead?”

“Oh, shut up.”

The first stop on the tour was, as far as Dennis could tell, a nondescript stretch of sidewalk in front of one of San Francisco’s famous Victorian houses, called Painted Ladies. Once again, Jim talked about the history of the area, going back to some of the natural disasters that had plagued the city. He gestured to two of the houses in particular, explaining that each of them experienced paranormal activity on a regular basis. One of them had apparently changed hands so often that it had become a famous example of one of California’s more obscure laws: If a house was haunted, the owner was required to inform prospective buyers. Dennis made a mental note to check for the existence of said law, then quickly forgot about it as the tour resumed.

At first, it seemed as though the entirety of the evening's activities would consist of listening to ghost stories and history lessons. Upon reaching the third destination, though, Jim produced a tarnished pocket watch from within his satchel, and held it up for the group to see.

"Can anyone tell me what this is?" he asked.

"It's certainly not a waste of time!" quipped Luke. The groans he received in response were more sincere this time, and Dennis kicked his friend in the heel to shut him up.

"Well," Jim continued, his friendly demeanor unaffected by Luke's heckling, "it's a pocket watch, obviously. What's interesting, though, is what kind of pocket watch it is." He held the timepiece higher, catching the glow from a nearby streetlight. "Around the turn of the century – that's 1900, not 2000 – there was a sort of club for artisans and tradesman. To become a member, a person would have to create something so perfect that the rest of the society would unanimously agree that it was the best of its kind." He reached down and adjusted the flame of his lantern, bringing it down to a much lower level. "Each of them was given a silver pocket watch with their initials etched into hands, and in 1908, the group accepted their first-ever female member. Her name was Winifred Charles."

The crowd pressed closer to the ghost hunter as he flipped the catch on the watch, and held it open. In the dim light, Dennis could barely make out the letter W on the hour hand, and what might have been a C on the minute hand. There were muted gasps and whispers from all around, and Dennis cast a wary eye at Luke, suspicious that his friend was readying another awful pun.

"Winifred was the daughter of a tailor," Jim continued, "and when her father died, she took over the business. Back in those days, women could be seamstresses, but never tailors, so she hatched a cunning little plan." His tone became conspiratorial, and his eyes lit up with mischief. "See, she didn't tell anyone that her father had died, and she kept right on pretending that he was the one making all of the fancy suits and whatnot for her customers. Then, one day, she was visited by a man named William Howard Taft, who was running for president. She spent three months making him a custom-fitted suit, and when he talked about how superb it was, she let the cat out of the bag about her father."

Luke nudged Dennis in the ribs. "Dude, was California even a state in 1908?"

"Yes, it was. Shut up and listen."

"Sorry, I didn't realize you were such a history buff. My mistake."

When Jim spoke again, his voice was much lower, and although the roguish quality remained, his words somehow felt darker. "Well, a few people didn't take kindly to Winifred being allowed into the club, and they took it upon themselves to teach her a lesson. They waited until the dead of night, when they knew nobody would be awake, and they burned down Winifred's shop." He paused, letting out a slow breath. "What they didn't realize – or maybe they did, and just didn't care – was that she was inside, working late. By the time the fire was extinguished, there was nothing left of her but a twisted, blackened skeleton... and this pocket watch."

There was an audible murmur from the crowd. A few people attempted quiet jokes, but a pall of almost tangible horror seemed to have fallen from the night sky. "It was here," Jim said, "between where these two houses are now, that Winifred's shop once stood, and the place where they found her corpse was right there in the middle." He swung the watch idly as he spoke, his eyes seemingly focused on some remote point in

space and possibly time. Dennis felt a chill across his neck, and he tugged at his jacket. “Ever since then, people have talked about strange and terrifying things going on in this area. Once, no more than a year ago, a couple of guys were trying to have a barbecue out in their backyard. Now, these were not skittish men, but what happened to them brought both of them to tears. As soon as they’d lit the barbecue, this horrible, howling wind came up, knocking it over and spraying coals all over the yard... into the shape of a skull. And if that wasn’t enough, two of those coals kept glowing for hours and hours, and those two were right in the center of the skull’s eyes.”

The ghost hunter held up the pocket watch again, and with his other hand he produced a plastic cigarette lighter. “To most people, this looks like an ordinary pocket watch, and most of the time, it is. But if you’re in the right place, and you do the right thing, it’s something much more.” He held his hand steady, waiting for the watch to come to standstill. “Not moving, right?” he asked. There were several murmurs of agreement. Then, with a slow, deliberate motion, Jim raised the lighter until it was only an inch or two from touching the watch, and flicked it on.

The effect was hardly instantaneous, but it was noticeable nonetheless. The watch began to spin on its chain, slowly at first, then faster and more violently. Dennis watched the ghost hunter’s hand carefully, straining to see a clue as to how the trick was accomplished. If it was indeed a trick, he couldn’t see how it was done, and he resolved to ask Jim directly after the tour was concluded.

“If there’s one thing you all take away from here tonight,” the man said, stifling the lighter and pocketing the watch, “it should be this...” His voice suddenly jumped in volume, and the playful aspect returned. “Don’t play with matches!”

Laughter broke out as the tension was alleviated, and the short walk to the next stop was filled by discussions – some muted, others not – of what everyone had just witnessed and how it might have been accomplished. Luke had come up with a wholly unlikely method involving a magnet and some fishing line, but he seemed to be one of the outliers amongst a group of delighted (if cautiously so) believers.

The tour continued for the better part of two hours, with each new location providing an interesting and occasionally unpredictable story. Every so often, Jim would produce another allegedly haunted object, and try as he might, Dennis couldn’t ever seem to come up with a reasonable explanation of what might have been happening behind the scenes. Even Luke’s sarcastic attitude had softened, and Dennis could tell that he was grudgingly enjoying what he probably saw as a piece of performance art.

When the last story was concluded and the crowd began to disperse, Dennis hung back and waited. A couple of tourists from Florida had felt the need to detail their own supernatural experiences to Jim, who listened to their stories with a warm smile and occasional nods of the head. Finally, when Luke and Dennis were the last ones left, they approached the ghost hunter.

“Uh oh, here comes the funny man,” Jim said in a sing-song voice. “Oh, and the writer, good, I wanted to talk to you.”

“I remember,” answered Dennis. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you, too.”

“I’ll just sit here and talk to myself, then,” Luke interjected. “Maybe go find a ghost to talk to...” He strode down the street, whistling loudly, and stopped under a streetlight, where he paused and examined his nails.

Dennis cleared his throat. "Sorry about him. Believe it or not, coming here was his idea."

"Oh, I could tell," Jim laughed. "The loud ones are always embarrassed about actually wanting to listen to me."

"Yeah, that's Luke alright," said Dennis with a nod. "Anyway, uh... Okay, look, this is going to be rude, but I really have to know..."

"Uh huh?"

Dennis swallowed. "I just wanted to ask, you know, how much of that was real. If any of it."

A knowing smile crossed the ghost hunter's face. "You have a few ghost stories of your own, huh?" Technically, Dennis thought, he only had the one ghost story, but it still felt like a gross understatement.

"Something like that, yeah," he said. None of the evening's tales had even come close to mirroring the situation with Evy Palin, and he was hesitant to describe it. In fact, Jim had led the tour group to believe that most ghosts – at least in his experience – did not often manifest as easily-recognized figures or apparitions. Most of them, he had explained, were little more than motes of light or unexplained cold spots in a room.

Jim rummaged in his bag, pushing aside sheets of photographs and folders full of laminated newspaper clippings. "While I've got you here," he said, "I was wondering if you could do me a favor."

"Uh, maybe," replied Dennis. "What do you need?"

"I was wondering," Jim repeated, "if I could get you to sign this?" He pulled out a hardcover book with a missing jacket and opened it to the title page.

"Oh, wow, definitely," Dennis said. He scrawled a cursive approximation of his name into the book, which he noted was dog-eared and worn. "I take it you enjoyed it, then?"

"Actually," replied Jim, "I haven't read it yet. I've been carrying it around for months."

Dennis shook his head quickly, trying dissipate the fog of bemusement that had clouded it. "Anyway, I did have something I wanted to ask you. Suppose you had a ghost, like the ones you talked about, only it was haunting a piece of furniture."

Jim nodded. "What kind of furniture?"

"An armchair."

"Okay. Why is it haunting an armchair?"

"Well, that's the thing," answered Dennis, "I don't know."

The ghost hunter shrugged apologetically. "I can't really help you then, sorry. I mean, without knowing about your ghost's history, there's not much to go on."

"You don't know of any kind of sure-fire exorcism technique then?" Dennis' last shreds of hope were fraying, despite the encouraging tone in Jim's apology.

"Every ghost is different," he said. "You have to understand that some of them don't want to leave. Those that do usually have a reason for hanging around, but even then, you might not be able to find out what it is."

"I see." Dennis sighed. "Well, thank you. I had a great time."

"My pleasure. Thanks for the book."

"Not a problem."

Both men stood awkwardly until the ghost hunter extended a hand. "Well, have a nice evening."

“You too,” replied Dennis, shaking it. Then he hurried down the street to where Luke was waiting, fully expecting another barrage of derisive commentary. He wasn’t disappointed.

Chapter Seven

It was well past ten when Dennis arrived at home, and he was somewhat surprised to find Alena awake and waiting for him. He brushed through the door, intending to hang up his jacket and fall into bed, but the sight of her reading at the dining table stopped him in his tracks.

"Hi!" he said. "I didn't expect you to be up."

"I didn't expect you to be out this late," replied Alena. "How's Luke?"

Dennis made a face and sat down across from her. "What makes you so sure that I was out with Luke?"

"None of your other friends would keep you out until this hour on a Tuesday."

"Alright, fair point." Dennis stood and walked to the bedroom, kicking off his shoes and throwing his coat into the open closet. Alena was still reading when he came back out, but she saved her place with her thumb and gave Dennis a scrutinizing look.

"So, what did you guys do?"

Dennis retook his seat and squinted at the ceiling. "Well, we hired a camera crew and a couple of hookers, then we broke into Robin Williams' house and painted everything blue. It's too bad that we had to leave in the middle of it, I thought we had an Academy Award winner in the works." He smiled hopefully, but his wife did not appear to be amused. "Fine, he got me drunk and convinced me to come on a ghost tour."

Alena blinked and raised an eyebrow. "A ghost tour?"

"Yeah, here, look." Dennis pulled out the flyer, which was irreparably wrinkled after its stay in his pocket. "This guy named Jim took us around to all of these haunted houses and told us stories about their history and whatnot."

"That's it?"

Dennis shrugged. "It was better than I'm making it sound."

"Uh-huh." Alena rubbed her eye with a finger. "This doesn't have anything to do with that woman you told me about, does it?"

"Who, Elspeth?" He shook his head. "No, we stayed in the city, kind of near that sushi place that you like." It wasn't exactly the truth, but he didn't think that avoiding the question really counted as being dishonest.

"More research for your book, then?" Alena's tone, while not exactly accusatory, definitely carried a hint of disapproval. "How's that coming, by the way?"

"Actually, it's funny that you mention that," replied Dennis with a smile. "The tour guide tonight – he called himself a 'ghost hunter,' by the way – asked me to sign a book for him."

"That's nice. You haven't written any more, have you?"

Dennis shook his head. "Not a page," he confessed. "I don't know, Alena, the whole premise seems kind of stupid now. I might just scrap it and try something else."

"Oh, really?" huffed Alena. "So, these past few months working with Sam have been for what? The hell of it? Or do you really plan on being a con artist again?"

The irritation in his wife's voice made Dennis wince. "In my defense, I was never really a con artist. Other than the one time, I mean."

"What about the thousand dollars you stole from that woman?"

"Hey, I did *not* steal that," protested Dennis. "And I didn't keep it, remember?" Alena didn't respond, and for a sickening moment Dennis was sure that she had found out about

his having given the check to Luke. "Look, you're right," he said hurriedly, "I haven't been working as hard as I could, but I will. Like I said before, this is going to be the last job that I do for Sam. As soon as it's over with, I'm done. I won't do anything but write." He relaxed when Alena nodded, but immediately tightened up again when she threw out another question.

"Why don't you just call and cancel tomorrow, then?" she asked. "If you're done, then you're done, and you don't need to help Sam get any more patients."

"Clients," Dennis corrected. "I mean, no, wait, you were right. Patients." He waved a hand nervously. "I can't do that. I have an obligation to be there, and I'm going to fulfill it, but I'll get it over with as soon as I can."

Alena's eyes narrowed. "And you won't take any more money from her, even if she insists?"

"No."

"No *what*?"

"No," Dennis said again, rolling his eyes, "I won't take any money from her."

"Thank you," replied Alena. She slid a bookmark into the spot where her thumb had been and closed her book. "I'm going to hold you to it, Dennis. Tomorrow is your last day, even if she doesn't agree to see Sam." She stood up. "I'm going to bed. Are you coming, or are you going to stay up for a bit?"

"I think I'll stay up," Dennis said. "I'll be in later." He watched Alena leave the room without another word, then thumped his head down on the table. Now he had two promises to keep, and absolutely no idea how to go about keeping them.



Wednesday began badly. Recalling the past evening's fight with Alena had left Dennis feeling irritable and anxious. If that hadn't been enough, the morning had brought with it the realization that he had accidentally left his car's headlights on the night before, and had managed to drain his car's battery to the point where turning the key rewarded him with little more than a pathetic whimper from the motor. Finally, as an added punch line to his already aggravating day, he wound up discovering that he had put his shirt on inside-out.

"No, really, I think it makes an impressive fashion statement," Bobo stated, doing little to hide his wide grin. Dennis struggled to right the orientation of his clothing, cursing the tight fit of his thin turtleneck. "It has a counter-culture sort of vibe to it. The ultimate statement of nonconformity."

"Then why did you bother pointing it out?" Dennis grumbled, working his arms through the sleeves. Bobo shrugged and faced forward in his seat, looking up through the windshield.

"Looks like it might rain."

"It already did. I had to pop-start my car in it."

Bobo looked back at Dennis. "Really? I thought your hair was just like that."

Dennis scowled and made a futile attempt at combing his brown locks into place with his fingers. After the fourth or fifth failed attempt, he finally gave up and started the car. Assuming that they didn't run into any more delays, the pair should arrive at Elspeth's house at exactly nine o'clock. From that point on, though, Dennis had little idea about

what to expect. Several miles passed and the car remained silent. Finally, Bobo moved as if to say something.

"This ghost, then," he began, "she haunts a chair. What else is there to her?"

"Uh," Dennis stammered. He glanced in the rearview mirror, wary of the police car which had pulled into the lane behind them. The driver didn't look like the man from Harding's office, but he couldn't be sure. "She looks seventeen, but she's actually something like sixty-three."

"That's it?"

"Other than the fact that she haunts a chair, yeah." Dennis squinted at the reflection of the police car, still trying to make out the features of the person driving it. Bobo watched his face, and faced backwards to look at the car behind them.

"I take it you have a problem with cops?" Bobo asked.

"Would you turn around?" hissed Dennis. "No, I don't usually have problems with cops, but a friend of mine might have dragged me into one of his."

Bobo nodded, and didn't ask for any further details. The car hummed over the Golden Gate Bridge, and Dennis breathed a sigh of relief when the police car sped past them. At some point while they were in a tunnel following the bridge, the overcast sky gave way to a cheerful blue, and Dennis squinted in the sudden rush of light.

"So, here's a question," Bobo said. "Why don't we just burn the chair?"

"Burn it?" Dennis repeated.

Bobo shrugged. "Hack it to bits, then. If this spook is haunting a chair, why don't we just off the chair?"

Dennis considered. "Do you think that would work? It seems too... I don't know, simple, I guess." He pulled towards the exit that would take them to the house, hoping that he remembered the correct route. "Besides, what if it hurts Evy? I don't think Elspeth would like that very much."

"Evy's the dead one, yeah?" Bobo asked. Dennis nodded. "I don't see how you can hurt a ghost, really."

"Well, she didn't like it when I tried to touch her," replied Dennis. He caught sight of a familiar street and hastily braked to make the turn.

"We can try talking first," Bobo said. "Leave the fire as a backup plan." He scratched at his head, which Dennis still half-expected to be adorned with shoulder-length dreadlocks, rather than shaved to a fine stubble. A few minutes later, the car pulled up in front of the stone walkway leading to Elspeth's house. Bobo let out a low whistle as he looked at the place, and although Dennis shot him a warning look, he had to agree with the sentiment. The pair climbed from the car, pausing only as Dennis double-checked to make sure his headlights weren't left on again.

Bobo whistled again as the pair approached the house. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

"Yeah, why?" Dennis asked. He tapped the knocker a few times.

"Well, I mean... Rather posh, isn't it? Not at all what you'd expect for a ghost house."

Dennis treated Bobo to a sidelong glance. "I wasn't aware that 'ghost houses' had any specific look to them."

"I suppose they don't," Bobo conceded. "Still, though, you wouldn't think they'd look like this."

The door opened a moment later, without so much as a creak, and Elspeth Palin looked up at the two men from within a fuzzy pink bathrobe. A smoldering stub of a cigarette was clenched between her fingers, and she held a small glass ashtray in her opposite palm. Her eyes had the bleary look of someone who had been woken only seconds before, but when she spoke, her voice was alert.

"Right on time, I see," Elspeth commented. She examined Bobo with a suspicious gaze. "Who might you be?"

"Barnaby Owens, ma'am," Bobo responded. If the man had been wearing a hat, Dennis imagined that he would have politely tipped it. "Most folks call me Bobo."

"I see." Elspeth took a sharp drag from her cigarette and let the smoke drift out from her nostrils. "He's with you, then, Dennis?"

Dennis nodded. "Bobo runs a shop that sells things of an occult variety," he explained, doing his best to sound professional. "He volunteered to lend a hand, and I could hardly turn him down. I hope you don't mind?"

"There's plenty of breakfast," Elspeth said as a response. She stubbed out the cigarette and beckoned the men to follow her inside. "I don't imagine Evy will be too polite, though." She led them through a large kitchen to a circular breakfast nook. The walls around the table were each set with a tall window, providing a view of the expansive backyard behind the house.

"We could always talk to her one at a time," Dennis suggested. He was ushered to a chair, and he sat down in front of an impressive array of white plates, each of which was topped with bacon, sausage, slices of white toast, and pieces of fresh fruit. Bobo followed suit, and helped himself to a selection of everything on the table.

"The eggs will be done in a minute," Elspeth said. "Just as well, now that I know there are two of you." She shuffled over to the stove, revealing slippers that matched her robe. "How do you prefer your eggs, Barnaby?"

"Bobo, please, ma'am," he replied politely, albeit through a full mouth. "Never mind about eggs for me."

"You're not eating, Dennis," Elspeth said without looking over her shoulder.

"I wanted to ask something, actually," Dennis responded. "Why wouldn't your sister be polite if two of us tried to talk to her at once? You were there the last time I tried."

Elspeth returned to the table with a pair of smaller places, each bearing a perfectly fried egg. "It's not a matter of how many people are there," she said. She placed one plate in front of Dennis, and another at a vacant spot on the table. She continued speaking as she walked back into the kitchen and retrieved two pitchers. "I'm sorry to say, but it's more because of your skin tone, Barnaby."

"It's 'Bobo,' ma'am," he said again. "Am I too pale, do you think?" He nudged Dennis, who continued eating in silence.

"Milk or juice?" Elspeth asked. She poured a selection of each into a set of small glasses on the table, and each of the men helped themselves to one. Dennis avoided the milk, but Bobo seemed moved to devour all that he was offered. "Evy hasn't had much experience with... Dark-skinned folks," Elspeth explained. It was the first time that Dennis had heard caution creep into her voice. "She's only ever known one man with skin darker than her own, and he was the house boy for some neighbors back in London."

"A slave, you mean," said Bobo.

Elspeth shook her head with an expression of distaste. "A servant. He made small enough wages, but they did pay him." She served herself from the assembled plates, and took dainty bites from her toast as she spoke. "I had another black man come and see her once, right when she first appeared." She shook her head disdainfully. "She acted as though he was there to wait on her. He hasn't spoken with her since."

"Why haven't I heard anything about this?" Dennis murmured absent-mindedly. Both Elspeth and Bobo turned to look at him, but it took several seconds for him to notice their curious expressions. "Sorry," he stammered. "I was just wondering why this place isn't more famous." He looked at both of them, still staring at him in confusion. "I mean, a real ghost? I'm surprised it hasn't been on one of those reality television shows."

"What?" asked Bobo.

"Oh, you know," Dennis replied. He made nonsense motions with his hands, as though the meaningless gestures would add something to his explanation. "They go around and they find places that are haunted and they try to catch the ghost on tape."

"Then what?" Bobo pressed. Elspeth remained quiet, having shifted her focus back to the consumption of her morning meal.

"Well, then they usually get scared and run around screaming until a commercial break." His hands fell back to his lap. "Now that I think about it, they don't really ever show you the ghost or anything, either."

"People like to pretend," Bobo answered. He pointed at Dennis with a piece of bacon. "You know full well what happens when they find the real thing."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dennis asked, a trifle irritably.

Bobo smiled and leaned towards Elspeth. "He was a gibbering mess yesterday, he was. Looked like he'd gone swimming in a cesspool."

"Oh, no, it was only water," Elspeth replied quietly.

Bobo looked taken aback. "What?"

"After he fainted," she continued. "I had to dump two pitchers of water on him."

Bobo turned back to Dennis with a giddy laugh. "You *fainted*, September? Christ, that's a change from bludgeoning a bloke with a statue."

Dennis felt the tips of his ears start to burn. "I told you that I passed out, remember?"

"Must have missed it, with all the bruises you gave me."

"Look, I apologized, didn't I?"

Bobo tilted his head. "No, actually, I don't think you did."

"Well, it's hard to feel sorry when you keep smiling like that." Dennis wolfed down the contents of his plate as he struggled to think of a topic change. "Elspeth," he said, "how many other people have visited Evy?"

"Quite a number, I should think," Elspeth replied.

"Give me an estimate."

Elspeth looked up from her plate and gave Dennis a quizzical look. "I haven't kept a count of them. Twenty or thirty, perhaps? Why?"

Dennis didn't reply. A tiny bell had started ringing in his head, but he couldn't figure out exactly what it meant. "How long have you been doing this?" he asked. "Trying to get rid of Evy, I mean."

"Hey now, that's a bit harsh," Bobo protested. Elspeth's gaze landed on him for a moment before going back to Dennis.

“While I’m sure I don’t know what Barnaby means,” Elspeth said with a hint of a smile, “I’ve been trying since she appeared, so, eight years. Ever since my parents died.”

“It’s ‘Bobo,’” muttered a sullen voice. Elspeth dabbed at her lips with a napkin, although the act didn’t hide the smile from her eyes.

“Mind you,” continued Elspeth, “I wasn’t particularly serious about it until the doctors gave me a time limit. Most of that number has been over the past year.”

Whatever glimmer of intuition had been prodding at Dennis before, it faded away and vanished as he fought to pinpoint it. He scowled to himself, more out of frustration than any sense of ineptitude, and focused an accusing glare on the empty plate in front of him.

“Well,” he said, putting his hands on the table. “I suppose we should go and have a talk with Evy, then.” Without waiting for an answer, he pushed away from the table and rose. Bobo hurriedly followed, murmuring thanks to Elspeth for the meal as he moved.

“You go on ahead, Dennis,” Elspeth said. “I’ll take care of the cleanup here. You remember the way?”

Dennis nodded. “Do you need to introduce me again or anything?” he asked. Bobo raised a curious eyebrow, but remained silent.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine on your own,” Elspeth replied. Dennis nodded again and marched back towards the foyer with Bobo close behind. Behind them, Elspeth set to gathering up the plates and glasses, causing a melodic clatter of porcelain and glass to follow them through the hall. Once the pair was out of earshot, Bobo put a hand on Dennis’ arm and slowed his pace.

“Hey,” he said. There was a mixture of worry and confusion in his tone. “What did you mean by that?”

“Mean by what?” asked Dennis. He retraced the steps he had taken the day before, and soon found the door that would lead to Evy’s room.

“All that about introducing us,” Bobo said. “What happens if we don’t get introduced?” The obvious nervousness in his voice sent a sympathetic tingle of fear through Dennis’ chest, but he quelled it with a deep breath.

“Nothing happens,” he explained. “Evy has memory issues. She doesn’t retain anything from day to day.”

“Oh,” Bobo said. The anxiety in his words had been replaced by mild disappointment. “Well, that’s not very exciting.” He scuffed his shoe on the ground and looked around the hallway. “So, what do we do now?”

“Now,” said Dennis, grasping the doorknob, “the interview begins.”

Chapter Eight

As far as dramatic entrances went, Dennis thought, this one left something to be desired. After taking a deep breath and nodding to Bobo, he had moved to open the way into Evy's room and found it locked. Unfortunately, he had been leaning into the motion, and had slammed rather awkwardly against the solid wooden door. The setback, minor though it was, had thrown Bobo into a fit of giggles that seemed out of character for a man his size. Dennis stood in silence for several seconds while Bobo continued to laugh, and irritably wondered if bringing the bigger man along had been the best decision.

"Are you done?" Dennis asked. Bobo continued to snort and chuckle as he wiped a tear from his eyes.

"Oh, god, that was funny," he wheezed. "Really, you should have seen it from where I'm standing."

Dennis rolled his eyes and grumbled. "Wait here," he said. "I'll go ask Elspeth for the key." He stalked back down the hallway, fully aware of Bobo's continued laughter behind him. After a couple of wrong turns, he managed to find Elspeth still in the kitchen, loading the dishes from the morning meal into a giant stainless steel dishwasher.

"Something wrong, Dennis?" She didn't turn from her task.

"No, not really," replied Dennis. "I just remembered that I need the key, is all."

"Ah, yes," Elspeth said. "I was wondering what that thump was."

Dennis could feel himself blushing as Elspeth opened a drawer and withdrew a nondescript key. He mumbled his thanks and hurried back to where he had left Bobo, who was still chortling quietly.

"Knock it off," muttered Dennis. "You want to make a good impression, don't you?"

"Seems to me that I'll be doing that more than once," Bobo replied. "I mean, with her memory and all."

Dennis sighed and fumbled with the key until finally the door swung open. The room appeared exactly as it had before, with the brown armchair standing resolutely at its center. Bobo leaned through the doorframe and stared.

"Doesn't look like much, does it?"

"Wait until she shows up," replied Dennis. He searched the room until he found the wooden stool, which he positioned in front of the armchair. Then, without further ceremony, he sat down and took a deep breath.

"Hello Evy," he said carefully. "My name is Doc... My name is Dennis. I'd like to talk to you."

For a few minutes, nothing happened, and the only sound was Bobo shifting his weight. "Quite dramatic, this is."

Dennis was uncertain as to whether Bobo was joking or not, but he didn't offer a response. Instead, he kept his gaze focused on the worn upholstery, looking for a hint of the ghost's appearance.

"Evy," he said again, leaning forward, "can you hear me?" He was growing tense. Had he done something wrong? Or maybe – he had to consider it as an option – this was the punch line to an incredibly elaborate practical joke.

"Whoa!" Bobo suddenly exclaimed. "Now *that's* something you don't see every day!"

Dennis glanced back at Bobo with a confused expression. His eyes had gone wide, and were locked on the chair. Dennis turned back to it, hoping to see something new, but came up empty.

"What?" he asked finally. "I don't see anything."

"That's a bloody big spider there!" Bobo responded, jabbing a finger forward. Dennis looked to where the man was pointing and saw a large, eight-legged shape taking a slow walk down the side of the chair. He shivered involuntarily, and scooted back slightly. His motions did not go unnoticed by Bobo, who grinned with amusement.

"Oh, come on, now," he said, chuckling. "Don't tell me Doctor September is afraid of a little bug."

"It's not a bug," Dennis replied, feeling queasy.

"It's a creepy-crawly bugger," Bobo replied. "I don't care if it's an insect." He stepped forward and slapped the interloper with a broad palm. "There," he said, brushing his hand against his leg. "All dead."

Thank you, said a voice in Dennis' head. He jumped and looked back at the chair, which was suddenly occupied by the young girl he had seen during his last visit. There was no subtle fading-into-existence this time, either. One moment, the chair had been a dull piece of furniture, and the next it was providing a seat to a spectral teenager. She was still clad in the v-necked day dress, and nothing else about her had changed, at least not that Dennis could see.

"*Whoa!*" Bobo exclaimed again. This time, it was his turn to jump, and his voice tightened. "September, look! Look at that!"

"Please excuse him," Dennis said to the ghost, not bothering to hide his triumphant smile. "He's not the most diplomatic person on the planet." He was secretly pleased by Bobo's reaction, as it made him feel much less cowardly. Even so, he was dimly aware of his heart pounding in his chest.

"I can see as much," Evy replied. Her transparent form shifted on the chair as she adjusted to what was presumably a more comfortable position. Then again, Dennis mused, the chair probably didn't offer much in the way of cushioning to a person who was weightless. Evy rocked her head from side to side, and her brows knit in concentration. "I'm sorry, sir," she said finally, "but I'm afraid you have me at a loss."

"It's alright, Evy," Dennis replied. "My name is Dennis, and I'm here to talk to you about..." He paused. Come to think of it, what exactly *was* he here to talk about? It seemed like a bad idea to say that he was here to drive her off, regardless of whether she would remember it.

"Yes?" Evy prompted. Her voice had a coy ring to it, and she pursed her lips expectantly. Dennis opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by Bobo, who stepped forward with a disarming smile.

"We're here because we need your help," he declared. "I'm Barnaby, but you can call me Bobo."

Evy's expression changed to one of annoyance as she shifted her gaze upwards. "Thank you... Bobo." Her voice held a tone that was generally reserved for inept children. "I'll be sure to tell you if I need anything." Her eyes flicked back to Dennis, who was still wracking his brain in an attempt to find conversational topics. "You were saying, Dennis?" she asked.

"Well," Dennis stuttered, "I was hoping that you could answer some questions for me." Evy let out a seductive laugh and leaned forward.

"And what," she asked suggestively, "will you do for me in return?"

Dennis didn't know which part was more disturbing: That he was being propositioned by a ghost, or that she would have been almost forty years his senior if she had been alive. He heard muffled laughter from behind him, and looked back to see Bobo clamping his hand across an amused grin. Dennis gave him a pointed glare and turned his attention back to Evy, who was still displaying a sultry smile and a clear view of her celestial cleavage. He wasn't particularly familiar with the culture at the time of Evy's death, but her behavior seemed much more well-suited to the lusty barflies that he sometimes encountered at Thoreau's.

Probably best not to tell Luke too much about this, he thought wryly. He cleared his throat. "Well, we can discuss that later on," Dennis said, tilting his head towards Bobo. Evy followed the motion with her eyes, and understanding registered on her face.

"Bobo, dear," she said suddenly, batting her eyelashes once. "I'm so *terribly* thirsty. Would you go and find something for us to drink?"

"Oh, right away, missus," Bobo replied in a fair approximation of a Jim Crow accent. "I jus' get right on that." He remained where he was, and gave Dennis a humorless smile and a shrug. Evy did not appear to notice, and once again turned back to Dennis.

"What did you want to ask me, Dennis?" Evy inquired. Then she giggled and touched a finger to her bottom lip. "You know, you remind me of Cary Grant."

"Uh, thank you," Dennis replied. "I think." Evy giggled again and lounged against one side of the armchair, bringing her legs up underneath her.

"I just love the cinema," she said with a sigh. "Don't you?"

Dennis started to respond, but closed his mouth over the words and shook his head. "Evy, what did you do yesterday?" he asked. It was a decidedly frail attempt at a topic change, but he realized that the question might actually yield pertinent results. If nothing else, maybe he could get a handle on how Evy had died.

Then again, that would require that she provide a helpful response, which she seemed disinclined to do. She threw back her head and let out a moan of mock frustration.

"Oh, let's not discuss anything so boring, Dennis," she said. "All that arguing and fighting over something so silly."

"What was silly?" Bobo interjected. Both Dennis and Evy turned to look at him. "Who was arguing?" he added.

"Where is our tea, Bobo?" Evy asked with obviously feigned patience.

"Not ready yet, ma'am," Bobo replied. Evy rolled her eyes and gave Dennis a knowing look.

"Really, Dennis," she chided with a patronizing smile, "I hope you don't let him act quite so brashly towards you." Bobo muttered something about a bruise on his head, but let the remark slide.

"Actually, I was curious about that myself," Dennis said. "Who was arguing? About what?"

Evy sighed again, this time with genuine frustration in the sound. "It was just something to do with father's work, of course. Does he ever talk about anything else?"

"I don't know," Dennis replied. "Does he?"

Evy leveled a dark look at him. "I'm not sure I like where this is going, Dennis. Why did you say you were here, exactly?" Her eyes narrowed suspiciously and she pulled herself upright. "I think perhaps it would be best if you left."

"Now you've done it," Bobo commented dryly.

"Done *what*?" snapped Dennis, looking over his shoulder.

"Trode too close to the fire, you did."

"Bobo, did you not understand me when I asked you to bring us tea?" Evy demanded through a saccharine smile.

Dennis made an aggravated noise and buried his face in his hands, and he suppressed a humorless laugh when he heard Evy say "There, now, you've gone and made Dennis get all worked up." Apparently, he could either endure the flirtations of a ghost, or he could get himself ousted by pissing her off. Neither option seemed to be a particularly effective method of exorcism, unless it was Dennis who was the target. He tried in vain to get the conversation back under control, but after a few more minutes, it proved to be an entirely hopeless endeavor.

"Please excuse us for a minute, Evy," Dennis said. He rose and beckoned for Bobo to follow him. "I'll be back soon." Evy replied with a skeptical hum, and turned to examine a blank spot on the wall. It was dismissal enough for Dennis, and he made a hurried exit.

Back in the kitchen, the pair found Elspeth in the midst of putting dishes away. "That was certainly a fast conversation."

"Your sister has quite the attitude, ma'am," Bobo said.

"Yes, well, I did warn you."

Dennis coughed softly. "You didn't mention that she was quite so, uh..." he trailed off, searching for the word.

"Horny?" offered Bobo. Elspeth sniffed with what could have been either distaste or amusement, and finished placing the dishes in their various cabinets. Dennis considered punching Bobo, but the gesture died before it reached his hand. He was frustrated, but he had to admit that he was scarcely an expert at dealing with any aspect of the situation, regardless of what his alter ego claimed.

"Anyway," Dennis said firmly, trying to keep his thoughts from derailing, "she doesn't seem too inclined to talk about anything that happened around the time that she died."

"No, I wouldn't expect so," Elspeth replied. "Not the happiest of times, really. I don't remember much of it." She stood on her toes and stretched her petite frame to put the last of the dishes back in the cupboard. Bobo made a move to help her, but shrank back under the force of a warning frown. Dennis smiled quietly. Elspeth didn't strike him as being willing to accept help from anyone. She made it clear that her independence was her most precious possession.

Dennis' smile faded and dropped into a thoughtful frown. Come to think of it, Elspeth's decision to hire an investigator seemed drastically out of character for her. This was a woman who did her own gardening, her own cooking, and presumably kept the entire house in its spotless condition of cleanliness. Dennis' frown deepened. Looming death sentence or not, he couldn't picture Elspeth as the sort of person who would willingly ask for help unless there was something incredibly important at stake, and her attitude about her sister seemed almost blasé. Something, Dennis decided, was missing.

The feeling of a hand gripping his arm pulled Dennis out of his thoughts. Elspeth was staring up at him with an expression of very slight impatience on her face, and he was suddenly aware that Bobo was whistling tunelessly in the background.

"Sorry, I was off in my own little world there," Dennis said. Bobo's quiet whistling shifted, and went through a few lines of what might have been "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Elspeth's attention remained on Dennis.

"I asked if you agreed with your musically-inclined partner," she said, her look of irritation growing in proportion to the volume of Bobo's noise.

"Bobo, knock it off," Dennis said. The whistling stopped, although it may have been less out of choice and more due to the broad smile that suddenly stretched Bobo's face. Dennis gave him a look, and then smiled apologetically down at Elspeth. "I'm sorry, I must have missed something while I was thinking. What are you asking me?"

"Barnaby has suggested a rather... unique solution," explained Elspeth. Behind her, Bobo made a cross-eyed face and pantomimed an explosion with his hands.

"Oh, *that*," Dennis said. He raised an eyebrow at Bobo as he spoke. "We discussed it, but only as a last resort." He looked back at Elspeth, whose face was now touched by a skeptical if not patiently amused smirk.

"You're welcome to try it, of course." She turned to look at Bobo, who was not quite fast enough in dropping his arms. "I don't imagine you'll have very satisfying results, though."

Bobo was talking before Elspeth was halfway through her disclaimer. "Great!" he exclaimed, clapping his hands together. "I'll set about moving the chair outside, then." He marched out of the room, the sounds of his whistling following him. Dennis watched the man go, and a few seconds passed before he realized that Elspeth was staring his way.

"I'm sorry about him," Dennis said in a low voice. "I'm sure he means well. I'll ask him to stay behind tomorrow, if you'd like."

"Oh, hardly, Dennis," replied Elspeth. "He's an entertaining young man. A bit quick to resort to drastic measures, perhaps, but his enthusiasm is endearing." She beckoned for Dennis to follow her. They walked through the kitchen's side door and entered a spacious living room which Dennis had yet to see. Elspeth approached a slender wooden cabinet at the room's far side, and fiddled with a decorative key set into one of the doors.

"I'm afraid that I haven't any gasoline handy," she said. There was a metallic click of a latch, and Elspeth pulled her canvas purse from the cabinet's recesses. "There's a station near the highway, though, and I should think that you can buy a gas can there." She handed Dennis a few bills, which he took reluctantly.

"I could convince him to let me talk to her a bit longer," Dennis said. He could already hear the grunts and thumps of Bobo wrestling the chair through the house. "I mean, we only tried for a few minutes. I'm not ready to give up yet."

Elspeth smiled cryptically. "Humor your friend for now, Dennis. If it doesn't work, you'll have plenty of time to do things your way."



The walk to the gas station was fairly short, but was still taking awhile. It wasn't until Dennis was halfway along that he realized he could have just driven the distance, and by that point he didn't feel like turning around. Besides, the time alone gave him a chance to mull over the various details that had been bothering him. There was no reason for

Elspeth to lie, but perhaps she had unconsciously omitted an important point somewhere. About what, Dennis couldn't say. He supposed there was always the chance that his suspicions were merely the result of his paranoia acting up again.

His steps fell into a slow rhythm as he worked through his thoughts. Elspeth had contacted him because she wanted to get rid of her dead sister. Why was it so important? Yes, she was due to follow in her departed sibling's footsteps before too long, but that didn't seem to be quite enough motivation for a woman who was otherwise so independent. Maybe, as she had hinted, she was worried that she'd wind up as a ghost herself, and was trying to make certain that she didn't have any reason to hang around. Eight years around a haunted chair probably gave one some interesting thoughts about the afterlife.

Several minutes of thought-heavy walking passed before he became aware of the dark blue sedan following behind him. Dennis glanced over his shoulder, wondering if the driver was lost. The glare cast by the midmorning sun obscured any view of the car's interior, but whoever was inside responded to being noticed by pulling up next to him and stopping. The passenger side window rolled down, and a deep voice called out.

"Hey there, Dennis." The rumbling of the car's idling engine muffled the words, but there was no mistaking that Dennis' name had been called. Confused, curious, and only marginally concerned, Dennis approached the vehicle and peered through the open window. The spacious interior was empty, save for the muscled, dark-skinned driver. Dennis felt his heart jump into his throat when he recognized the man as the so-called retired detective that he had seen exiting Harding's office.

"Going somewhere?" the man asked. Dennis took an involuntary step back from the car, his mind and heart racing to see which could explode first. "Why don't you hop in? I'll give you a ride."

"Thanks, but I'd rather walk." Dennis' dry mouth made the words come out as a rasping croak, and the man gave him a humorless smile.

"I'd be happier if you got in the car," he said. His left hand tapped at a spot just beneath his right arm, and Dennis' heart kicked itself into overdrive as he saw the telltale bulge of a gun beneath the man's jacket. He considered running, but didn't imagine he could get very far on foot. Even if he tried to jump over a fence or escape down an alleyway somewhere, he suspected he would be easily outrun. With trembling hands, he reached forward and tugged on the handle of the car door.

Several millennia passed, and the man in the car finally asked "Something wrong?" Dennis swallowed and pulled on the handle again.

"It's locked," he managed to say.

"Oh. Sorry." There was a click from the door, and a third attempt at pulling the handle opened it. Dennis slid into the passenger seat, dimly aware that his panic had given way to a sense of resolute dread. The window next to him rolled back up, cutting off the sounds from outside. It left the car silent, save for the hum of the motor and the whisper of the heater. For several agonizing moments, nothing was said, and the car remained where it was.

"Seat belt," the man said plainly. Dennis jumped at the sound, but quickly followed the implied request. As soon as the buckle had clicked into place, the man shifted the car into gear and started slowly driving down the street.

"My name's Spinner," the man said. "Malcolm Spinner."

"I saw you outside the sandwich shop," Dennis answered. Spinner gave no reply. "And at Samuel Harding's office," he tried again.

"What were you doing there, Dennis?" he asked. "Or is it Darvyn?" He looked over at Dennis, who kept staring straight ahead. "No? You're not Darvyn September?" He pulled two photographs from a pocket and tossed them into Dennis' lap. One showed Dennis staring out of a restaurant window, phone still in hand, while the other was a blurry but unmistakable picture of himself in costume. Dennis said nothing, which was not so much an act of defiance as the result of his mind being too occupied to think of a reply. "Well, whichever you are," Spinner continued, "I think it would be a good idea for you to consider a career change."

"Am I under arrest?" Dennis asked. Spinner snorted.

"No. This is just a friendly ride. Where are you going, by the way?"

"Gas station," murmured Dennis. Despite having threatened him earlier, the man did not appear to be openly hostile. Dennis had seen enough daytime television to know what a "good cop" was, but somehow this situation didn't seem to fit the profile.

"Car died on you?" Spinner asked. Dennis did not reply, hoping that his captor would draw his own conclusions. "That's a nice bar your friend runs," Spinner said. "I might stop by again sometime."

"Look, what's this about?" Dennis snapped. The temperature in the car seemed to drop several degrees as the congenial tone of Spinner's voice disappeared and was replaced by something forceful and unrelenting.

"Don't play dumb, kid," he said. "You think that a small-timer like you has any tricks that haven't been played a million times before?" He wrenched on the steering wheel, taking the car around a sharp corner that roughly pushed Dennis into the door. "You and your buddy aren't anything special. Just another couple of crooks." The car continued to wind through the neighborhood, following a path that was as seemingly aimless as the one being traced by Dennis' thoughts. Several minutes passed as he tried to assemble a decent response, but the eloquence of his retort evaporated as Spinner slammed on the brakes, bringing the car to an abrupt halt.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dennis coughed, straining against where the seat belt had cut into his neck.

"The hell you don't," growled Spinner. He turned in his seat and stared solidly at Dennis, who did his best to meet the man's gaze unflinchingly. Surprisingly, it was Spinner who shifted first. He looked back through the windshield and tightly gripped the steering wheel with both hands. Then, just as quickly as the man's friendly demeanor had disappeared before, it was back.

"Look," Spinner sighed. "Maybe you got into this thinking you'd be helping someone out. I could buy that. You seem like a nice kid." He turned back to Dennis and thrust a finger forward. "That's why you've got no reason to keep at it. If you really want to help the lady, stay the hell away from her." He nodded towards the windshield. "The gas station's about a hundred yards up."

Dennis hurriedly fumbled with the seat belt, releasing its hold on him. Then he reached for the door handle, and paused. "Um," he stuttered, looking down.

"What is it, kid?" Spinner asked. His voice was gentle, and had an expectant quality to it.

"The door," replied Dennis. "It's locked again."

"Oh, right," Spinner said. He pressed an unseen button, and the latch popped open. "It does that automatically when I start driving."

Dennis climbed out onto shaking legs and steadied himself on the open door. He left the pictures on the floor. Spinner leaned forward and held out a white business card. "Listen, Dennis," he said, "if you change your mind about talking to me, give me a call." Dennis didn't respond, but took the card nonetheless. Without so much as a second look in Spinner's direction, he pushed the door closed, and felt his heart speed up again as it immediately swung back open.

"You have to really slam it sometimes," Spinner's voice called. Dennis scowled and threw the door again, this time latching it. The car immediately pulled away, leaving a shaken and unsteady Dennis to walk the final stretch to the gas station. In spite of his still overwhelming sense of panic, he realized that it was a different place than the one he had intended to visit, and he darkly wondered if he'd be able to find his way back.



Dennis had purchased a package of cigarettes in addition to the supplies for Bobo's anticipated display of pyrotechnics, hopeful that the nicotine would do something to soothe his electrified nerves. Instead, the smoke had only given him a headache, which was just as well since carrying both a smoldering cigarette and a can of gasoline was not the most brilliant of ideas. He had wandered for a bit before coming across a street he recognized, and by the time he arrived back at Elspeth's house, the sun was almost directly overhead and his stomach was growling.

Several attempts at pounding on the front door, both with the knocker and with his fist, failed to result in either Elspeth's or Bobo's presence to greet him. When he finally entered on his own, the house seemed deserted. He meandered through the familiar areas of the dwelling, checking Evy's room first, now devoid of the chair, and then searched the connected kitchen and dining room. Eventually, he found his way to an open door leading out behind the house, and the sudden sound of Bobo's laughter told him that he had finally located the other two living entities in residence.

The backyard was landscaped in much the same way as its more evident counterpart at the house's front. Rows of flowers bordered a well-kempt lawn, kept invisible from neighbors by a tall wooden fence. A single, ancient tree stood off to the left side of the area, beneath which a white table and matching chairs had been set. Bobo and Elspeth sat opposite each other, with a game board between them, and Evy's chair stood at the yard's far corner, looking for all the world like an innocent piece of furniture.

"Took you long enough, mate!" Bobo called when he saw Dennis approaching. "We was thinking you'd been kidnapped!"

He sort of had, Dennis thought with a shiver. He had decided during his walk back that he wouldn't mention the encounter with Spinner. There was no need to worry Bobo needlessly, and Elspeth could easily confirm the reason for his presence, should anyone happen to ask. He had briefly imagined that a squadron of police officers would be waiting for him upon his return, but had decided that Spinner wouldn't have let him go if he had been planning anything of the sort. With a carefully neutral expression, Dennis walked forward and examined the game in progress.

"How are you at Backgammon, Dennis?" Elspeth asked. Dennis ran his eyes across the game board and tried to make sense of the pieces.

"I've never played," he confessed. He turned his gaze to Bobo, whose face was lit by a near-perpetual grin.

"I'm winning," Bobo proudly declared.

"No, you aren't," countered Elspeth good-naturedly. She winked at Dennis. "He hadn't played before either. Some of the finer points are still eluding him." There was a clattering of dice and some pieces changed position on the board. Judging by the look of bemused mirth on Bobo's face, the finer points of the game were the least of his worries.

"So, are we going to do this?" Dennis asked. Both Elspeth and Bobo looked up with varying degrees of amusement on their faces, and suddenly Dennis felt incredibly silly standing there with his gallon-sized jug of accelerant.

"It can wait until we finish the game," Elspeth said. A fair enough statement, Dennis thought, but he didn't feel particularly productive as an observer. He trudged over to where Evy's chair sat and gave it an accusing glare.

"What have you gotten me into?" he demanded in an exaggerated voice. Although the chair was seemingly vacant, Dennis preferred it that way. He didn't see much appeal in complaining at an object that could offer input. "One minute, I'm just an author with a stupid hobby, and the next, I'm getting forced into cars at gunpoint while my partner the fraudulent shaman plays Parcheesi with a British version of Martha Stewart."

"Backgammon!" yelled Bobo. Dennis felt his ears burn and his face turn red. He hadn't realized that he'd speaking loud enough for his words to carry back to the table, and he wondered how much of what he'd said had been overheard. He stole a quick look over his shoulder. Based on the carefree way that the game continued to progress, he figured that the part about his encounter with Spinner had gone thankfully unnoticed.

The gas can landed with a sloshing thud as Dennis dropped it, and he sat down in front of the chair. For a moment, he thought he heard a faint hint of laughter, but it could have been coming from a house nearby. A piece of stiff material dug into his hip, and after a moment of contorted grasping, he pulled out Spinner's business card, now slightly wrinkled by his efforts. The information printed on it was straightforward and simple enough, but one detail caught Dennis' attention. Under the name "Malcolm R. Spinner," was a line of smaller text, spelling out the words "Private Investigator." The man wasn't a detective after all, at least not of the official variety. While the fact put Dennis more at ease than he had been, it also raised further questions.

Questions which would have to wait, it seemed, as Bobo was suddenly at Dennis' side, having bounded across the yard like an overgrown puppy.

"Alright, then, September," he said, snatching up the gas can. "Let's have us an old-fashioned exorcism!"

"I don't remember anything about gasoline in those rituals," replied Dennis, climbing back to his feet. The brief moments sitting had left some moisture clinging to the underside of his legs, along with a few blades of cut grass. He brushed at them with one hand, eyeing Bobo warily.

"You must have slept through that part," Bobo said.

"What?"

"Did you get matches?"

"No, I figured we'd use a lighter. What was that you just said about sleeping?"

Bobo plopped the gas can down on the chair. "Bad idea to use a lighter for this, mate. With matches, you can toss 'em."

"Ask Elspeth for some matches, then!" Dennis said. "And tell me what you meant by sleeping!"

"No time for that now, we have an exorcism to perform."

Dennis eyed Bobo with a flat glare. "Are you always so intentionally difficult?" As expected, Bobo grinned in response.

"It's a movie, September. An old one, even. You know, with the girl and the priests?"

"Haven't seen it."

"And the backwards stairs?"

"Now it sounds like one of those M.C. Escher drawings," Dennis muttered. "Alright, fine, start dousing the chair. I'll go get some matches from Elspeth."

"Right here, Dennis," the woman chimed, materializing next to him. She held out a cardboard box of oversized fire starters, probably designed for getting fireplaces going. Dennis took them with a nod of thanks, and reminded himself to get more sleep that night. Ironically, he was at greater ease with the idea of dealing with Evy than he was with the surprise of the girl's sister sneaking up on him. At least he hadn't yelped.

Nearby, Bobo was whistling as he emptied the gas can onto the chair. It took less than a minute before the final drops fell onto the worn upholstery. When the task was complete, Dennis stepped forward, readying one of the elongated matches.

"Okay, as soon as I light this, we're going to want to get back a bit," he said.

Bobo nodded seriously, glancing back towards the tree. "How hot are you thinking it'll be?"

"This was your idea, you tell me," Dennis muttered. "I just don't want to take any chances." He struck the match and waited for the flaring sparks to calm into a steady flame. Then, with a quick look to make sure that both Elspeth and Bobo were a safe distance from any danger, he flung the match at the chair and sprinted away.

After a minute or two had passed, Dennis stormed back towards the chair, a wide-smiled Bobo in tow.

"Make sure it don't go out this time," suggested Bobo helpfully.

"Do you want to do this?" Dennis scowled.

"Hey, you're the big-shot doctor, I'm just the advisor. The assistant, if you will."

Dennis struck another match and watched it burn for a few seconds. "Funny how the assistant sat back here and played Baccarat while the big-shot doctor played errand boy," he said.

"Backgammon," Bobo corrected. He readied himself to run as Dennis held the match up, and the pair retreated back to the tree as the tiny flame sailed towards the chair. This time, the effect was instantaneous, and a brief roar of spawning fire reached Dennis' ears as he ducked behind the massive trunk.

He wasn't sure what he had expected. Ethereal screaming, maybe, or some kind of exotically-colored smoke. Instead, the pyre looked incredibly mundane, or at least as mundane as could be expected when it consisted of a brown armchair and a gallon of unleaded fuel. It was hard to tell through the waves of heat and oily smoke, but the chair seemed to be enduring the conflagration with impressive resolve.

"Well," Bobo began after several moments of watching the blaze, "at least it's pretty, isn't it?"

"Sure," replied Dennis. "In a mad arsonist sort of way." The flames continued to lick at the chair, although they were slowly shrinking as the fuel ran low. When the last

flicker of the inferno finally died, the chair remained where it was, apparently no worse for the wear.

"I suppose that's the end of it," said Elspeth quietly.

"Do you really think that she's gone?" Dennis asked, surprised. Elspeth looked up with an incredulous smirk.

"I was referring to the fire, Dennis. I suspect that Evy is alive and well, in a manner of speaking."

"Here, now, that can't be right!" Bobo protested. "That was a gallon of petrol, that was! It was enough to burn bricks!"

"But not antique furniture, by the looks of it," mused Dennis. He stared across the yard at the object in question. The grass beneath it had dried out and cooked, but the chair itself appeared to be completely untouched.

"Bollocks!" Bobo pushed away from the protective cover of the tree and stomped towards the burnt area on the grass. Dennis started to protest, but it was clear that his words would have no effect. He hurried to follow, anxious to see what Bobo was up to. The bigger man stood with his hands on his hips, regarding the chair with a mixture of detachment and frustration.

"What the hell is going on here?" growled Bobo. Neither the chair nor its currently absent spectral inhabitant offered anything in the way of a response, and Dennis hurried to offer potential explanations in their stead.

"It might not have been hot enough," he ventured. "Sometimes it takes a lot to get things going, especially when the wood is really hard."

"What are you, a bleeding Boy Scout?"

"I was," Dennis confessed. He swept a palm over the chair's frame, taking care not to touch the wood. "It isn't hot at all," he stated. He stared down at the upholstery, which had remained equally untouched by the inferno. "You know, you'd think that the cushions would have been singed, at least."

"You'd think the whole bloody *chair* would be!" Bob exclaimed. He grumbled something under his breath and took his anger out on the chair with a well-placed kick.

A deafening explosion assaulted Dennis' eardrums at the same time that a violent shockwave, hot and powerful, threw him away from the chair and across the yard. He landed badly, and what little breath the detonation hadn't forced from his lungs was quickly expelled by the painful blow of his back slamming into the ground. A high-pitched ringing in his ears blocked out any other sounds, and it took several moments of bewildered blinking before he realized that the painful disk of bright light at the center of his vision was, in fact, the sun. The entire front of his body felt like it had been pummeled by a fist made of red-hot iron, and it only intensified when he instinctively curled up in an effort to breathe.

He might have stayed there for hours had his mind not reminded him that both Bobo and Elspeth had probably been hit by the blast as well. With a groan of effort that was inaudible to his own ears, Dennis waged an internal war against his protesting muscles until he had finally wrestled himself into a huddled kneeling position. Bobo was several yards away, propped up on one hand as he twirled a finger in his ear canal. The ridiculous open-mouthed expressions passing across the man's face told Dennis that his friend had also lost his sense of hearing, and was trying to regain it by any means possible. He scanned the yard, mildly concerned at how suddenly vibrant the colors seemed, until he

spotted Elspeth's dainty figure splayed out near the overturned table. He made an effort to stand and stagger towards her, but instead had to crawl forward on all fours, lest his aching limbs rebel and impede his progress.

Dennis was relieved when Elspeth waved off his attempts at helping her, and more than a little jealous when she climbed to her feet unaided. A black and white mess of Backgammon pieces littered the ground nearby, as Dennis discovered rather painfully when he sat on a die hidden in the grass. He watched as Elspeth pushed the table and its surrounding chairs back upright, the entire thing like a scene from a silent movie accompanied only by a perpetually ringing bell.

Muscles ached in protest as Dennis was suddenly hauled to his feet, but the feeling that he had lost a fight against a rabid bulldozer had mercifully begun to subside. He let himself be led to one of the chairs, and tensed painfully as he fell into it. Given the choice, Dennis thought, he would have preferred to stay on the grass. Bobo walked around from behind him, his giddy demeanor having returned with such fervor that Dennis wondered if the man had taken a blow to the head.

Words were mouthed to him, but the ringing in Dennis' head had not yet faded to the point where they were intelligible. He pointed to his ears meaningfully.

"I can't hear anything," Dennis said. The sound of his own voice came to him as if through miles of cotton. It must be louder than he'd intended, though, because Bobo made hasty shushing motions in response. A few moments later, two glasses were placed on the table. Remembering his experience from earlier in the week, Dennis took a careful sip of the contents before downing one of the containers in grateful relief. One surprise glass of gin had been more than enough.

"Anything broken, Dennis?" asked Elspeth from behind him. Her words were muffled and carried an odd buzzing quality, but at least he could make them out.

"I don't think so," he replied. His vision, which he hadn't even realized had been tunneling, faded back to normal. "What happened?" He looked over at Bobo, who was staring off in the direction of the chair. Steeling himself against further surprises, Dennis followed his gaze.

The chair remained where it had been, upright and unaffected by the events of the past several minutes. If anything, it looked moderately better than it had earlier, probably as a result of having any still-clinging dust either burned or blown away.

"I don't think she liked that much," Bobo observed.

Dennis snorted. "Really? What was your first clue?" Something about the scene seemed a little bit strange, even when he ignored the obvious. It was another moment before the hidden detail became apparent. "Flowers," Dennis stated, pointing towards the chair.

"Flowers?" repeated Bobo. "What about them?"

"Look at the flowers behind the chair," Dennis prompted. "What do you see?"

Bobo squinted for a few seconds. "Irises?" he guessed.

"Quite right," interjected Elspeth. Dennis glanced over to see the woman picking up the last pieces of the scattered game. "They're lovely, aren't they?"

"Very lovely, ma'am," Bobo agreed.

"Yeah, lovely irises," said Dennis hastily. "What do you notice about them, though?"

"That they're very lovely!" Bobo declared. He beamed at Elspeth, who shared a smile with him.

"They're also still there," Dennis impatiently pointed out. "That blast was powerful enough to knock the table over, but the flowers that are two feet away look fine."

"Oh, actually, Dennis," said Elspeth gently, "I'm afraid it was me who knocked the table over." She brushed at herself idly. "The whole thing toppled with me when I tried to catch myself, and it brought a few of the chairs down with it."

Dennis considered this for a moment. "Are you telling me," he said slowly, "that the explosion only hit the three of us?"

Bobo shrugged. "Looks like it."

"That's impossible!" Dennis exclaimed. Bobo shrugged again.

"More impossible than a ghost what haunts a chair?"

"Yes!" sputtered Dennis. "Well, no. I don't know!" He gritted his teeth and felt one of his eardrums pop back into place, putting him slightly off-balance. "Anyway, it's not supposed to work like that. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction."

"I don't know that I could take another one of her reactions," Bobo said. He scratched his head as he regarded the chair, much in the way that a shepherd might regard a sheep that was trying to fly. He turned back to Dennis. "So, what now, boss?"

"Back to talking, I suppose," Dennis sighed. His fingers made a metallic noise as he drummed them on the table. "I need to figure out a way of getting her to trust me, though."

"Yeah, she didn't seem too keen on telling you anything," Bobo agreed. "Though she was pretty keen on you, eh?"

"Oh, yes, Evy fancies herself quite the vixen," Elspeth cut in. She put the last of the retrieved game pieces back on the table and sat down in a vacant chair. "One of the fellows I hired before was rather taken with her." Both Dennis and Bobo turned to listen. "I suppose it's a small miracle that she always shows up in the same state," Elspeth continued. "I rather doubt she'd have been willing to put her clothes back on otherwise."

Neither Bobo nor Dennis said anything in response, but both men exchanged a look. It hadn't occurred to Dennis that the ghost might be capable of shedding her garments, and the thought definitely added an unexpected element. He was already feeling guilty about lying to Alena, and he doubted that it would improve if he was treated to a spectral striptease. Still, he had to admit, the thought did bring to mind some interesting images.

"Actually," Dennis murmured, "maybe that's the answer."

"Oi!" exclaimed Bobo with a furtive glance at Elspeth. He lowered his voice to an urgent hiss. "You're not thinking of doing the nasty with her?"

"No, you dolt," Dennis replied. "I'm thinking that I know of a way to get her to open up to me. Not like that!" he added in response to Bobo's widening grin. "I just bet that I know a situation where she'd be willing to answer my questions." He made a show of adjusting his clothes. "I'm going on a date with a ghost."

Chapter Nine

Although it was only mid-afternoon, it had been agreed that the next attempt at interrogating Evy would take place the following day. Both Bobo and Elspeth had insisted that if Dennis was to go on a date with the ghost, as he had suggested, then he should be clad more formally. Despite his own assurances that his current attire would suffice, neither Bobo nor Elspeth would relent on the matter. As such, Dennis had been given little choice but to postpone his romantic endeavor until such time as he was dressed more appropriately for the occasion. After bidding Elspeth a polite – and in Bobo’s case, an apologetic – farewell, the pair of would-be exorcists climbed into Dennis’ car for the journey back to the city.

As soon as Dennis turned the ignition, Bobo began speaking. “Are all your jobs this interesting?” he asked. Dennis snorted.

“I suppose.” He watched Elspeth’s house as they pulled away, almost expecting to see a ghostly figure watching them from one of the windows. “I mean, none of them have been this *real*, but all of them are fairly entertaining.”

“Most blokes just visit the cinema when they’re bored,” joked Bobo.

“Oh, right, like you’re one to talk, Draadtrekker.” That got a laugh, and for a moment, Dennis was not seated next to an oversized immigrant from England, but rather a charismatic shaman with the spirit of a storyteller.

“Yeah,” Bobo agreed with a gleam in his eye. “This one time, right? This lady comes in and asks me for something she can slip her husband.”

“What, like, poison?” asked Dennis.

“That’s what I thought, too!” Bobo exclaimed. “She meant an aphrodisiac, though. So, I told her to come back in an hour, and I whipped up a little potion for her.”

“What was in it?”

Bobo shrugged. “Water, mostly. With a bit of purple food dye. I wish more people would buy it, actually. She spent thirty bucks.”

“I’m glad to hear that customer satisfaction is your biggest concern, especially considering that I shop there,” Dennis said. “Is that all, or did you get caught?”

“Nah, nobody ever catches me,” replied Bobo. “Present company excluded. She weren’t too happy with me, though.”

“Didn’t you just say that you didn’t get caught?” Dennis asked. He turned his head and squinted at a road sign. “I think we missed our exit.”

“I *didn’t* get caught,” affirmed Bobo. “No, she was mad because she caught her husband. With another woman, I mean. So, naturally, she blamed it on the contents of the bottle I’d given her, and demanded the antidote.”

“Water and some other color of dye, I assume.”

“Coffee, actually. I bought decaffeinated stuff by mistake, and figured I’d get some use out of it.” He looked off into the distance. “She hasn’t been back in awhile, come to think of it.” His brow furrowed, and he glanced out each of the windows. “September, where the hell are we?”

“I told you,” Dennis said, “we missed our exit somewhere back there. I think there’s another one up a bit further.”

“Can’t we just turn around?”

"That would be too easy." A few seconds of silence passed before Dennis rolled his eyes and sighed. "Oh, fine, have it your way. We'll head back towards Elspeth's house and figure it out from there."

"I'm sure you know best. You're the doctor, after all."

"You know, I actually am," Dennis replied. Bobo looked incredulous. "Really, I mean it. I bought a PhD online."

"Seems like a waste of money, if you ask me," Bobo said. "You should buy my love potions instead."

"I prefer Earl Grey, thank you. Besides, every other paranormal investigator out there is a doctor or a reverend or something. At least I have the paperwork to back mine up."

"Why's that, then?" asked Bobo.

"Which part?"

"All them doctors and priests. What's the point?"

"Well, really, it's a question of credibility," Dennis explained. "Although, to be honest, a lot of the guys I've met are still pretty lacking in it." He shifted in his seat and chuckled quietly. "Actually, that's a great story. Back when I was first getting started, I went to this UFO convention in the city."

"What, you hunt aliens, too?" interrupted Bobo.

"There doesn't seem to be a lot of distinction," Dennis answered. "Not at those gatherings, anyway. Everyone has their own little booth with whatever junk they're trying to sell, and there's all these seminars that are hosted by so-called experts on one thing or another. They all claim to have been abducted or haunted or talked to by the devil or something, so it's a pretty bizarre experience."

"I should look into it," Bobo murmured. "I bet I could sell a ton of merchandise. A proper ton."

"And then some," agreed Dennis. "I was there for research, though, and trying to get my character right. That was when I met this guy named... I don't know. Francois something. He said he was an exorcist. I think he had me pegged as a mark, because he kept asking me all of these leading questions."

"What's the punch line, here?"

"The guy was a con artist," Dennis replied. "A damned sleazy one, too. He'd find people whose relatives had recently died, and then feed them this bullshit about how there were still ghosts hanging around. For a fee, he'd offer to send them on their way."

"Sleazy, sure," said Bobo. "Pot calling the kettle black, September?"

"Hey," Dennis protested. "It's completely different. I never took anyone's money, for one."

"Yeah, you left that to the shrink, so you're sleazy *and* stupid." He smiled to show he was joking. "Still, I guess you never used the obituaries as a help wanted section."

Something about that sentence struck a chord with Dennis, but he couldn't figure out what it was. "Well, anyway, I learned something important that day."

"How to kill demons?"

"Yes, Bobo, exactly," Dennis replied sarcastically. "I learned to keep quiet. Most of these guys, or at least the ones that I met, have a bit of a self-aggrandizing streak. They like to brag about the things that they've seen, and it comes across as being kind of unbelievable. The ones who are most successful are always the folks who don't say anything until someone asks. *Then* they start bragging." A familiar street loomed into

view, and Dennis turned to head back towards the highway. Bobo made a noise like he was considering something, and then turned to face Dennis.

"So, does that mean that I should ask you what happened earlier?"

Dennis arched an eyebrow. "What do you mean?" he asked. The car let out an irritated growl as the gears shifted, and the sound soon mirrored his own mood as Bobo continued to question.

"I mean you come back from the petrol station with a look like someone killed your mum. Plus, you were gone for bloody ages."

"Uh huh," Dennis responded. Bobo paused, presumably waiting for a more descriptive answer.

"Well?" he prompted.

"Well what?" asked Dennis. It suddenly occurred to him that they might be under surveillance, and his eyes scanned the road for any sign of Spinner's blue sedan. Although the thoughts had been mercifully absent from his mind since leaving Elspeth's house – until now, at least – he had been increasingly worried about how the investigator had found him in the first place.

"Is someone following us?" Bobo asked.

"Where?" Dennis yelled. He jerked his gaze up to the rearview mirror, and then out each of the windows. "Where?" he asked again.

"That's a yes, then," said Bobo, nodding. "Stop messing about, you're liable to hit something."

"Who's following us?" Dennis demanded.

"Nobody, far as I can tell," replied Bobo. He turned around in his seat and stared out the car's rear window. "Not now, anyway. I take it someone was before, though?"

Dennis hesitated for several seconds. Finally, he replied with an almost imperceptible nod. "Yeah, something like that," he admitted. "A private investigator named Malcolm Spinner."

"What's he want, then?" If Bobo was at all concerned, it didn't show in either his voice or mannerisms. "Look, there's the petrol station," he said, pointing. "I knew it wasn't too far off."

"It wasn't," Dennis sighed. "Look, remember all that stuff I told you about my September character?"

"You mean the nutter convention, or telling old ladies to go and see a shrink?"

"The latter, I guess," replied Dennis. "Well, the guy who pays me is in some kind of trouble. I don't really know what it is, but I get the idea that he must be in pretty deep." He briefly described his earlier encounter with Spinner, and then recounted his experience with meeting the man at Harding's office. Bobo listened with a thoughtful expression until the story was done.

"Inappropriate, eh?" he asked. "What could a shrink be doing that an ex-copper would see as inappropriate?"

"I'm not sure that Spinner actually is an 'ex-copper,'" Dennis replied. He shifted in his seat to pull out the wrinkled business card, which he passed to Bobo. "See? According to that, he's a private investigator."

"Actually, I've heard that most PIs start out in the Old Bill," said Bobo. He peered at the card. "What'd he give you this for, then?"

"In case I changed my mind and decided to talk to him."

Bobo turned the card over a few times in his hands. "What about?"

"I –" Dennis began. He considered the question. "Actually, I don't know." He tried to remember Spinner's exact words in the car. "He said that my buddy and I were just small-time crooks, and that if I really wanted to help Elspeth, I would stay away from her."

"That's me, right?" asked Bobo. "Your buddy?"

"I don't see who else it could be," Dennis answered. "Unless he meant Sam. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense, though."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing," Dennis said, gesturing with a finger, "I haven't told Sam about Elspeth yet."

"Or Evy," added Bobo.

"*Especially* not about Evy," said Dennis with a mirthless laugh. "God, can you imagine how that would go over? This guy is a shrink who specializes in dealing with people who think that they see ghosts. What do you think would happen if I told him that I was planning to go on a date with one?"

"He'd congratulate you on finally getting some?" Bobo guessed.

"I'm married."

Bobo shrugged. "Like I said."

"Anyway," Dennis said, ignoring the shot, "I don't see how Spinner could have been referring to Sam."

"Bloody great coincidence for him to show up, then, isn't it?"

"Sort of," Dennis conceded. He thought it over again. As far as he could tell, his only connection to Spinner was through Harding, but that didn't explain how the investigator had known about Elspeth. Maybe he hadn't, come to think of it. After all, he had never actually mentioned any names. What if he had been referring to a different person entirely, like the niece that Harding had allegedly wronged? Dennis voiced his thoughts to Bobo, who nodded in agreement.

"Sounds to me like you're on the wrong side of a detective story," he said.

"Well, one way or another," muttered Dennis, "I think I need some answers." He glanced at his watch, and then pointed at the car's glove compartment. "Get my phone out of there," he said.

"Making plans?" Bobo asked.

Dennis shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm making an appointment."



Once again, the labyrinthine path to Harding's office proved to be more difficult to navigate than Dennis had expected. When he was on his own it was bad enough, especially when he passed by the same open doors and curious expressions during his roundabout exploration. With Bobo in tow, the experience was amplified from mildly embarrassing to downright aggravating, largely because of the commentary that the bigger man was offering.

"Here, I'm sure we passed that water fountain already," Bobo said, pointing towards an alcove.

"It's a different one," muttered Dennis in reply. He was trying to count office doors, and the randomly-numbered signs were making it difficult.

"It had the same sticker on it," Bobo pointed out.

"They all have that sticker on them."

"With the same tear in them?"

Dennis made a dismissive sound and waved a hand irritably. Up ahead, the hallway turned sharply to the right, and Dennis could picture the luxurious corner offices behind the uniform walls. The thought made him feel a bit queasy. He didn't have any particular issue with heights, but something about tall buildings made him uncomfortable. Perhaps it stemmed from a general distrust in humanity, or a lack of faith in their ability to do anything right. He pushed the images of crumbling skyscrapers from his mind, and concentrated on locating his intended destination. Finally, after a few more turns and one unexpected dead end, a gold-colored plaque caught his eye.

"Okay," said Dennis, stopping in front of the marked door. "When we go inside, just hang out in the waiting room. I don't want Sam to start asking too many questions about you."

"Why's that, then?" Bobo asked, wrinkling his nose.

"I just get the idea that the fewer people who are involved, the better," replied Dennis. Without waiting for a response, he opened the door and strutted inside. The receptionist, either out of apathy or obliviousness, did not look up. At least she was behind the desk this time, Dennis thought. He glanced at the clock on the wall, and felt his eyes being dragged over to the new painting that hung nearby.

"Well," observed Bobo, "it doesn't look like everyone agrees with you."

"What are you talking about?" Dennis asked. Bobo pointed at the canvas on the wall.

"The fewer people involved, the better? I count seven blokes in that picture." Dennis shook his head, trying to hide the amusement that had broken through his stoic visage. Bobo was right, though. The painting left very little to the imagination, despite the dozen or so limbs making futile efforts at modesty.

"This is a shrink's office, is it?" Bobo asked, grinning. "I wonder what I'm meant to get out of that."

"Isn't art about personal interpretation?" said Dennis whimsically.

"That piece might as well have subtitles."

The sounds of their conversation finally appeared to break through the receptionist's carefully maintained shield of indifference, and she looked up with a grudging sigh.

"Can I help you with something?" The image created by the pop of her gum and the nail file with which she gestured was far too stereotypical for Dennis to take seriously. He felt his barely-suppressed smirk insistently pulling at the corners of his mouth.

"I'm here to see Sam." He looked up at the clock again, and then examined own watch. One of them, he decided, was off by fifteen minutes, and he doubted that it was his own timepiece. "I called a few minutes ago."

"Uh huh," muttered the girl. Dennis wondered if the obvious doubt in her voice was intentional, or just the byproduct of dealing with too many of Harding's patients. "He's in a session right now," she stated, "but you're welcome to wait for him."

"I'll do that, thanks," replied Dennis. He was treated to an expression of apparent surprise from the other side of the desk, made all the more severe when he responded with a bright smile. He gave the girl a polite nod, then walked with measured strides to where Bobo was seated beneath the graphic painting.

"This is the guy what pays you to play dress-up, yeah?" Bobo asked. Dennis looked up at the desk, but the receptionist gave no sign of having heard.

"Yeah, you could put it like that."

"Don't you think he might be a bit miffed that you went behind his back with all this?"

"I doubt it," answered Dennis. "All of my jobs start out on my own. I just usually tell him about them sooner than this."

"Before the spooky buggers show up, you mean." Bobo craned his neck to examine the painting again. "I don't really see the point," he confessed.

"It's an orgy," Dennis explained. "I think the point is pretty obvious."

Bobo blinked with a look of surprise, which melted into one of amusement. "Not the painting, git, the act. The bells and whistles, you know?"

A casual shrug prefaced Dennis' response. "I just try to give them what they expect. Nobody wants supernatural advice from a young author when they could have it from an old guy with an accent."

"I understand *that* part," Bobo said. "I wear a costume too, remember?"

"Oh, right."

"I just don't see why you bother at all. I mean, it's not like he's lacking in business, is he?" Bobo tilted his head towards the closed office door.

"The way he explained it to me," Dennis said, "is that there's this untapped group of people who usually have more money than sense."

"Yeah, believing in ghosts?" Bobo replied sarcastically. "Who'd be dumb enough to do that?"

"Shut up. Evy is the exception that proves the rule."

Bobo opened his mouth answer, but the sound of a lock turning interrupted him. Dennis watched as the door to Harding's office swung open, and he immediately leaned back to hide behind Bobo when he recognized the person walking through it.

"I think we've made some excellent progress today, Moon," said Harding's voice. The bespectacled man was following the overweight (and still jewelry-laden) woman from several nights back. Dennis slouched down as far as he could, hoping that Bobo's larger form would hide him from view. The woman made enthusiastic small talk with Harding before finally being led to and practically forced out the door of the office.

"Well, she is certainly an interesting case," Harding sighed. He turned to face the waiting area and gave Dennis a smile. "Although, you already knew that, didn't you?" He glanced over at Bobo for a moment and his eyes narrowed slightly, but beyond that he showed no reaction to the man's presence. "Well, Dennis," he continued, "if you'd like to step into my office, we can discuss this matter of pressing urgency you mentioned." Dennis rose and followed Harding through the door to the inner sanctum, leaving Bobo to contemplate the explicit painting in the waiting room.

"A friend of yours?" Harding asked as he closed the door.

"Yeah, I suppose," answered Dennis. "Look, we really need to talk about this whole private detective business. Something isn't right."

"Why do you say that?" Harding asked. He passed by his usual chair and instead took a seat on the leather couch against the room's far wall. "Has he been bothering you?"

"Well, he..." Dennis paused. "Yes, he's been bothering me. He showed up at the bar the other day, and then he abducted me this morning."

"Really? Well, that's a touch on the excessive side."

"Only a touch, huh?" Dennis scoffed. "Come on, Sam, spill it. What's going on between you and that guy?"

"I think a better question," Harding countered, "might be for me to ask you the same thing."

Dennis folded his arms and stared down at the psychiatrist. "I never had any trouble with a job before that guy showed up at your office, and now suddenly I'm looking over my shoulder so often that my neck is stiff."

"This is about a job, then?" asked Harding with a raised eyebrow. "I wasn't aware that you had taken a new one."

"Yeah, well, I hadn't gotten around to telling you about it yet," Dennis replied. "Besides, it's not going to pan out."

"Why do you say that? I did ask you to stay in close contact about your next meeting, did I not?"

Dennis gritted his teeth. "Look, can we please discuss this business with the cop?" Harding parted his hands and bowed in a gesture of acquiescence. "Thank you." Dennis closed his eyes for a moment and took a breath. "I'm a fairly normal guy," he stated, looking back at Harding. "This whole paranormal consultant business was supposed to be research for my next book, and I only started with it because you talked me into it. I didn't count on getting shot at by Shaft."

"He shot at you?" Harding asked, obviously surprised.

"No, but he might graduate to that. He did take my picture. Twice!" he ended, feeling a bit flustered.

Harding sat in silence, an unreadable expression on his face. "What does this have to do with your latest job, Dennis?"

"Nothing!" Dennis spat. "Nothing at all! I'm working with this lady who has a haunted chair, of all things, and suddenly this Spinner character won't leave me alone!" He walked in tight circles around the office, navigating around the desk and chairs in a meandering path that mirrored that of his thoughts. "I don't know how he found out who I am, and I don't know why he gives a damn about what I'm doing, but I have a sneaking suspicion that it has something to do with you!" He punctuated his last statement with an accusatory jab of his finger. Harding stared at the outstretched digit, and then leaned to look at its owner.

"A haunted chair, you say?"

Dennis fought the urge to kick the couch. Fortunately, his all-too-recent encounter with exploding furniture kept him from any brash actions. "Damn it, Sam," Dennis growled, "what the hell is going on?"

Harding removed his glasses and polished them on his sweater. "I told you already," he responded quietly. "A patient of mine claimed that her daughter was seeing —"

"Ghosts, I remember," Dennis interrupted. "That's all well and good, but what does it have to do with me? It sounds like a pretty big coincidence."

"Trust me when I say that I haven't the faintest idea, Dennis," Harding said. "It could be Mr. Spinner believes that you are somehow involved in the business with his niece."

"How?" demanded Dennis. "You said that it had nothing to do with me! You're the psychiatrist, you tell me what he's thinking!"

"While I am a psychiatrist, Dennis," Harding said pointedly, "I am only qualified to help the mentally unsound, not predict what they might believe." He folded his hands in

front of his face. "Even so, the idea has some merit. I don't imagine Spinner to be the most stable of individuals, and a fantasy of that nature is possibly the sort of thing that a deranged mind might concoct."

"Great," Dennis muttered. He sank into a chair and shuffled to face it towards Harding. "So what am I supposed to do?"

"If ever you're uncomfortable with this," Harding began softly, leaning forward, "you're always free to stop working for me. I certainly don't want you to feel trapped in a situation that causes you any amount of worry."

"Thanks," answered Dennis. "Really, I mean that. It doesn't solve the problem of right now, though."

"Right now," Harding repeated, "I would recommend that you avoid doing anything to call attention to yourself. Perhaps it would also be a good idea to stay in a hotel for some time, until Spinner loses interest in you."

Dennis' face twisted into a show of skepticism. "How am I supposed to explain that to Alena? She might notice if I stop coming home."

"It's only one idea, Dennis. I'm confident in your abilities to think of something." Harding shifted his position on the couch, and apparently shifted gears in his head at the same time. "Incidentally, how is your friend Luke doing? I hear he wound up in some sort of trouble."

"Yeah," Dennis said. "He said you were going to help him out, though."

"Oh, absolutely," confirmed Harding with a nod. "As I mentioned to him, I should have the money in a couple of days. Really, I could stand to offer it to him now, but I'd prefer to wait until a few things come through."

"I'm sure he understands, and I know he'll pay you back as soon as he can."

Harding shook his head. "Not necessary, really. If all goes well, I'll be coming into a significant sum of money before too long." He switched gears again, apparently ending the topic before it could be questioned further. "Now, perhaps you can tell me about this latest job of yours?"

Dennis said nothing, struggling to find a believable way of recounting his experiences from the past few days. "Well," he said, hoping to fill the air with some semblance of an explanation, "as I said, she has a haunted chair."

"A unique delusion, but not unheard of," Harding replied, nodding.

Dennis kept his face as expressionless as he could. "She wants to find a way of getting her sister to leave, and my advertisement gave her the idea that I could help."

"I was unaware that you were selling yourself as an exorcist nowadays," Harding said with a smile. "Her sister haunts a chair, then. What do you think of the situation thus far?"

Again, Dennis tried to think of a way to continue the conversation without coming across as outright insane. "Why do you think so many people believe in ghosts, Sam?"

"Oh, more reasons than I could hope to name," Harding replied with a warm laugh. "I suppose it's comforting to think that our existence goes on after death, even if only as a shadow of our former selves." He gestured across at his desk, pointing to where a framed picture stood. "The loss of a loved one can be a fairly devastating event, as well, and many people find themselves wishing for a way to keep their dearly departed in their lives."

"What about in this case?" Dennis asked.

"Why does your client want to eliminate her sister's ghost, you mean?" Dennis nodded. "It could be any number of things. A fantasy that has gone on too long to simply be dismissed, even as it becomes a reminder of her own mortality. A means of asserting dominance over the memory of someone perceived as a superior. Without meeting her, I'd have no way of knowing for sure."

Dennis wondered if the older man's last comment had been an underhanded suggestion of sorts. If it was, he chose to ignore it. "Humor me for a minute here, Sam," he said as casually as he could. "I mean, I'm sure you're right about one of those things. Just..." he stopped, taking a moment to choose his next words. "Well, what if there *was* such a thing as ghosts? How would they exist, do you think?"

Harding's grandfatherly smile was touched by both amusement and slight concern. "I hope you're not letting your act go to your head, Dennis." He folded his arms and looked towards the ceiling for a moment. "Well, assuming that ghosts *did* exist, I suppose they'd need a source of energy to continue doing so."

"Like what?" Dennis pressed.

"I've really not given it that much thought," Harding laughed. "Perhaps the life essence of the people around them is enough to keep them sustained. Or it could be that there is some sort of ethereal energy that we, as living beings, cannot perceive or utilize."

"So, in order to kill a ghost, so to speak," reasoned Dennis, "you'd have to find a way of cutting off their access to that energy."

"Looking for ideas to fuel your exorcism?"

"Something like that," Dennis replied.

"Of course," Harding continued, "there's the classic assumption that a ghost remains because it has some sort of unfinished business to attend to. Perhaps the obsession in life is enough to foster a presence in death."

Something about that statement made sense, Dennis thought, although he couldn't think of a reason for Evy to be obsessed with an antique chair. "I guess the best way of dismissing a ghost would be to help it with that unfinished business, then."

"A rather clichéd solution, if you ask me," Harding replied. "However, I suppose it might be a useful avenue for you. Perhaps, after her sister is 'dismissed,' she might be open to the idea of talking with me."

"Maybe," said Dennis skeptically.

"Well, regardless, I'd like you to keep me in the loop with this, Dennis. You're in a sensitive position, and I'd hate for you to cause this woman any emotional damage." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "Also, a little applied psychology would probably work wonders for your exorcism, no?"

The statement raised an interesting idea. "Do you think that ghosts have the same psychology as humans?" Dennis considered Evy's nonexistent memory, and wondered if the trait could be a clue.

"I'd say that they must," replied Harding. "After all, they are the imaginings of human minds. If they weren't..." He trailed off and shrugged. "Well, the point is moot, since ghosts are a physical impossibility."

Dennis smiled for the first time since entering the office. "I thought we were suspending disbelief," he said.

Harding returned Dennis' smile with one of his own. "Just take care not to suspend your own."

Images of sultry specters and gasoline-fueled flames danced through Dennis' mind. Easier said than done, he thought.



"Did you get your answers, then?" Bobo asked. At Dennis' request, the pair had abstained from discussion until getting clear of Harding's office, and although the mirrored elevator was a comfortable place for Dennis to recount his talk with Harding, Bobo had been insistent.

"Not really," confessed Dennis. "Sam doesn't seem to know any more about this than I do, or if he does, he can't talk about it."

"Why not?"

Dennis shrugged. "Doctor-patient confidentiality, I'd imagine. It sounds like Spinner is more of a nut than anything else, though."

"Maybe he could do with a different sort of visit to your friend, eh?" Bobo asked. The elevator let out a ding, and the doors slid open to admit the pair into the front lobby. "What did you tell him about me?"

"Nothing," Dennis answered.

"Nothing?" gawked Bobo. "Come on, now, September, I thought the copper was after me, too."

"We don't know that for sure, though, do we?" Dennis replied. The thought made him pause in his footsteps, bringing an odd glance his direction from the building's concierge. "Actually, that makes a lot more sense," he thought out loud.

"What does?" asked Bobo. "Why are we stopping?"

Dennis resumed walking as he explained. "I take back what I said in the car. Spinner wasn't talking about you when he mentioned my 'buddy,' he was *definitely* talking about Sam. I mean, it adds up, doesn't it?"

"Sure thing, boss."

Dennis rolled his eyes. "Think about it. If Spinner thinks that I have something to do with his niece, he must have come up with the idea that I'm pulling something similar with Elspeth. If I were him, I'd make the same assumption."

"You've lost me."

"Okay, look," Dennis said, perhaps a bit more forcefully than he needed to, "Spinner thinks that Sam is doing something to make his niece see ghosts. Then, he sees me at Elspeth's house, maybe in my September outfit. It doesn't take a genius to put that together, even if the conclusion is wrong."

"Well, I mean," said Bobo, "you are working with the shrink on this spooky business, ain't you? Doesn't sound too far off to me."

"Sure, except that I only just told Sam about Elspeth." The pair reached Dennis' car and climbed inside. Bobo's response was muted by the sound of the engine sputtering to life. "Sorry, what was that?" Dennis asked.

"I said, so what?" Bobo repeated. "All this Spinner bloke sees is you and the shrink working together, right? He doesn't know that you're working on your own." He looked over his shoulder as Dennis pulled out into the street. "Hey, what color is his car, anyway?"

"Blue," replied Dennis immediately. "Is he following us?" He squinted in the rearview mirror and scanned the vehicles behind them.

"Maybe," Bobo said, "but I'm sure he's not the only one with a blue car. See, there goes one." He pointed at a ridiculously small coupe going in the opposite direction. "What are you going to do if he is?"

"Following me?" asked Dennis. "I don't know. Sam suggested that I spend some time away from home in a hotel room or something. I don't like the idea, but I'd rather not get Alena involved in all of this."

"That's your wife, then?"

Dennis nodded. "She's going through a rough time with her business, and I'm sure that having a private detective following her around wouldn't make things any easier."

"Yeah, she'd probably get to wondering why you hired him, eh?"

This time Dennis shook his head. "She'd be able to figure out that it had something to do with Sam. I told her about Spinner a few days ago, and that was back before he started following me. Besides, she knows that I trust her."

"Great, September, but does she trust you?"

"Let's hope so."



After dropping Bobo off at his shop, Dennis considered stopping by Thoreau's for a drink and a chance to get his head together. He wasn't looking forward to the prospect of Alena's reaction, but since an unpleasant discussion seemed inevitable, he wanted to make sure he knew exactly what he was going to tell her. He ultimately decided against visiting the bar, reasoning that it would be better to be at the house when she arrived. He guessed that she wouldn't be back for more than an hour, but he still opted to err on the side of caution and take a direct route home. Throughout the entire course of the journey, he kept glancing in his rearview mirror, but the road behind him was pleasantly free of blue sedans. He only hoped that Spinner's car wouldn't be waiting for him when he arrived.

As relieved as he was to find his driveway empty, Dennis was nonetheless surprised to find the lights on as he opened his front door, and even more surprised to find Alena curled up on the couch with a mess of crumpled tissues lining the floor around her. His heart jumped as she looked up at him with bleary red eyes, and for a sickening moment, he was certain that his explanation of the week's events was going to be rendered pointless.

"What's wrong?" Dennis asked. The concern in his voice was all too genuine, although he had to guiltily admit that most of it did not pertain to his wife's obvious anguish. He sat down across from her and waited as she noisily blew her nose.

"It's Antonio," whispered Alena. She sniffed loudly and dabbed at her eyes, but it did little for her tear-stained complexion.

Dennis tried to keep his relief from showing, and quietly hated himself for feeling it at all. "What happened?" he asked.

"A car accident," replied Alena. Her voice was choked up and stuffy, and Dennis suspected that she was holding back a much larger torrent of tears. "He's in a coma."

It was hard for Dennis to imagine Alena's flamboyant partner in anything other than a state of perpetual energy. They had met during Dennis' first awkward attempt at courting Alena, and although the two were scarcely close enough to be considered friends, Dennis enjoyed the man's colorful and lighthearted company nonetheless.

"Is he going to be okay?" Dennis asked. "Will he wake up, I mean?"

"Nobody's sure of anything," whispered Alena. "They say he's stable, but that's all anyone will tell me."

"Do you need me to call his family or anything?"

Alena's shoulders quivered with her answer. "He doesn't have any family. None that care about him. His sister still lives in Mexico, and she's too heartless to even talk on the phone."

"Well," said Dennis, unsure of what else he could offer, "if you need anything, just let me know."

Alena let out a short sigh that was punctuated by a barely-controlled sob. "I just need some space, Dennis. To cope with this. I'm sorry, it's... it's not you, I just need to be alone."

"Ah," Dennis replied. He scratched the back of his head uncomfortably. "Actually, that kind of works out."

"What do you mean?" Her eyes were still red from crying, but Alena's narrowing gaze was cold nonetheless.

"I was thinking that I might spend a few days away from home, is all." He looked away, thought better of it, and fought to keep his eyes on Alena's. "Just for a few nights, until some things blow over."

"What things?"

This was not a time for dishonesty, Dennis decided. Nor even a time for omitting any details. "This is going to sound crazy," he began, "but I promise, it's all true."

The story of Elspeth, the haunted chair, the private detective, and Harding's advice all came out in a mess of details. Dennis had to remind himself that this was not something that his wife would be likely to believe, and the fact that he sounded deranged even to his own ears was not a promising thought. To her credit, Alena listened quietly throughout the entire account, pausing only to blow her nose on occasion.

"I know it seems like a bad horror movie," Dennis confessed at the end of his tale, "but it all happened. Now I'm worried that Spinner might follow me here, or start investigating you, and I don't want things to get out of control."

"Out of control?" parroted Alena. "Out of control? Dennis, I think you're well beyond the ability to claim that you're in control of anything!"

"What?" Dennis stammered. Only seconds before, his wife had seemed fragile and lost. Now she was giving a passable imitation of an erupting volcano.

"Do you really *believe* this?" Alena shouted. Her tears were flowing again, this time out of anger rather than sadness. "Ghosts? Haunted chairs?" She forcefully blew her nose, and flung the soiled tissue to the floor. "Dennis, this isn't funny! I don't need this right now!"

"I'm not kidding," replied Dennis in a deadpan voice. "Honestly."

Alena looked like she was on the verge of screaming. "This is exactly what I was afraid would happen!" she exclaimed. "That you'd either go too far somehow and buy into all this supernatural bullshit, or that you'd get in over your head and wind up in jail!" She tore at the box of tissues in her lap. "Now you've done both! Dennis, honestly, your timing could not be worse if you tried!"

"I'm sorry!" Dennis pleaded. "I didn't want to lie to you! I know things got out of hand, but I thought that it would be better if you knew!"

"Knew what?" Alena demanded. "That my husband has gone insane? That my *life* might be in danger?"

"Hey, now, I think that's a bit —"

"No, don't! Just don't!" She took a deep, sharp breath and closed her eyes. "I need some space, Dennis, but I don't need you disappearing. What's really going on?"

"I told you," replied Dennis. "There's this detective following me, and I really think that I should spend some time away from..." He trailed off as Alena's face tightened into a scowl.

"I can't deal with this right now," she said, standing. "You want to go? Fine. But you're the one making that choice. I just *knew* that you wouldn't keep your promise. Did you even *think* about keeping it?"

Dennis opened his mouth to reply that he *had* thought of it, but slammed into the icy realization that it wasn't remotely true. The entire experience had been so hectic that Dennis had completely forgotten about his promise to make that day his last. He hoped, too late, that his confession would count for something, and realized that his last few seconds of dumb silence had prompted Alena to storm from the room.

"Wait, Alena, hang on," said Dennis hurriedly. He moved to follow her towards the bedroom, staying a few steps behind. "I know how this sounds, but think about how I feel! I didn't do anything wrong..." he paused for a split second, reconsidering. "Not really, anyway. Imagine what it's like for me, knowing that you won't believe a word that I say."

"I don't know which is worse," Alena blurted. "That you've gone completely insane, or that you want me to believe you're having an affair with a ghost!" With that, she slammed the door in Dennis' face. He glared at the painted wood in anger and defeat.

"How would that even work?!"

Chapter Ten

Dennis stopped in his tracks. This was wrong. Completely, totally, and utterly wrong. When he had chosen the hotel as his sanctuary, he had possessed a clear mental picture of what the interior would look like. His mind's image was not overly extravagant, but it still made the depressing room look much worse by comparison. He had been slowly learning to trust his intuition on these matters, and was more bothered than he cared to admit that his expectations had proved to be absolutely off-base.

He supposed he should have predicted some form of disappointment, especially after wandering the halls in search of his room. The entire establishment had a feeling of having seen better days as a nursing home, or perhaps a mental asylum. Doors stood ajar as he walked past, admitting brief glimpses of boiler rooms, run-down laundry facilities, and at least one example of what looked suspiciously like a disused and water-damaged kitchen. At least, Dennis hoped that it had been water. His own room was clean, at least as far as he could tell, but the dim lighting and yellowish wallpaper gave the space a sickly feel. He certainly wouldn't trust the tiny refrigerator with any item he later hoped to eat. Resigned, he slumped onto the bed – creaky springs, he noted – and pulled his laptop from his bag.

Luke hadn't been answering his phone, and Dennis didn't feel like he knew Bobo well enough to impose on him, which had left Harding's hotel suggestion as the most viable alternative to sleeping at home. There were other people whom Dennis could have asked for help, of course, but he hadn't liked the idea of involving his more casual acquaintances in the details of his quickly-sinking personal life. He was also worried enough about the state of his relationship without having to hear the well-meaning condolences of uninformed friends. True, Alena had been nice enough to let him gather some clothes together, and had even gone so far as to give him a guarded hug before he left, but the situation was still far from pleasant.

As it had turned out, Dennis' choice of hotels was also far from pleasant, but he possessed neither the energy nor the inclination to find a better one. The sun had set, and the evening's traffic had congested the city streets beyond his ability to comfortably navigate. For that reason, and because his knowledge of San Francisco's inns was limited at best, he opted to stay where he was and get an early start towards Elspeth's house the next morning.

For the time being, though, he hoped that he'd be able to distract himself by working on his book. He had been neglecting it somewhat as of late, but the details of his encounter with Evy would undoubtedly provide him with all the inspiration he had once hoped for. The computer's screen sprang to life, and a few presses of a button brought a digital manuscript into view. Dennis scanned the pages, recalling as he did the experiences that had prompted their writing. He chuckled at the memory of one particularly nervous individual who had wound up discovering a family of skunks living in the basement. The affair had been a close call in more than one respect, since it was the light cast from Dennis' so-called magic candle that had revealed the furry interlopers.

Dennis closed the laptop several minutes later, realizing that he hadn't added a single word to the stories he had been reading through. He certainly wasn't lacking in material, but for some reason, every attempt to write something new was met with a mental brick wall. He sighed and tried calling Luke again, idly wondering at the same time if he could

get his deposit for the hotel room refunded. Once again, the call went unanswered, and Dennis resisted the urge to fling his phone away in disgust. He was in a dark mood, to be sure, but he didn't see that as an excuse to stay unproductive. Plus, he hadn't eaten recently, and his stomach had taken to loudly reminding him of it. Rather than continue in his futile efforts at creativity, he decided to surrender to his hunger and go out in search of some sustenance.

A restaurant was out of the question, since Dennis was trying to keep a low profile, and he wasn't too inclined to trust the dubious food services that the hotel allegedly provided. Fortunately, a brief exploration turned up a pair of vending machines, which he decided would be an adequate if not entirely palatable source of nourishment. As he rummaged for his wallet, a piece of hard paper unexpectedly dug under one of his nails.

"What the hell was that?" Dennis muttered aloud. He yanked his wallet from the confines of his pocket, bringing the paper aggressor out with it. Spinner's business card stared up at him, a sneering reminder of Dennis' unfavorable situation. The damned thing just kept turning up, didn't it? Well, that was one thing he could deal with, then. He crushed the card in his fist and flung it at a nearby trashcan. For once, his aim was accurate, and the crumpled paper bounced into the plastic bin.

Dennis turned back to the vending machines, feeling perhaps more smug than he should have about having defeated the business card. It was a symbolic victory: Spinner had decided to invade his life, and had no doubt found Dennis' address and phone number by this point. Disposing of the man's own contact information seemed like a fitting response, if not an entirely rational one. Who did he think he was, throwing threats around like that? It hardly seemed in keeping with the character of a private detective.

A sudden thought popped into Dennis' mind. With a fervor that probably would have made him seem downright insane to anyone watching, he lunged towards the trashcan and rifled through it, looking for the business card he had tossed away a few moments earlier. The receptacle was largely empty, and devoid of any disgusting foreign substances, but it still took a tense few seconds for Dennis to locate the discarded paper. As soon as his fingers closed around the stiff material, he quickly flattened out the wrinkles and stared down at the information it displayed. Spinner's name was emblazoned across the top, with the words "Private Investigator" directly beneath it. Further down, there was a telephone number and an email address listed.

"Gotcha!" Dennis exclaimed triumphantly. He glanced around the deserted hallway. "Hopefully, anyway," he amended. The vending machines forgotten, Dennis made the quick walk back to his room, where he reopened his laptop and pulled up an internet search. His heart sped up as he typed, and he took care to copy the information from the business card exactly. Something had been bothering him, besides his most evident problems, and he was determined to figure out an answer. It had started back when Elspeth said that more than two dozen people had met with Evy in the past, and as he had told Bobo, Dennis knew that many paranormal investigators liked to brag about their exploits. Most of them, at least based on the ones he had encountered, were much more concerned with making a name for themselves as experts on ethereal matters than they were with actually providing legitimate help with anything. That was part of the reason, he supposed, that he had been so surprised to learn that so many people had visited the house before him, and yet he had still not heard about it.

The loading bar crawled across the screen at a frustratingly slow pace. “Come on, come on,” prompted Dennis, knowing full well that the words would have no effect on his search results. Still, saying them made him feel better. As the search finally finished, Dennis fought to keep his excitement from swelling prematurely. There were only three results displayed on the screen. The first was an article from less than a year before, and the third looked like an advertisement for an anti-wrinkle cream. Dennis doubted that either of those would be pertinent. That left the second listing, which gave the disheartening appearance of being an excerpt from an amateur magazine. He opened it anyway, preparing for disappointment, and scanned through the contents. It was largely what he figured it would be: Little more than a largely-speculative historical account, although he couldn’t immediately find any of the information which had brought him to the page in the first place. The majority of the story seemed centered around the demolition of landmarks, presumably for reasons other than those cited by the city government. To Dennis, it sounded like a conspiracy theory, and a weak one at best.

The article went on to accuse “anonymous parties” of purchasing structures through borderline illicit means, although it didn’t elaborate on what those means were. It wasn’t until he reached the very end of the article that Dennis felt his luck changing.

“Son of a bitch!” he shouted, springing upright from his slouch. He squinted at the screen, trying to be sure of what he was seeing, and he felt his heart racing as the certainty solidified in his mind. “Son of a *bitch!*”

“Shut the fuck up!” came the sound of a muffled voice.

Dennis blinked and stared at the wall. “Sorry!” he shouted back.

“*Shut the fuck up!*” the voice yelled again. Dennis considered raising his voice to apologize again, but thought better of it. Besides, he had bigger things to worry about now, like how to find Bobo at this time of night... and how to explain the mess that they were in.



“Draadtrekker!” Dennis pounded on the front door of the shop in a fair imitation of himself from a few days prior. “We have a problem!” There was no sign of a response from inside, and Dennis could sense the curious eyes on him from the little restaurant across the street. Since being watched was already a major source of his anxiety, the thought of adding more spectators to his entourage was not an appealing one. “Damn it,” Dennis muttered, and he stalked away from the door before someone took too much of an interest in him.

“Doctor!” an accented voice yelled. Dennis turned around, but the shop remained devoid of life. “Always when I am closed, you come!”

“Bo- ... Draadtrekker?” Dennis called, catching himself, “where the hell are you?”

“Up!” replied Bobo. Dennis craned his neck to see a mess of dreadlocks peering at him from an upstairs window. “Hello, my friend! Such a good evening it is right now!”

“Appearances can be deceiving, Draadtrekker! Let me in!”

Bobo flashed his wide smile and ducked back inside the window. A few moments later, the door swung open, and Dennis hurried to follow his friend into the store.

“Be with you in a jiffy,” Bobo said, dropping the accent. “Give me a second to lock up again.” As he fiddled with the door, Dennis walked further into the shop, and wound up

banging his shin against a low table. "Watch out," warned Bobo, too late. "I moved some things around since you were here."

"I noticed," Dennis muttered, rubbing his leg. He adjusted the weight of his bag and waited for his friend to finish before trying to find his way through the clutter.

"What's the matter, then?" asked Bobo, leading the way past shelves and cabinets to the back room. "Getting cold feet about tomorrow?"

"What are you – oh, the date," Dennis responded. He had taken care to pack a change of clothes worthy of a romantic night out, but after the rest of the evening's events, he had completely forgotten about his plans for the following day. "No, that's not it. I have something to show you."

"You couldn't wait until the morning?"

"It's something I found online," said Dennis. "You really need to see it." He started to pull his laptop from the bag, but Bobo stopped him.

"Wait, let's go upstairs," he suggested. Dennis looked on with mild disbelief as Bobo approached the largest of the cabinets in the room and opened it to reveal a stairway hidden behind it. "After you, September," he said, nodding his head at the opening.

"Not that I'm judging you," Dennis replied, "but would you care to explain this?" He ducked as he entered the cabinet, and quickly fixed his eyes on the light at the top of the stairs.

"Seemed like a fun idea at the time," explained Bobo. His voice sounded flat in the narrow stairwell, and the sound of his footsteps behind Dennis seemed to keep pace with the dull strains of classical music that were coming from elsewhere in the building. The pair emerged into an apartment with Spartan furnishings and the biggest stereo system that Dennis had ever seen. Speakers, both large and small, lined the room, and the melodies that Dennis had heard earlier jumped into clear definition. It was little more than ambient noise, but he had little doubt that the music could crack the foundation if it had been turned up to full volume.

"Okay," said Bobo, gesturing to a couch. "Sit. Explain." Dennis took the invitation, and placed his computer on the coffee table in front of him.

"Remember how you asked what the point of being a doctor or a priest was?" he asked, bringing the laptop to life.

Bobo furrowed his brow, and pulled the wig from his head. "No, not really."

"I told you how everyone at the UFO convention was a doctor or a reverend," Dennis reminded him. "It gave them more credibility, remember?"

"Oh, right, yes," replied Bobo, nodding.

"Well," Dennis continued, "it gave me an idea. So, I did a little research, and I found something that I thought you should see."

"You said that already," Bobo pointed out. "Couldn't you have just, you know, emailed it to me? Or called me?"

"Uh," Dennis stammered. "I was afraid my phone was being tapped."

Bobo gave him a strange look. "No you wasn't."

"Fine, you're right," confessed Dennis irritably. "I just panicked and I wasn't thinking straight. So sue me. Will you come look at this, please?"

Bobo grinned, which Dennis had decided was the man's response to just about everything, and moved to take a seat on the couch. Dennis turned the computer to face him, and sat back expectantly as Bobo read through the page.

"Yes, very interesting," Bobo said after a few minutes. "I like the part about the wrecking ball particularly. What does this have to do with us?"

"Look at the picture," Dennis prompted.

Bobo towards the computer again. "Oh, yeah. That's Elspeth's house, isn't it? Looks like someone scanned it in from a newspaper."

"They did," affirmed Dennis. "Read the caption."

"When was this taken?"

"Read the caption!" Dennis repeated.

"Keep your hair on, September," said Bobo. "Uh, right. So, it says that the house's owner – Elspeth Palin, look at that – was approached by an anonymous party about selling it, right after her father's obituary was printed." He sat back, a triumphant smile crossing his face. "Ah, it was taken eight years ago. That's when Evy showed up, yeah?"

"It isn't related. Not to this."

"Good to know." Bobo looked at Dennis expectantly. When Dennis didn't reply, he rolled his eyes. "Come on, out with it. What am I supposed to be seeing?"

"Look at who took the picture."

Bobo sighed and turned his attention back to the computer. "Photo by M. R. Spinner," he read. He paused, and his eyes widened slightly. "Blimey, ain't that the PI?"

"It would be a pretty big coincidence if it wasn't," said Dennis. "And if it's not a coincidence, then it means that he knew about Elspeth a long time ago."

There was a brief glimmer of understanding in Bobo's eyes, but it was quickly obscured by a cloud of confusion. "Wait, I'm lost. This bloke knows about Elspeth, and he knows about Harding, right?" Dennis nodded. "What's that have to do with the shrink's niece, then?"

"It's Spinner's niece," corrected Dennis, "and I don't think Spinner is a private detective at all."

Bobo blinked. "What?"

"It's been bothering me for a while now," Dennis explained. "I couldn't figure out why he was interested in me, or why he cared what I was doing at Elspeth's house. If he's a private detective, then somebody must have hired him. If he's not, then he must have some kind of personal investment at stake." He took a breath, considering his own thought process. "Since Spinner was already suspicious of Harding, he must have figured that I was involved with the thing with his niece. Then, when he saw me at Elspeth's house, he decided that I was up to something. So, he made a fake business card claiming that he was a private investigator, and tried to scare me off out of his own sense of personal justice." He looked at Bobo, who was sitting in pensive silence.

"Okay," Bobo said, tilting his head. "Just a few problems there, September."

"Like what?" challenged Dennis. "What could I have left out?"

"How about the part where he follows you to Elspeth's house the first time?" Bobo suggested. "Or did he just happen to be there when you showed up? Speaking of bloody big coincidences, I mean."

"Well, he was already following me when I talked to Elspeth on the phone," said Dennis. "He could have seen me write down the address, recognized it, and heard me set up my appointment with her."

"Alright, fine." Bobo made a conceding gesture, which he turned into a pointing finger. "Why'd he follow you the next day, then? It's nothing to do with his niece, right?"

"Right," agreed Dennis, "but maybe it's a similar situation. Maybe he feels personally obligated to help her out somehow. I mean, he was obviously there when the article was written." He nodded at the computer screen.

"Was he?" Bobo asked. "I don't know, September. He took the picture, but that's all we know for sure."

"I think we can make a reasonable assumption at this point," Dennis countered.

"Right, because reasonable assumptions are always on the mark," replied Bobo. "Your man Spinner certainly thinks so."

A frightening thought occurred to Dennis. "Wait, do you think he could have followed me here?" he asked. He looked at the window nervously. "Shit, he could be right outside!"

Bobo seemed poised to dismiss the thought, but hesitated and shrugged. "Let's have a look-see," he said, pulling his wig back into place. He stood up and walked to the window, where he brushed aside the curtains. "Blue car, right?" he asked.

"Yeah," Dennis confirmed. "Is he out there?" Bobo didn't respond. "Well? Is he out there?"

"Could be," said Bobo, his voice low. "Come look."

Dennis stood and joined the larger man by the window. Bobo pointed wordlessly at a dark blue sedan that was parked across the street. As soon as he made the gesture, the car's headlights flared to life and the vehicle pulled away from the curb with a squeal of spinning tires.

"A bit over-dramatic, that," Bobo commented. "I guess it answers your question, though."

"God *damn* it!" Dennis swore. "What the hell are we supposed to do now? The man is psychotic!"

"He's also gone." Bobo let the curtain fall, and he pulled the wig off again. "Nothing much we can do now, except get some rest for tomorrow."

Dennis started to respond, but a loud buzzing made him jump. He dug into his pocket and pulled out his vibrating phone. The display showed that it was Luke calling, and Dennis hurriedly answered.

"Hey, what's up?" came Luke's voice. "I saw you called." Even without hearing the nervousness there, Dennis would have known that something was wrong. Luke never made small talk, and polite greetings, no matter how casual they might have been, were practically a personal taboo for him.

"Are you alright, Luke?" Dennis asked.

"Oh, yeah, fine." There was a pause. "Only, did you talk to Sam today? Did he say anything about that money he was going to loan me?"

"He said he'd have it soon," replied Dennis. He pulled the curtain aside and stared out the window again, but there was no sign of Spinner's car. "Listen, Luke, I'm sorry to do this, but I'm in a bit of trouble here myself. Are you sure that everything is okay?"

"Yeah, really, it's fine," Luke answered, not at all convincingly. "I'll just try to get in touch with Sam."

"Alright, let me know how it goes." Dennis ended the call without waiting for a response. "This is messed up," he said to Bobo.

"Someone else involved?"

Dennis shook his head. "No, that was something different." He looked out the window again. "I just don't know what the hell we're supposed to do now."

The bigger man shrugged. "You can stay here for tonight, if you'd like. The couch is comfy enough, and we can head over to Elspeth's bright and early."

Under normal circumstances, Dennis would have refused, but thoughts of being tailed and confronted again made the relative security of Bobo's apartment look incredibly appealing. "Just for the night," Dennis said.

"Wife won't mind?"

"No."

The curt reply brought a hint of a raised eyebrow to Bobo's face, but he didn't push for an explanation. Instead, he walked over to a large cabinet, a twin to the one they had walked through earlier, and pulled open the doors.

"Well, it's still early," Bobo said. "Do you want to play a game or something?"

Dennis sighed, and mentally warned himself that he should try to calm down. "Sure," he answered reluctantly. "What did you have in mind?" Bobo turned around with a wide smile, displaying an unopened box still in its cellophane wrapping.

"Backgammon?"

Chapter Eleven

Dennis woke with a start and a stiff back. Sounds of quiet clattering were coming from somewhere in the apartment, and although it took him a moment to remember where he was, he soon relaxed when a familiar smell reached his nostrils. Dennis shook himself awake and walked towards the kitchen, where he found Bobo preparing a pot of coffee.

"Did you sleep at all last night?" the bigger man asked.

Dennis rubbed his neck groggily. "Yeah, why?"

Bobo shrugged impassively. "I just wasn't sure if you found the time for it after all those trips to the window."

Fair enough, Dennis supposed. By the time he had finally dozed off, he must have scanned the street more than a dozen times, hoping to convince himself that Spinner wasn't laying in wait somewhere close by.

"Sorry if I kept you up," murmured Dennis. He eyed the coffee. "Is some of that for me, or are you brewing another love potion?" Bobo responded by pulling two white mugs from an overheard cupboard and placing them next to the gurgling machine.

"I put a towel out for you if you want to have a wash," Bobo said. "It'll be a few minutes yet before breakfast is ready."

"Aren't you hospitable?" Dennis joked. He grew more somber. "Thanks, by the way."

"For what? It's just muffins."

"Not just that," replied Dennis. "For everything. I would have spent the night in a hotel room otherwise."

"Don't mention it, then," Bobo said, turning back to face the counter. Dennis wasn't sure if the polite dismissal was meant for his benefit or not, and the lack of any follow-up questions bothered him slightly.

"I had a fight with my wife."

Bobo turned around again, his expression guarded. "That's bad, is it?"

"It's not good," Dennis sighed. "She wasn't too happy when I told her about the mess that I'm in."

"The mess *we're* in," corrected Bobo. "That Spinner bloke is after me, too."

"It does seem that way," Dennis murmured. He shook his head vigorously. "Whatever. Until he shows up again, let's just forget about him. I'm going to go shower."

"Don't take too long."

"You can start eating without me," said Dennis. "I don't mind."

"Still best be quick about it; you might mind when the hot water runs out." Bobo cocked his head to the side. "Although maybe it's better for you to take a cold shower, with that date today." A number of halfway-witty retorts came to Dennis' mind, but none of them seemed appropriate. Instead of letting loose with a lame response, he turned and trudged towards the bathroom, still massaging his neck with one hand.

The tiled room, like the rest of Bobo's dwelling, was incredibly simple in its furnishings. Everything from the towels to the toothbrush holder was white, the only exception being a green soap dispenser in the shape of a particularly stoned-looking frog. Even the shampoo bottle kept the uniform color, although the smell of the substance inside was much more floral than Dennis would have expected. He bathed quickly and dressed in the clothes he had brought along for the date with Evy, although he left the tie

and the blazer off for the time being. By the time he exited the bathroom, Bobo had set the table with the two steaming mugs of coffee and a small assortment of muffins.

"Is that what you're wearing, then?" Bobo asked, looking Dennis over.

"Most of it," answered Dennis, looking down at himself. "There's a tie and a jacket, but I'll put those on later."

"I half expected you to be out in your September suit."

Dennis spread his arms. "Well, this will have to be good enough." He sat down and reached for a dark muffin. "It's either that or show up naked."

Bobo laughed out loud, nearly spilling his coffee. "Blimey, wouldn't that be something? I bet Evy would be on you before you could sit down!"

"Yeah," Dennis chuckled. "I've never heard of a ghost being quite so flirtatious."

"If that's what you want to call it." A long slurp punctuated Bobo's words as he emptied half of his mug. "Heard of many ghosts, have you? Oh wait, sorry, I forgot... you are the expert."

"Very funny. I meant in stories and such." Dennis finished his muffin and reached for another. "Actually, a lot of the people I've talked with claim that their ghosts are raging philanderers or something."

"The afterlife must be one brilliant party."

"I'll say."

Bobo munched his way through a muffin of his own. "How'd you get going with this, anyway?"

Dennis snorted. "Sam helped me put an ad in the paper," he said. He looked up at Bobo, who was clearly amused. "What? Not the exciting start that you expected?"

"I'm just surprised anyone reads the paper anymore."

"It's definitely not as popular as it used to be," Dennis agreed, "but I guess the people who see ghosts are the same ones who keep their subscriptions going. Anyway, I was just following the doctor's orders, since it was his idea."

"What's in it for you? I mean, most people don't offer thousand-dollar checks, do they?"

Dennis shrugged. "Inspiration, I guess."

"Mid-life crisis?"

"No," replied Dennis with a smirk. "Inspiration for my next book. It was going to be about a paranormal investigator."

"Was?" Bobo repeated. Dennis gave another shrug.

"I didn't really find what I was looking for. Everything was just a different version of the same story."

"What did you expect?" Bobo waved his fingers. "A real ghost?"

"Hey, I found that, didn't I?" Dennis took a thoughtful sip from his mug. "I don't know. I've never really believed in anything supernatural, but I guess I was hopeful that I'd find something interesting."

"It don't get much better than possessed chairs though, eh?"

Dennis checked his watch. "Speaking of which, we should probably get going soon. Why did you let me sleep so late?"

"I thought you might need the rest after staring at the street all night," Bobo said. "I'll go and change." He stood and walked through to the bedroom, leaving Dennis to finish devouring his second and then third muffin. When Bobo returned, Dennis stopped

chewing and stared. His friend's dark skin was offset by an impossibly white collared shirt, and the sleek black bowtie beneath his chin was an obvious match to the tailored pants he was wearing.

"Uh, Bobo," Dennis said, swallowing, "you do realize that *I'm* the one going on a date, right?"

"Sure," replied Bobo. "You'll need a waiter, though, yeah?"

"Oh, god... You're serious, aren't you?"

Bobo flashed his familiar grin. "Absolutely. Remembering how she was treating me before, I thought I'd play the part."

"If you insist," said Dennis. "Although you'll have to do a better job than you did last time."

"Just so long as you remember to tip."



The front door opened as Dennis and Bobo approached the house, and Elspeth greeted the pair with an amused smile and a twinkle in her eyes.

"My, don't you boys look dapper," she said approvingly. She somehow managed to juggle a lit cigarette and a steaming cup between her hands and her lips.

Bobo nodded politely and smiled as he stepped inside. "Thank you, ma'am. Do you think Evy will be suitably impressed?"

"Here's hoping," Dennis quietly interjected. He glanced over his shoulder at where they had left the car. The drive over had been miraculously free of blue sedans, but Dennis was feeling more paranoid than ever about the prospect of being followed.

"I've moved her chair out of the bedroom," Elspeth said, leading the way towards the spacious living room. "I daresay the furnishings in here are more in keeping with a fancy dinner date."

The undigested remnants of Dennis' breakfast tightened in his stomach. "I hope you didn't spend too much time getting things ready," he said. As palatable as Elspeth's cooking had been the day before, he wasn't sure that he could handle a four-course meal just yet.

"Oh, it's just a few place settings and the like," replied Elspeth, giving no mention to food. The group stopped in front of a well-decorated table, complete with an embroidered tablecloth and silver candle holders. Evy's chair was set at one side, and Dennis' concerns were immediately addressed by the sight of two empty plates, each stained with what looked like the remnants of a decadent meal.

"I was wondering about that," said Bobo, gesturing to the dishes. "I mean, how is she supposed to eat?" He smiled at some internal image and pantomimed a mouthful of food falling to the floor.

"Quite," Elspeth replied. "Although, if you boys are hungry, I could see to making something."

Dennis' stomach clenched again, and he was relieved to hear Bobo politely decline the offer for more food. "I think that we can just get started," he said. Dennis nodded in agreement, and Elspeth emulated them both with a sharp nod of her own.

"Right, then," she said. She took a long drag on her cigarette. "I'll be in the den if you need me." She walked away, leaving a trail of steam and smoke in her wake. Bobo turned to Dennis with an expectant smile and rubbed his hands together.

"All set, Romeo?"

"I think so," Dennis replied. "Any advice?"

"Well, it's been my experience that girls like it when you ask them questions about themselves, so it looks like you've got that covered."

"I meant... Oh, nevermind."

Bobo flashed another of his grins. "Oh, one thing, though," he said, holding out a hand. "Give me your phone."

"What?" Dennis gawked. "Why?"

"Never bring a phone on a date, September, it's common manners."

Dennis dug into his pocket. "I'll set it to be silent," he said, pressing a button.

"Not good enough. Give it here. I'll put it in the other room, and you can have it back when you're done."

With a glare and a muttered insult, Dennis dropped his phone into Bobo's waiting palm, and then turned to face the table. With as little ceremony as he could manage, he slid into the chair across from Evy's and waited. He didn't know what he had been expecting, but it hardly surprised him when the worn armchair remained conspicuously empty.

Dennis sighed inwardly. He felt ridiculous, as though he were about to play a game of make-believe with an eager child. Perhaps Evy felt the same way, since she was remaining tactfully absent. Finally, Bobo stepped forward with a serious expression, and made a show of glancing from Dennis to the vacant chair.

"May I interest either of you in a selection from our dessert menu?" he asked.

"Uh, maybe in a few minutes," Dennis replied. He looked across at the empty space where the ghost's head might have been. "Unless you want anything, Evy?"

"None for me, thank you," a feminine voice replied, and the girl faded into view. She was clad as she always had been, and the only change in her appearance was in the straightness of her posture. "Though if you could see to clearing our plates, that would be excellent."

For a moment, Dennis pondered what life – or, at least, Evy's approximation of it – might be like from the perspective of a ghost. Evy in particular didn't seem to retain any memory from one appearance to the next, and Dennis could only speculate at how disorienting it would be to suddenly find oneself in the midst of an upscale dinner date.

"Of course, ma'am," said Bobo with a quiet bow. He kicked Dennis' leg, and Dennis snapped back to reality. "Some more wine, then?" He gestured to a pair of empty crystal goblets, both of which had a thin red residue at the bottom.

"That would be lovely," said Evy. She turned to Dennis as Bobo gathered the plates, and flashed a coy smile as the bigger man left the room. "Although, I think I may have had too much already. Why, I can hardly remember your name."

"It's Dar... It's Dennis." Still feeling a bit silly, he plucked his napkin from the table and made a show of dabbing his lips. "How was your meal? The steak here is supposed to be excellent."

"Oh, yes, quite so."

Silence hung in the air as Dennis thought about what to say next, and Evy used the time to make nearly-revealing adjustments to her neckline. "So," said Dennis hastily, "you were telling me about your family. You said you have a younger sister, right?"

"Oh, yes!" Evy laughed. "Yes, Ellie is absolutely adorable. You should hear the way she carries on about things." She leaned forward conspiratorially, and although the motion afforded Dennis an easy view down the ghost's dress, he kept his eyes firmly fixed on hers. "Just the other day, I found her hiding in my closet. She gave me quite a shock, but I could hardly be angry with her."

"Well, maybe you can introduce me to her someday soon," Dennis said. "After all, I think it's about time that I met them all, don't you?"

"Oh, that's hardly necessary." Evy waved her hand dismissively. "They'd just get in the way. Father, for one, is far too protective."

Dennis fought the urge to pounce on the comment, remembering how it had effectively annihilated his attempts at conversation during their last meeting. Instead, he turned to look over his shoulder, and then looked back at Evy.

"That waiter is certainly taking his time, isn't he?"

Evy snorted and shook her head. "Honestly, I'll be surprised if he remembers us at all. The last time I dealt with him, he completely forgot to bring me my tea."

"Shameful, isn't it?" Dennis remarked. It was another second or two before Evy's words registered. "Wait... When was that, exactly?"

"Oh, I can hardly be bothered to mention it, really," Evy said.

"Well, I'm interested," pressed Dennis. "What happened?"

"It was nothing, dear, really. I simply asked him for some tea, and he never did see fit to bring it."

With either excellent or atrocious timing, Bobo chose that moment to reappear, carrying a half-empty bottle of red wine with him. Dennis arched an eyebrow and was given a shrug as Bobo moved to refill both of the goblets.

"Have we decided on a dessert?" he asked.

"Not just yet," Dennis replied. The sight of the crimson fluid was already enough to turn his stomach, and he was beginning to suspect that Elspeth had a dessert course waiting in the kitchen, should it prove necessary. Bobo finished his task without further comment, twisting the bottle in midair with an expert motion of the wrist, and leaving the nearly-empty container on the table.

"Take your time," he said. "I'll be back in a few minutes to check on you." Dennis gave him a polite nod, finally getting into the right character, and turned his attention back to Evy.

"Well, he seems responsible enough now."

"I suppose," the ghost murmured. "Quite a change from before."

"He's really stuck in your mind, isn't he?" Dennis asked cautiously. If his words had any adverse affect, it wasn't apparent.

"He reminds me of someone I knew back in England," said Evy with just a hint of sadness. "A boy named Dante. Of course, I could never tell anyone about him. He was a servant boy, and I..." she trailed off, a nostalgic look in her eyes. "Well, it would hardly have been proper."

The conversation had gone off-track. As interested as Dennis was in the fact that Evy might have actually recognized Bobo, it was hardly the reason for this so-called date. He took a feigned sip of his wine. "Well, I for one think that it's a shame that your father is so overprotective. You're a very capable young woman, and he really should recognize that."

“He does, though,” said Evy. “It’s what makes it all so frustrating. If he trusts me with everything else, he should trust me with men like you.” She winked and giggled, biting her lower lip seductively.

“Well, it would certainly make things easier,” Dennis replied, not entirely certain what he was agreeing with. Another few seconds of silence passed, with Evy acting coquettish and Dennis trying to determine what his next move would be. Other than learning that her father didn’t approve of her dating techniques – which was hardly surprising – Dennis hadn’t found anything that would begin to help with Evy’s exorcism.

“Do you see a lot of men?” he asked, grasping at straws. Evy giggled again and wiggled her nose playfully.

“Oh, Dennis, dear... Are you jealous?” She laughed out loud, throwing her head back in delight. “Well, I suppose it’s fair to say that I *have* seen a fair number of men, but they all seem to blend together. None of them were nearly as interesting as you are.”

“Thank you.” Something was amiss, and for once, Dennis had a fair idea about what it was: At the time of her death, Evy had been seventeen years old, and under the care of what she had described as an overprotective father. Maybe it was completely off-base, but he suspected that the men Evy was referencing might actually have been the host of paranormal investigators and psychics that had met with her over the past eight years. “What makes me stand out, if it’s not too weird of me to ask?”

“I’d say it’s your choice in conversation.” Evy smiled seductively and twirled a wisp of spectral hair. “I can scarcely remember what any of them had to say.”

“They were probably too eager to talk about themselves,” suggested Dennis. “Instead of asking about you.”

A raised eyebrow and slightly pursed lips gave Evy the appearance of a glamor model, and the hinted comment seemed to work. “Is there something you’d like to ask me, Dennis?”

“Many things,” Dennis answered, completely honestly. “Some more appropriate than others.” He forced his face into a suggestive smile. “Why don’t you tell me a secret? The first thing that comes to your mind.”

Evy tapped the tip of her nose with a finger. “Will you tell me one?”

“After you do. I asked first.”

“Oh, fine,” the ghost laughed. “It’s not really about me, though, and it’s hardly exciting.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Dennis said, scooting forward on his chair.

“Well,” Evy began, “refresh my memory. How much have I told you about my father?”

“Only that he’s overprotective,” replied Dennis. He thought back to some of the details that Elspeth had mentioned. “Also, that he’s away from home a lot on commissions or something. He’s an artist.”

“Yes, that is what he tells people,” Evy said. “It’s not strictly accurate, though.”

Again, this might prove to be interesting, but Dennis didn’t see how it applied to Evy’s current situation. “What does he do, then?” he asked.

“He calls it work.” Evy’s eyes grew wider, as though she was attempting to broadcast excitement into Dennis’ mind. “Really, though, he goes out and swindles rich people.”

“What?” Dennis stammered, caught completely off-guard. “How?” His reaction brought a titter of satisfaction from Evy.

"He and his partner set up these... schemes, they call them, where they get people to invest enormous sums of money in things. Then they claim that the venture has gone under, and they repay a bit to the investors." Evy propped her head on one hand and gazed across at Dennis. "It sounds frightfully exciting, but really, it's quite dull. Still, you musn't tell mother about it."

"Wait, let me make sure I have this right," Dennis said, doing his best to sound amused. "Your father... is a *con* artist?"

"Terribly boorish, isn't it?" said Evy with an affected yawn. "It only ever leads to arguing, after all."

Dennis was still reeling, but the comment reminded him of his last conversation with the ghost, just before Bobo's failed attempt at turning her chair into a bonfire. "Arguing like they did 'yesterday,' you mean?"

Evy frowned, but answered nonetheless. "Yes, that would be a prime example. I told you about that?"

Dennis nodded with what he hoped was a casual attitude, which was not easy with the levels of confusion and excitement he was experiencing. "You said that people were arguing about something silly, and that it was related to your father's work. Of course, that was before you told me what your father's work was."

"It really *was* quite silly. I expect they'll be in good sorts when they come back." Evy stretched gracefully and pointed a slender finger over Dennis' shoulder. "Don't let me stop you if you'd like to order dessert this time, Dennis." He turned and caught sight of Bobo striding back into the room.

"Are you ready for –"

"Dessert, yes," Dennis interrupted. "I mean, no. No dessert. Not yet." He glanced back at Evy. "Actually, could you show me the way to the restroom?"

"Certainly, sir," replied Bobo. "It's just down the hall to your left."

"I'd really feel better if you showed me," said Dennis, arching his eyebrows.

"Really, sir, it's... Oh, right," Bobo said, understanding. "If you'll just follow me, then."

"I'll only be a minute, Evy." Dennis stood and followed Bobo out of the room, resisting the urge to look back at the ghost. As soon as they were out of earshot, or at least what Dennis presumed to be so, he began speaking again in a low voice.

"Bobo, listen," whispered Dennis, grabbing the bigger man's arm. "I don't know how long we have before she starts forgetting me, so I don't have time to explain this, but go and ask Elspeth if she knows anything about her father's partner."

"What, daddy Palin was a poof?" Bobo asked incredulously.

"His *business* partner," Dennis hissed. "I think I'm onto something here, and if I can work out Evy's involvement, I might be able to solve this thing."

"She's haunting a chair because of some bloke her dad knew?"

"I told you I don't have time to explain!" Dennis snapped. "Just go and ask, will you?" Bobo held up his hands in mock surrender.

"Right, anything you say, boss. I'll just tell you when I bring in the check, shall I?"

"Fine, sure, whatever."

Dennis hurried back to the table, and ground his teeth in irritation as he saw that Evy's transparent form was no longer waiting for him. Perfect. He had been gone all of thirty seconds, if that, but it had apparently been enough time for Evy to lose interest. By now,

he supposed, she would have completely forgotten about him, and their conversation as well. He could always run through it again, like a take from a film, but there was no guarantee that it would work a second time. Or that he could even remember everything that he had said. With a scowl and an irate sigh, Dennis trudged from the room.



It was a short walk from the living room to the entry hall, and Dennis managed to catch up with Bobo just before the man ducked through a doorway.

"Something else, sir?" Bobo asked, stopping in mid-stride.

"Shove it," Dennis growled. "She's gone. I took too long. Where were you?"

Bobo gestured carefully, and Dennis noticed a glass of water clutched in the bigger man's hand. "The lady asked for a drink, so I went to get her one. I didn't get around to asking about her daddy's lover."

"Don't say that," said Dennis tersely. "It isn't a joking matter."

"What was that, Dennis?" came a voice from the den. Dennis brushed past Bobo into a cozy sitting room, furnished with brown armchairs that were almost identical to Evy's. Elspeth was sitting on a matching couch, and a low marble table stood in the center of the space. The rows of dark, well-stocked bookshelves that lined the walls gave off a feeling of aged and opulent comfort, much like the rest of the house.

"Evy's gone," Dennis sighed. He moved over as Bobo entered the room and handed the glass of water to Elspeth.

"Well, that would make continuing your date rather difficult," she said. She took a long swallow before placing the glass on the table. Dennis saw his phone there too, along with Elspeth's ashtray. "Although, you might be able to start again where you left off."

"Do you think she'll remember me?" Dennis asked hopefully. Elspeth's shrug was less than encouraging.

"She might. Her memory seems up to her whim, but I've never seen it last beyond an hour or so."

Dennis glanced at Bobo, who returned his gaze quizzically. "Are there any exceptions?" Dennis questioned. "Anything she retains no matter what?"

"Nothing that I'm aware of," replied Elspeth. She coughed suddenly, erupting into a restrained fit. "Excuse me," she said, taking another drink. Her hand shook slightly as she replaced the glass, splashing a few drops onto Dennis' phone.

"Elspeth," Dennis began tentatively, "what was your father like after your sister died?"

"A bit distant, really," replied Elspeth matter-of-factly. She coughed again once and cleared her throat. "He still did commissioned art pieces from time to time, but the fire seemed to have left him. Of course, one can never be sure, since I didn't really know him before Evy's death." She continued speaking, anticipating Dennis' next question. "My mother was largely the same, right up until the end. Father died shortly after her."

"Did you ever see any of the pieces your father did?"

A lopsided smile crossed Elspeth's face as she replied. "What a strange question. Yes, I saw a few of them. I don't have any, if that's what you're asking."

"Not exactly," Dennis said. He chose his next words carefully, not wanting to upset the woman. "Something that Evy said made we wonder, though. Do you remember your father's business partner at all?"

"Oh, yes, I should say so." Elspeth patted at her bathrobe until she found a crumpled package of cigarettes in one pocket. She offered one to Bobo, who declined, and one to Dennis, who hesitantly accepted. "I never knew him personally," continued Elspeth, "but he was around often enough." She lit her cigarette with a practiced motion, and then passed the lighter to Dennis.

"What was his role, do you know? In your father's business, I mean." Dennis lit his own cigarette and inhaled shallowly. The smoke did little to calm his nerves, but at least his hands were occupied. Elspeth shook her head quietly, tapping the end of her cigarette into the ashtray.

"I was never clear on that," she responded. "They had something of a falling out after Evy died."

"Why?" Dennis asked. "What happened?"

"Again, I really couldn't say." Elspeth took another drag and exhaled, punctuating her words with tendrils of smoke. "If I had to guess, I would say that it was because of Evy's medicine."

"Medicine?" Dennis' brow furrowed. "You didn't tell me that she was taking anything. What kind of medicine?"

"Insulin," said Elspeth plainly. "Evy was diabetic."

"So, back when you told me that she was unhealthy...?"

"Oh, yes," replied Elspeth. "I'm sorry, I thought I'd mentioned it."

It was a new piece to the puzzle, and Dennis was beginning to get a sense of a larger picture forming. He tapped off his cigarette and left it smoldering in the ashtray. "What did your father's partner have to do with it?"

"This is speculation, you understand," replied Elspeth, "but I suspect that we were in the United States illegally at first. I remember we left England in quite a rush, although I expect anything new seems chaotic to a child."

"Cor, I get it." Bobo spoke up for the first time since entering the room. "Your dad's partner was American, was he?" He stepped forward and gestured between Elspeth and Dennis. "So, he'd get the medicine for Evy. I mean, if your family couldn't get it, being illegal and all, it would make sense, eh?"

The room was filled with a pensive silence, eventually broken by Elspeth taking a final drag on her cigarette. "Yes, I suppose it would," she said. There was a touch of emotion to her voice, and a somber air about her that Dennis had not witnessed before. He waited before speaking again, measuring his thoughts.

"I think I may have figured it out," he said finally. Both Elspeth and Bobo looked at him expectantly, and he licked his lips before pressing onward. "Let's assume that your family *was* here illegally, Elspeth, and that your father's partner was helping them out. Evy would have spent a fair amount of time around them both, which is why your father started including her in things. Or, maybe he just wanted to keep an eye on her, I don't know." He took a breath. "Then, there was a big argument, and Evy died in the middle of it. Maybe something kept her from getting her insulin in time. She did mention that her father and his partner were gone, so it might fit. Either way, she's still here and waiting for them to kiss and make up." Bobo coughed on a laugh, and Dennis silenced him with a warning glare. "After Evy died, there was one less reason for your father's partner to stay around."

Elspeth's face was expressionless, but her shoulders were tense and held high. Once again, silence dominated the atmosphere, mixing almost tangibly with the thin haze from the cigarettes. Dennis stood motionless, waiting for something, anything, to break the heavy spell that hung over the room. His patience paid off, and Elspeth looked up at him with a piercing, almost pleading gaze that was entirely alien from the calm and confident expressions he had seen on the woman in the past.

"Including her in what things?" Elspeth asked softly.

Dennis felt a clammy nausea trickle through him, beginning at the base of his scalp and seeping through the rest of his body. "Well, uh, Elspeth," he said, shifting his weight uncomfortably, "remember how you could tell from the very beginning that I was... how did you put it?"

"Paranoid?" suggested Bobo unhelpfully.

"A flimflammer," Elspeth declared.

"Right, that." Dennis' breath whistled through his teeth as he inhaled. "Well, it turns out that your father and I might have shared a common profession." He sat down across from Elspeth, trying to appear supportive and understanding. "Your father *was* an artist, Elspeth. A con artist. He got your sister involved in a job of some kind, and she died before it was finished."

Dennis felt like he was in a dream, for how real the situation seemed. Elspeth's eyes teared up, and his own started to leak sympathetically. "Oh, Evelyn," whispered Elspeth. "She never did like me sneaking around, but I didn't think she actually had something to hide." She sniffed once and drained the rest of her water, then sat clutching the glass as though it might provide her with some comfort.

"Well, listen," Dennis continued as gently as he could. "I think we can fix all of this. Do you know where we can reach your father's old partner? Is he still alive?" If he had been superstitious, Dennis would have crossed his fingers.

"No," replied Elspeth. "I mean, I don't know. I never saw him again after Evy died. Even if he is alive, I wouldn't know how to go about contacting him."

"Damn," Dennis muttered.

"What about a picture?" chimed Bobo. "Maybe if she saw the two of them making nice, that would be good enough."

"It could work," agreed Dennis, albeit skeptically. He turned back to Elspeth. "How about it? Do you have a picture of your father and his partner?"

"I might," Elspeth sniffed. She coughed again, but whether it was from choking back tears or some other cause, Dennis couldn't tell. "There's an envelope somewhere filled with old photographs. I'll go see if I can find it." The woman's strength seemed to return as she stood, and the pained expression left her face. "Meanwhile, Dennis, perhaps you could speak with Evy again. If this works as you think it will, we would all do well to be prepared." She walked quickly from the room, leaving Dennis and Bobo alone.

"Seems tough on her," commented Bobo. "Course, if it were my sister in that chair, it might be tough on me, too." He shrugged as though casting off an inner thought. "Not that you'd ever find Zoe haunting a piece of furniture."

"Zoe?" Dennis repeated.

"My sister."

Dennis regarded Bobo with a thoughtful look. "I didn't know you had a sister." Despite the serious situation, Bobo laughed out loud.

“Master of the obvious, you are. Come on, September, you’ve known me, what, three days? Forgive me if I don’t tell you everything at once.”

“Life would sure be easier if people did,” said Dennis, looking at Elspeth’s ashtray. “Still, I guess we know enough now.”

“Time for your second date, then?”

“It might just end up being a repeat of the first one.”

“Let’s hope for a better ending, then.”

Dennis nodded gravely. If he didn’t figure this out, Evy might not get an ending at all.

Chapter Twelve

“It’s your turn to tell me a secret, Dennis.”

Keeping his frustration under control was proving to be a challenging task. The choreographed second date had been practically identical to the first, up until Evy had deviated from the script. From there, Dennis had been fighting a losing battle as the ghost led the conversation on a maddening path through stories of petty theft, amateur espionage, and clandestine trysts worthy of a bad spy novel.

“You weren’t finished telling me yours, though,” Dennis said, feigning interest. “Who was the guy you were with?”

“Now, Dennis, that would be another secret, wouldn’t it? And yours have all been terribly similar.” She batted her eyes playfully, which only irritated him. The accusation was true enough, though, since Dennis had carefully tailored his own stories in the hopes of prompting Evy to mention her father’s confidence schemes again.

“Alright, how about this,” he tried again. “You pick a topic for me. When it’s my turn, though, I get to pick one for you.”

Evy smiled coyly. “How am I as a date, Dennis?”

“Uh, fine,” Dennis replied. “I mean, you’re great. You’re really amazing.”

“Tell me about your last date.”

For a brief moment, Dennis was suspicious that Evy was playing a twisted sort of game with him. He dismissed the thought. If the ghost had remembered anything of their earlier conversation, he doubted that she would have waited until then to remark on it. After all, the only difference between the two dates, at least during the first half, had been Bobo’s absence from the later conversation.

That brought another thought to mind. Dennis turned to look over his shoulder, wondering as he did how the search for the photographs was faring. While he wouldn’t have any particular use for them at the moment, it would be nice to have them on-hand if the conversation took a turn towards its intended topic.

“Afraid of eavesdroppers, Dennis?” Evy asked flirtatiously.

“Oh, no, it’s not that.” He cleared his throat and continued speaking before Evy could say anything else. “My last date? Or my last really memorable date?”

“The really memorable one,” Evy answered, sitting back with an expectant smile.

“Okay.” Dennis paused. “But you have to tell me about anything I ask for afterward, right?”

“Mmhmm,” Evy thrummed, pulling her knees up to her chest. Not especially good table manners, Dennis mused.

“Okay, well,” he began, “this was about two years ago now, not long after I had moved back to San Francisco. I was really interested in this girl, and acting like a complete fool about it. I bribed her roommate to let me into their apartment, and I was busy arranging some flowers on her dining room table when she suddenly came home.” He smiled at the memory, even as he felt a quiet but insistent twinge of regret in his chest. “I didn’t have anywhere to hide, so I ducked behind her kitchen counter. She heard me, of course, and she called my name.”

“What did you do?” Evy asked. The look of eager interest on her translucent face was both satisfying and encouraging.

"You'll never believe this," laughed Dennis, "but I took off my shoe, put my sock on my hand, and gave her a puppet show."

"You *didn't*!" Evy squealed. "Oh, Dennis, that is priceless!" She laughed for a minute longer, and Dennis did his best to join in, but his heart felt a bit too heavy for it. It seemed unbelievable that he had gone from puppet shows in Alena's kitchen to being kicked out of the house they shared. He knew that her life was a complicated ordeal at the moment, especially considering the accident her partner had been in, but the harshness of their last exchange was far too fresh to be easily ignored. He shook his head, concentrating on the task at hand.

"Now it's your turn," Dennis said. He made a big show of considering his question, despite being well aware of what he wanted to ask. "I know!" He snapped his fingers. "You told me that your father was a con artist, right?"

Evy's eyes narrowed, but the expression seemed more tinged with confusion than suspicion. "Did I? Well, I can't imagine why."

"Yes, you did," affirmed Dennis. "Let's hear about that."

Evy rolled her eyes in what Dennis hoped was only affected frustration, and tilted her head as she looked at him. "There isn't much more to tell than that, dear."

"That can't be *all* of it," Dennis said, a tad desperately. He was more than a little afraid of the thin ice upon which he was treading, fearful that it might collapse with one wrong word. "You didn't tell me how you found out. Nobody else in your family ever did, right? Besides, my secrets are a lot more exciting." If the veiled challenge didn't do the trick, Dennis knew that he would be sunk. Thankfully, Evy seemed to respond to it, and she leaned forward again.

"Your last story hardly counts as a secret, dear." She tapped her lip thoughtfully. "Still," she said, her voice dropping into a hushed tone, "what if I told you that Father is having me help him with his latest scheme?"

"That's more like it," encouraged Dennis, although he was a long way from feeling relief. "What are you doing with him?" He shot a look over his shoulder, hoping that Bobo would return before too much longer. If, by some stroke of luck, this was going to be the moment that Evy opened up about the events surrounding her death, he wanted to have the pictures nearby.

"Dennis, really, there's nobody spying on us, you needn't be so jumpy," Evy said reassuringly. Dennis managed to look back with a fair imitation of a charming grin.

"One can never be sure," he replied, realizing as he did that he was quoting Elspeth's favorite phrase. "You were saying?"

"Nothing, really." The ghost gave a one-shouldered shrug. "All the real work is finished, and nobody is any the wiser. Father's gone over to see his partner right now, in fact. The only thing I'm doing is keeping a key."

Dennis' heart leapt. That was it! That *had* to be it! Suddenly, he didn't care about Bobo, Elspeth, or any pictures from an old envelope. It was obvious: Evy's father had left her with a key, presumably to something pertaining to his scheme, and she had died while guarding it. Granted, there was still her odd obsession with the worn-out armchair, but that seemed irrelevant now. She was waiting for her father to reconcile an argument with his partner, after which she could return the key and be free to depart.

Dennis jumped up, bumping the table and knocking one of the wine-filled goblets over with a ruby splash. "Sorry, Evy," he said hurriedly, "I need to –" he cut himself off and

swallowed. "I'll be right back." He all but ran from the room, crashing headlong into Bobo as they both rounded the same corner.

"Christ, September!" Bobo exclaimed, regaining his balance. "You look like you've seen a ghost!" He smirked and let out a short laugh. "Seriously, where's the fire?"

"Would you stop it with the bad puns?" Dennis put one hand on the wall to steady himself and looked up with manic triumph. "I figured it out, Bobo! I know why Evy's haunting that chair!" He paused, considering. "Well, maybe not the chair specifically, but that doesn't matter! Where's Elspeth?"

"Keep your hair on, September," Bobo said. "She's back in the sitting room asking for some more water. Give me a second, here."

Dennis followed impatiently as Bobo walked through the kitchen and filled the glass from the tap. He was no longer concerned about whether Evy would disappear again, but he did feel an urgent need to explain what he had discovered. With what seemed like unnecessary slowness, the pair walked back to the den. A large envelope, yellowed with age, had joined the other items on the table. Dennis hoped that his phone was beneath the paper, and that it hadn't been somehow misplaced.

"I found those pictures for you, Dennis," Elspeth said, gesturing with a shaky hand that held another lit cigarette. "I hope there's something that will help."

"We don't need them anymore, actually." Dennis' own hands were shaking from excitement as he sat down. "Elspeth, listen, when your father died, did he leave behind a key?"

"A key?" Elspeth asked.

"A key?" parroted Bobo.

"Yes, a key!" Dennis exclaimed. "Like, a key to a safe or something. Anywhere that he might have stored valuables."

"I can't think of anything," replied Elspeth. Another series of coughs wracked her body, and she reached for the glass that Bobo was holding. "Dear me, I'm sorry," she said, her voice strained. Half of the water was gone before she spoke again. "No, my father never had anything like that. Not that I was aware of, anyway." Dennis' heart sank.

"Are you sure? Your sister said that she was looking after a key."

Understanding dawned on Elspeth's pale face. "Oh, you mean the safety deposit box key, then?"

"That's it!" Dennis rushed forward and sat down on the edge of a chair. "Where is it? Do you still have it?"

"Of course, dear. It's –" she coughed again, louder even than before. "It's in that drawer where I keep all the keys. You remember, don't you?"

"Yes," Dennis replied. "In the kitchen, right? Where you keep the one to Evy's room?"

"That's right." Elspeth made an attempt at clearing her throat, but the action just prompted more coughs.

"Are you alright, ma'am?" asked Bobo with concern.

Elspeth waved him off, but continued to sputter and wheeze. "I'm fine," she croaked. "Just... just give me a minute."

Dennis would have preferred to wait for Elspeth to calm down before explaining, but she motioned for him to continue. "Evy thinks that she's guarding that key," he said. "If we show it to her, if we tell her that it's all over, then that's it. She'll be gone."

"Just like that?" Bobo asked.

"I'm sure of it."

"That's certainly... certainly something, Dennis," Elspeth rasped. She looked down at where her spasms had spilled her water onto her lap. "Barnaby, if you wouldn't mind, could you..."

She never finished the sentence. Another fit of coughs escaped her lips, and the glass slipped from her fingers.

"Elspeth?" Dennis jumped forward. "Elspeth, are you okay?" The woman didn't reply, and she doubled over towards the floor.

"Here, help her lay down!" shouted Bobo, rushing around to her side. This time, she made no attempt to fend off the attention, incapacitated as she was. The paroxysms continued, intermittently interrupted by long, painful-sounding gasps. Dennis felt his heart race at the sight of the woman's pale skin and bulging eyes. "Breathe, okay?" Bobo said urgently. "Just breathe!" He shot a look back at Dennis. "September, get that fag up before it sets the house on fire!"

Bobo's words took a moment to register, and a further, tense second longer to make sense. He scrambled around on the floor, locating Elspeth's cigarette where it had fallen. A splash from the overturned glass had extinguished the embers, but he thrust it deep into the ashtray nonetheless. "Is she alright?" he asked frantically, kneeling close to the couch. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know!"

Elspeth retched and gasped, and Bobo barely managed to duck away as the woman's hand clawed at her chest. Dennis watched the motion with raw panic in his veins. "Is she having a heart attack?"

"I'm not a bloody doctor, September!" He forced a hand through Elspeth's flailing arms, and with no apparent thoughts towards modesty, pressed it firmly against her chest. "I can't tell what's going on. There's a phone in the kitchen, call an ambulance!"

"Right, ambulance," Dennis said. He rushed from the room, past the restaurant façade, and into the kitchen. An old rotary phone sat on a counter at the far side of the room, and Dennis lunged for it, dialing as quickly as he could. He hoped that they wouldn't end up replacing one ghost with another.



Dennis disliked hospitals. Every time he visited one, he always seemed to leave with less flesh than he had entered with. Now, waiting for news about Elspeth, he felt a different sort of anxiety. The ride over, following closely behind the flashing lights of the ambulance, had been one of the more nerve-wracking episodes in Dennis' recent memory, and that was saying something. It was ironic how all the events of the last few days, his dealing with the trials of the dead, could be so easily overshadowed by a near-stranger slipping away from life. Nobody had said anything to him, not since he and Bobo had been forcefully confined to the waiting room by an overweight nurse.

"Bloody bad luck."

Dennis looked across at Bobo, who had been silent until then. He was sitting with his arms draped over his legs, a deflated look about him. Even his trademark grin was absent, a fact which Dennis found almost as disconcerting as the rest of the situation.

"Hey, at least she was still alive when we got here, right?" Dennis' positive remark sounded hollow and forced, even to him.

"Yeah, but for how long?" Bobo let out a huff of air and ran his fingers through his short hair. "It's a hell of a thing, September, and it never works out like you imagine."

Dennis nodded, his head bobbing rhythmically for a few seconds before he responded. "What are we talking about?"

"Life," Bobo stated. "Sometimes you get so close to something, only to get distracted at the last minute."

"I think this falls under a different category than distraction," Dennis replied mirthlessly. "Besides, we can always finish things when Elspeth gets better."

"If she gets better."

Dennis cast a sidelong stare towards Bobo. "You know," he said, "you're usually a lot more lighthearted than this."

"I never get to finish anything I start," Bobo replied, as though that explained things. He turned to face Dennis. "That's the real reason I left England, you know. Remember my sister?" Dennis nodded. "Yeah, well, she had this idea for a business making custom appliances. I was going to be the handyman, and she would run the administration side of things." A touch of a smile crept onto his lips, but not enough to illuminate his dark expression. "Then she met Phil. Bloody Phil!" He shook his head. "I mean, anyone could see he was a psychotic prick, but she shacked up with him anyway. The marriage lasted all of a week, and then she decided that she needed some time to get away and 'find herself.'" The last two words were spoken with a sarcastic inflection.

"So much for Bobo's business, then," Dennis said.

"Yeah. Just as well, though." Bobo sat up and looked around the room. Dennis had examined it upon their arrival, but had seen nothing worthy of note. The off-white walls were sterile of all decoration, and the only reading material seemed designed to cater to lifeless geriatrics. Only a single window, a wire mesh running through the glass, offered any kind of glimpse into the hospital beyond. Elspeth was back there somewhere, hopefully recovering from whatever had befallen her.

"Do you think they'll let us talk to her?" Dennis asked. Bobo shrugged casually, his moodiness apparently having evaporated.

"Might not be the best idea."

"Really?" Dennis furrowed his brow. "Why not?"

"Well, I mean," Bobo replied, cocking his head. "It's not like she took to the conversation too well the first time, is it?"

"Wait, you think that we caused her... whatever it was?" The idea shocked Dennis, and it was hard for him to keep from immediately feeling guilty.

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Thanks, Bobo, that's very reassuring."

"I'm no expert on these things, September. You need a watch fixed or a potion made, then I'm your man, but I've got no bloody clue about what makes people tick." He spun a finger next to his head. "It's all tangled up in there, it is. I know that much."

"Probably why psychiatrists do so well." Dennis blinked upon hearing his own statement. "You know what? I bet Sam would know. He deals with this kind of thing all the time." He reached for his phone, but found his pocket empty. A further search

revealed that it was nowhere on his person, and a sudden image of the table in Elspeth's den popped into his mind.

"Shit," muttered Dennis. "I forgot my phone at the house."

"You want to go back for it?" Bobo asked. Dennis' face contorted with uncertainty.

"I don't know," he replied. "Do you think it's a good idea?"

"Yeah, probably," said Bobo with a nod. His eyes narrowed slightly. "Come to think of it, we might have left the door unlocked. I think we should check."

"What about Elspeth? Shouldn't we be here when she wakes up?"

Bobo gestured at the room's only window. "There's a hospital full of doctors here, mate. I think she'll be fine without us for a little while."

"Fair enough." Dennis stood and swung his arms, trying to work the circulation back into them. "Also, it should give us a chance to look for that key."

It was Bobo's turn to look uncertain. "I don't know. Maybe we'd best hold off on that part until Elspeth is feeling better. She ought to be around for it."

Dennis shook his head adamantly. "No, I really think we should find that key. If you're right, and our conversation did put her in here, then being around for Evy's final departure would only make things worse." He punched a fist into his palm. "I say we head to the house, finish with Evy, and then give Sam a call on the way back here. If he says that it's okay to talk to Elspeth, then we'll have good news for her when she wakes up." He looked expectantly at Bobo, who said nothing, but rose to join him. They were halfway back to Dennis' car before he realized that he wasn't entirely sure what a safety deposit box key looked like.

Hopefully he'd know it when he saw it.

Chapter Thirteen

The sun was high and hot as Dennis and Bobo approached Elspeth's house. It seemed remarkably out of keeping with both the purpose for their visit and the season in general, especially for a winter day in Northern California. If he did wind up writing about this, Dennis thought to himself, he'd have to change things so that their final overture took place at night.

Bobo bounded out of the car before Dennis had shut off the motor, and called back from the doorstep. "It's open!"

"Great!" Dennis shouted back. "Now we won't have to break in!" He stepped out of the car and followed the short pathway up to the door, where Bobo was waiting with a mocking grin.

"Careful about the sorts of things you yell, September." He looked around with exaggerated worry. "You might get the neighborhood watch after us."

"Get inside, will you?" said Dennis, shoving the bigger man's arm. Bobo opened the door with a laugh, and led the way through. The house looked no different than it had earlier in the day, although it felt strangely empty knowing that Elspeth wasn't there. The thought that he was technically committing burglary crossed Dennis' mind, but by that point it was too late to foster any indecision.

"Okay," Dennis said, squaring his shoulders. "You head to the kitchen and look for the key. I'm going to find my phone and call Sam. We'll talk to Evy, wrap everything up, and be back at the hospital in no time."

"Right, boss," answered Bobo with a nod. "In a drawer in the kitchen, yeah?"

"I just said that."

"And I was just checking."

Dennis waved a hand, and the sound of Bobo's chuckling echoed through the house as the pair parted ways. Again, it occurred to Dennis that they both should have been more tense, but their mood was almost lighthearted. He entered the den slowly, taking careful measure of the room. Unlike the rest of the house, it had been thrown into a state of disarray by the paramedics that had responded to Dennis' call. The table had been shoved against a far wall, but the envelope – presumably with a cellular phone hidden beneath it – was still waiting patiently for Dennis to pick it up.

Sure enough, Dennis spotted a rectangle of silvery plastic as he pushed the aged paper aside. The screen was illuminated, showing that he had one missed call and a voicemail waiting for him. He ignored the former, tapping in the code to access his mailbox. A mechanical voice told him what he already knew, that he had a message waiting for him, and he nodded impatiently in time to the announcement. When the electronic routine was finally over, Dennis felt his chest go tight.

"Hey, Dennis," came Alena's voice. There was a drawn-out sigh. "Listen... I really want to talk about what happened last night. I'm not saying that I'm at all okay with any of it, but I should have let you explain things." A long pause came next. "I'm going to go in and check on Antonio, so I'll be out. Call me if you want to talk." There was a rustling noise, and the message ended.

The tightness in Dennis' chest relented somewhat, although he wasn't sure how he should feel. Alena sounded willing to listen, at least. Whether that would lead to understanding and forgiveness remained to be seen. Dennis' lips pressed together tightly

as he stared down at the phone, its display having darkened after the message ended. Should he call back right away? No, probably not. Alena was on her way to visit Antonio, as she had said, and disturbing her would be a mistake. Besides, Dennis wanted to be free and clear of this situation with Evy before he tried to explain it. He wondered how Bobo was faring in his search for the key, and decided to get on with the task he had assigned himself. He dialed Harding's number, and the receptionist answered before the line had scarcely had a chance to ring.

"Doctor Harding's office."

"Hi, it's Dennis." He could hear the girl chewing gum again. "Will you get Sam for me, please?"

"Doctor Harding is on his lunch break for the next hour," came the bored reply. "You can call back later."

"Can you wake him up?" asked Dennis. "It's urgent."

"He really doesn't like to be disturbed."

Dennis closed his eyes in weary frustration. "Look, tell him that it's about the woman with the haunted chair." That should get her interested, Dennis thought. "She's in the hospital, and I might not have much time." He hoped that the last part was a lie.

"Uh. Just a sec." There was an audible pop over the line, and Dennis worried that he had been disconnected. He probably did sound like one of Harding's more deranged patients, he supposed, but his fears were cast aside when he heard the noise again, and Harding's voice answered.

"Dennis?" the man asked. "Is everything okay?"

"That's what I'm calling to find out," replied Dennis. "I have kind of a strange question for you."

"Just a moment, I'll call you back from my cell phone." This time, the line really did disconnect. A moment passed as Dennis waited for his own phone to ring, and he answered it immediately when it did. "I'm sorry about that, Dennis," Harding said. "I didn't want my secretary listening in."

"She does that?"

"I just felt it would be best to act cautiously." Harding cleared his throat. "Now, your client is in the hospital? What happened?"

"I don't really know," confessed Dennis. "I was explaining something that I'd found out about her father, and she collapsed in a coughing fit." He tensed slightly. "Do you think I could have caused it? By telling her, I mean?"

"No, almost certainly not," replied Harding. The reassurance went a long way towards calming Dennis' nerves. "While we're undoubtedly affected by our emotions, I've never heard of anything quite so extreme." He paused briefly. "Unless you think she was having a panic attack of some sort? Does she strike you as prone to that kind of thing?"

"I... I don't think so." Dennis thought about the strength and confidence that Elspeth exuded. "No, she's not like that." He realized that he was pacing around the room, but didn't stop. "So, would it be safe for me to talk to her about it again?"

"I couldn't say, Dennis. What do you have left to tell her? Furthermore, what did you say to her already that might have prompted such a reaction?"

"You said that I didn't do it!" Dennis exclaimed, and Harding quickly made soothing noises in response.

"Calm down, calm down." The sound of a page turning came across the line. Dennis pictured Harding taking notes, as though he were treating one of his patients. The image was disconcerting, but he had bigger things to worry about. "Listen, Dennis," Harding continued, "I can't say anything with complete certainty until you tell me what happened."

As always seemed to be the case lately, Dennis needed to carefully censor a few details, lest he sound even more unhinged. "Elspeth always thought that her father was an artist. It turns out that he was a confidence man, and that he entrusted his daughter – Evy, not Elspeth – with a key to a safety deposit box. She was supposed to hide it until her father and his partner resolved an argument about something, but she died before that happened." Harding said nothing, which Dennis took as a prompt to continue. "Anyway, now Elspeth is in the hospital, and I'm back at the house looking for that key." Harding's silence continued. "Well?" Dennis blurted.

"Dennis," the psychiatrist replied, his voice fearful, "are you, by chance, talking about Evelyn and Elspeth Palin?"

"Of course I am! Who else would I be talking about?"

There was another moment of tense silence before Harding spoke again. "Dennis, are you safe? Where are you?"

"I'm at the house, Sam. Elspeth's house. I said that already." His grip tightened on the phone. "What's going on?"

The blood rushed from Dennis' face as his friend answered. "I didn't make the connection before. I didn't see how you could have possibly been involved." Harding took a shallow breath and swallowed. "Emma Palin was a patient of mine, Dennis, up until shortly before she died. She had never gotten over the death of her eldest daughter, who was named Evelyn."

"Elspeth's mother?" Dennis asked. A flash of anger rose through his surprise. "You *knew*?"

"Dennis, please, listen to me! I swear, I had no idea it had anything to do with you!"

"What had nothing to do with me? Sam, what's going on?"

"It was Spinner," answered Harding. Dennis felt his knees start to weaken. "The retired detective. He accused me of perpetuating Emma's delusions in order to extend my time with her." The sound of Harding's throat being cleared reminded Dennis to breathe, and he inhaled sharply before he passed out. "Spinner was a friend of the family," Harding continued. "I was never clear on the actual relationship, but I do know that he referred to Emma's daughter as his niece."

The pieces fell together in a sickening, chilling cascade. "He was the partner," Dennis whispered.

"Eric Palin's partner, yes," Harding confirmed. Dennis realized through a haze of panic that he had never known the paternal Palin's first name. "It seems probable."

"How could you not have known?" Dennis clutched the phone as though he were grabbing at Harding himself. "I told you about Elspeth! How could you not have known?!"

"It was eight years ago, Dennis!" Harding's voice sounded almost as desperate as Dennis' own. "If you had told me her name, I might have realized things sooner. Please understand, I never met anyone else in the family; I only dealt with Emma."

"What, were you disappointed about losing her business? Did you set me up so that you could have Elspeth as one of your clients?"

"Patience, Dennis, please."

"I don't give a damn what you call them!"

"No, I meant..." Harding chuckled nervously. "I was asking for you to be patient, and I'll explain. I had nothing to do with you meeting Elspeth."

"Oh, god," muttered Dennis, feeling sick. "That's why Spinner was interested in me. He thinks that I'm trying to help you pull the same thing on Elspeth."

Harding started to say something, but hesitated. "I think it might be more complicated than that." Dennis listened, suppressing the urge to gag. "As I understand it, Eric and Spinner had some personal issues. A disagreement about something. From what you've told me, it sounds like it may have been over how to split the profits from a job they had pulled." Harding's words grew more rushed. "Spinner must have seen this as an opportunity to tie up loose ends, now that Elspeth is incapacitated. There's little doubt in my mind that he plans to rob her, and clean out that safety deposit box once he has the key."

"What should I do?" Dennis coughed. "Sam, tell me what I should do."

"The first thing is to make sure that you're safe," replied Harding. "Once you've found the key, come over to my office, and we'll figure out what to do next."

"Won't that just make him want to chase me even more?"

"No, he's proven that he's beyond sanity." Dennis could easily agree with that. "And with Elspeth in the hospital, we need to think about protecting her, as well."

"Yes, right." Dennis squeezed his eyes shut. "I'll find the key, get to your office, and... then what?"

"One step at a time. Let's get you to safety."

"Okay, yeah, that." Dennis hung up his phone and shoved it into his pocket. He silently repeated Harding's advice like a mantra: *Find the key, get to safety*. On shaking legs, he left the den, stumbling around the furniture. *Find the key, get to safety*. At the back of his mind, beneath the cycling words, he thought about Alena, and wondered if he'd ever get the chance to see her again. He chided himself for being so melodramatic, but the self-criticism was lost under a wave of fear and adrenaline as he stared through the front window of the entry hall, and at the blue sedan that had just pulled up outside.

Find the key, get to safety.

Out loud, Dennis whispered, "Too late."



A tremor of electricity shot through Dennis' spine as he stood frozen, contemplating an immediate surrender. Almost without him telling them to, his legs started moving, sending him skittering around a corner and into the kitchen. Bobo looked up from an open drawer just in time for Dennis to tackle him and pull him onto the ground.

"Have you gone bloody mad?!" the bigger man yelped, barely saving himself from getting bruised on the floor's hardwood paneling.

"Quiet!" Dennis scrambled into a low crouch and held an insistent finger to his lips.

"Why?"

"Be *quiet*!" Dennis hissed again. He strained to hear anything that might signify someone's presence. At the very least, he should be able to hear footsteps on the tiled

floor of the entry hall. For the moment, the house sounded empty, but how long it would remain that way, Dennis couldn't begin to guess. He turned to Bobo, whose dark face had an ashen quality to it. "It's Spinner," explained Dennis, keeping his voice low. "His car just pulled up. I think he's going to come inside."

"What does he want?" Bobo adopted a crouch of his own, but rose slightly to peer over the countertop.

"He's after the key."

Bobo sank back down and gave Dennis a confused look. "What, the one we're looking for? Why? How does he even know about it?"

"He's Eric's old partner," answered Dennis.

The expression on Bobo's face was a mixture of many emotions, confusion being the most evident of them. "Who?"

"Eric Palin," Dennis replied. "Elspeth's father. Spinner was his partner." As quickly as he could, he recounted his conversation with Harding, taking as much of his attention away from listening as he dared.

"Your shrink buddy knew all of this?" asked Bobo, obviously amazed.

"No." Dennis shook his head. "Not really. He didn't know that Elspeth and Spinner's niece were the same person."

"Bloody shame, too. Would have saved us a lot of trouble." He stole another glance over the countertop. "How do we get out of this one?"

"Through the back door?" Dennis suggested. "No, that's no good, he's parked right next to my car. Damn it!"

"We could just, you know..." Bobo pantomimed running legs with two fingers. "I mean, come back for it later."

"I'm not leaving my car anywhere near that madman."

"You'd prefer to leave us near him, then?"

"Fine, whatever," snapped Dennis. "Let's just get out of here."

They crept forward, keeping low, with Dennis checking the windows as he passed them. The door to the backyard was painfully far away, across the living room and beyond Evy's chair. Dennis kept his eyes fixed on their destination, counting each step that took them closer. Although there was still more than half of the room to traverse, Bobo edged around to peer outside.

"Looks clear," he whispered.

Dennis nodded nervously. "When we get out," he said, "we should try to stick together. It's no use running if one of us gets caught."

"He's not going to get either of us," Bobo said firmly.

A gruff voice growled from behind them. "How about both of you?"

Dennis whirled around on his heels, knocking backwards into Bobo and sending them both sprawling. Spinner's massive figure loomed above them, his shoes clutched in one hand like a weapon. "You know," he said, "breaking and entering is a felony in California."

"We was invited," replied Bobo fearfully.

"The charge covers threats and coercion," Spinner stated. "Something that I'm sure you're both familiar with."

"I'm feeling pretty threatened, yeah."

Dennis kept his mouth shut, content, for lack of a better word, to let Bobo do the talking.

"Shut up." Spinner took an intimidating step forward. "You guys are in way over your heads. I'm disgusted, and I've seen some shit in my day."

"Really," muttered Dennis. He hoped the man would keep talking. Spinner had them at a disadvantage, to be sure, but if they could somehow manage to get past him, they might be able to make it to the car before being caught.

"I told you to back off, Dennis," Spinner said with a disapproving shake of his head. "You didn't listen, and now look where it's gotten you."

"Where's that?" asked Dennis, still stalling for time. His eyes darted around the room, searching for options.

"Don't give me that crap, kid. We both know what you're up to."

Dennis thought frantically. The table was close enough to provide a bit of a shield, and he might be able to wound Spinner with a fork, but he still doubted that he would win in a fight. There had to be something he could do to deflect the man's attention, if only for a second. His heart sped up as his gaze fell on Evy's armchair. If the ghost would put in an appearance, it might provide enough of a distraction to cover an escape, assuming she didn't waste time with a slow fade into existence.

"Don't even think about running," warned Spinner. "You won't make it."

Here's hoping that you're wrong, thought Dennis. "Evy?" he said, choking on the name. He cleared his throat. "Evy?" he tried again, louder. "There's someone here who knows you."

"Oh, yes!" a feminine voice exclaimed. "Malcolm, how are you?"

The moment Spinner started to turn, Dennis seized his chance. He leapt up and bolted, keeping the table between himself and the detective.

"Hey!" Spinner yelled, lunging. He caught Dennis by the arm and yanked, bringing them both crashing down amidst a clatter of silverware. Dennis flailed his legs, trying break free of Spinner's grasp. The man was strong, impossibly strong, and his clenched fist held firm.

"Boys, really!" protested Evy. Her words were drowned out by the sounds of the scuffle. Using his free hand, Dennis groped for something, anything, to defend himself with. His fingers closed on a smooth metal cylinder, and he managed to get a few hits in before the candlestick was wrenched from his fingers.

"Hang on, mate!" That was Bobo, but Dennis couldn't see what he was doing. He shoved against the table, trying to tear himself out of the melee. Spinner's iron grip kept him pinned, and Dennis' efforts felt feeble by comparison.

"Cut it out!" barked Spinner, flexing his arm and pulling Dennis closer. There was a rustling noise from beside them, and suddenly the world was covered by a billowing tablecloth. For a moment, Dennis struggled through the thick shroud of white linen, until the jolt of a heavy impact reached him through Spinner's arm.

"Now, September!" Bobo yelled. "I've got him stuck!"

"I'm stuck!" Dennis answered, but he felt Spinner's hand fall away as the man struggled. He slid backwards, clearing the table just before it toppled over, taking Bobo and Spinner with it. A second silver candlestick, twin to the one that Dennis had lost, rolled by his leg. He snatched it up, twisting to face where Bobo was holding a thrashing pile of table cover and private investigator.

"Keep him still!" shouted Dennis. He swung his makeshift weapon at where he thought Spinner's head was. The pile grunted, and Bobo shifted his weight to hang on.

"How?!"

"Use the tablecloth!"

"I *am* using the tablecloth!" Bobo screamed. A protruding bulge from the fray caught him against the chin, and he jabbed an elbow back in response.

Dennis move forward on his knees, pulling the cloth tight beneath his weight. "Where's the knife?"

"*What* knife?"

"The steak knife!" Dennis landed another blow with the candlestick, not caring what he connected with. "It was on the table!" His words seemed to give Spinner new energy, and the struggles beneath the tablecloth increased. A sudden tear erupted in the material, and a glint of metal slashed through, narrowly missing Dennis' hand.

"I think he has it!" exclaimed Bobo, pulling back. The move was almost enough to grant Spinner a second of freedom, but Dennis swung his candlestick, smashing it into the man's knuckles and sending the blade flying.

"Grab it! Hurry!" Dennis shouted. Spinner's hand shot towards him through the rip in the fabric and closed around his forearm like a vice. Even tangled as he was, the man's strength easily outmatched Dennis', but with his head still covered it was a reduced advantage. Dennis fought furiously, trying to free his arm for another swing, when Bobo sprang forward with the steak knife in hand.

"Here!" he exclaimed. He yanked the tablecloth down, revealing Spinner's scowling face. There was no way for the man to block as Bobo launched a rocketing fist at his head, connecting solidly with his right temple. The grip on Dennis' arm slackened. He twisted away, bringing himself around to trap Spinner's hand. The detective's face took on a hint of fear. With a growl worthy of an enraged grizzly bear, Bobo pressed the knife against Spinner's throat and tensed. Spinner froze beneath the tablecloth, and finally crumpled as Dennis brought a streak of heavy silver down on the man's skull.



Bobo was breathing in short, heavy gasps, while Dennis readied himself for another swing. The detective lay motionless, his face slackened, but that was by no means a guarantee of safety. Dennis watched carefully for any signs of life. Other than the shallow rise and fall of the man's chest beneath the rumpled white linen, he was still.

"Well," Evy said, her voice stern, "that is *quite* enough."

"I'll say," muttered Dennis. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "Help me get him into the chair."

"What?" Bobo asked with a start. He looked back towards Evy. She had wrapped into a protective ball and was peering over her legs.

"Not that chair, the other one." Dennis let the candlestick fall to the floor. His fingers were stiff and his arm felt rubbery, but he wasn't ready to relax just yet. With Bobo's help, he lifted Spinner's unconscious form into the chair across from Evy's, which was still standing even after the brawl. "Okay," Dennis said, exhaling. "Now let's tie him up."

Using the steak knife that Bobo had retrieved, Dennis cut the tablecloth into strips, still keeping a close eye on their captive. He bound Spinner's hands and legs, working as quickly as his shaking fingers would allow. The last several pieces were spent securing

the man's arms to the chair, which would hopefully be enough to keep him from escaping. When they were finished, Dennis and Bobo sat in deflated lumps on the floor, both of them still trying to catch their breath.

"I sure hope you're right about this guy, September," said Bobo after awhile.

"Evy recognized him, didn't she?" Dennis glanced back towards the ghost, but her chair was empty. She left as soon as the excitement was over, he thought.

"Alright, fair point." Bobo rolled his shoulders with a quiet groan. "What do we do now? Call the Old Bill?"

"No police," replied Dennis. "We'd have a hell of a time explaining what we're doing here."

"What, then?"

"I don't know." Bobo said nothing, but Dennis could tell that he was waiting for a better answer. "It's not like I make a habit of beating people up."

"Two fights in three days, and you're not making a habit of it?"

"I'm going through a rough patch." A smile fought its way through Dennis' exhaustion. "Besides, I got lucky. If you weren't here, he would have killed me."

"Looks like he killed your jacket, though."

Dennis looked down at where Bobo had pointed, and saw that his blazer was ripped down one arm. He removed the article, tossing it behind the overturned table. Then, catching himself, he chased after it.

Bobo watched as Dennis retrieved his phone from the pocket of his destroyed jacket. "Blimey, I forgot!" He rose and hurried to Spinner's side.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking him for weapons," Bobo said. "Good thing, too. Look at this." He pulled a compact pistol from a hidden shoulder holster. "Huh."

"Cripes." Dennis stared at the weapon. "We're lucky he didn't try to use it during the fight."

"Not really," replied Bobo. Dennis flinched and threw up his arms as Bobo aimed the gun at him, but a stream of water caught him in the face before he could duck out of the way. "See? It's a water pistol." He pumped a few more squirts to make his point.

"Oh, that's wonderful." Dennis spat and wiped the moisture from his face. "I've been worrying about him all this time, and the worst that he could do was get me a little bit wet."

"Yeah, funny, that." Spinner was next in Bobo's shooting spree. He groaned and shifted as the water hit his face. "Whoops," Bobo said, stepping back. "That's done it. He's waking up."

With the candlestick in hand, Dennis climbed to his feet and took up a guarded stance next to Bobo. Spinner continued to moan, his eyes fluttering and seemingly out of focus.

"Oi," said Bobo loudly. He sprayed the man again. "Wakey wakey."

Spinner blinked and grunted, trying to stretch but finding his arms tied. He examined himself with a befuddled expression, until his eyes came up to meet Dennis'. "Oh, hell no."

"Hell yes, I'm afraid," answered Dennis. He was feeling smug, having finally turned the tables on his aggressor. Still, he didn't completely trust that the strips of shredded tablecloth would hold, and he stayed ready to retaliate in the event of an attack.

"What... what is this?" Spinner murmured. He shook against his bonds. "Do you really think you can get away with this? I'm a cop!"

"No you aren't," replied Dennis confidently. "Not even close."

"Yeah, a bloody nutter is what you are," Bobo added. He squirted Spinner with the water pistol again.

"Stop that," the detective sputtered.

"You're in no place to make demands, mate." Another jet of water landed just below Spinner's eye.

"Bobo, don't antagonize him," cautioned Dennis. Bobo gave him a disappointed look, but tucked the toy weapon away. Dennis breathed a small inward sigh of relief. He didn't want Spinner to find any hidden wells of strength, and angering him was probably not the smartest idea. "Listen, Malcolm..." He hesitated. "May I call you Malcolm?"

"Fuck you."

"I'll take that as a yes." Dennis shifted the candlestick in his hand. Maybe a show of the weapon would keep the man subdued. "I know why you're here, and I know what you want, but you're not going to get it. I don't care what your relationship to the Palins is, and until Elspeth says so –"

"What chair am I in?" Spinner interrupted suddenly. "*What chair am I in?*"

"Shut up!" shouted Dennis. "Don't make me whack you again."

"You don't understand!" Spinner's eyes were wide and panicked. "There's a haunted chair in this house! You have to untie me!" He twisted and strained. Thankfully, the remnants of the tablecloth held.

"We know about the goddamned chair, Spinner!" Dennis waved the candlestick in the man's face. "And we know all about you, too."

Spinner's fearful look changed to one of defiance. "The hell you do. You don't know shit."

"Oh yeah? How about this: You and Eric Palin pulled some kind of job together almost fifty years ago. Then, you had an argument about what to do with the profits, and the two of you split up. It must have been a lot of money, though, because you stuck around and kept tabs on things." He jabbed Spinner in the chest. "We saw that picture that you took of the house. This house. And we know that you've been waiting for a chance to come back."

Spinner shook his head. "You've got it all wrong. Elspeth is my –"

"Your 'niece,' yeah, we know that, too. You and Eric must have been pretty close."

"I never even *met* her father!"

"Oh, this is bollocks," Bobo muttered. "Show him the pictures, September. That should shut him up."

Dennis wondered what Bobo was referring to, until he remembered the envelope that Elspeth had retrieved. It was still in the den. "Here, take this." He passed the candlestick to Bobo. "If he moves, bang him on the head. I'll be right back."

"Right, boss."

Dennis hurried from the room, pausing as he entered the foyer. He didn't think that Spinner was the type to bring along a partner – at least, Dennis had never seen him with anyone – but his footsteps slowed as he regarded the open front door. The street outside looked deserted enough, and nobody had come to help during the fight, so that hopefully

meant they were alone. Dennis wasn't going to take any chances, though. He closed the door and made sure it was locked before continuing on his way to the den.

Everything was exactly as he had left it, and the envelope was in plain sight on the marble table. Dennis snatched it up. The paper was thicker than he had realized, and it was heavy enough to have contained dozens of pictures. One of them, at least, should prove Spinner's guilt. His evidence in hand, Dennis walked back to the living room.

"Everything okay in here?"

"We was talking about his mustache," answered Bobo with a grin.

"I'm glad you two are getting along so well." Dennis held the envelope up and waved it. "Are you sure you don't want to come clean?" Spinner only grumbled. "Fine, then." Dennis flipped open the parcel and removed a stack of photographs. They were easily as old as the envelope, and were in black and white. Promising details, although the subjects pictured were peculiar: Train stations, factories, office buildings... and there was even a shot of what looked like an offshore drilling platform. Unless Eric Palin had been an architecture enthusiast, Dennis guessed that the assembled photographs had been part of at least one con job, if not several.

"See?" Spinner said triumphantly. "I'm not in there, am I?"

"I'm sure we'll get to you," replied Dennis, trying to sound more certain than he felt. The next pictures followed the theme of their predecessors, showing several different angles of an impressive ocean liner. "Here we go." Dennis turned over a photograph of Elspeth's house, taken from almost the same vantage point as the one that Spinner had published. "This looks like your handiwork."

"It's not."

"Of course it isn't," Dennis said with an insincere smile. The images grew more recognizable after that. "Look, here's Evy, and that must be Elspeth next to her." It was hard to believe that the white-haired woman was the younger of the two sisters, but the stern expression on the little girl in the photograph was unmistakable. Dennis flipped through a few more pictures, pulling out the ones that seemed relevant. His next choice was a portrait of the entire Palin family. The man – Eric, Dennis presumed – was a portly and jovial looking fellow, with neatly combed hair and a slight slouch. The slim woman next to him had to be Emma, a gray-scale figure of poise and elegance.

Dennis held the photograph out for Spinner to see. "Recognize him?" he asked, tapping a finger above Eric Palin's head.

"No." If the detective's arms had been free, Dennis was sure that he would have folded them.

"Fine, if you say so. I'm sure there's something in here that – " he stopped in mid-sentence. The picture in front of him showed Eric Palin and another man clasping hands, both of them with wide smiles on their faces. The former looked almost exactly as he had in the previous photograph, although he was holding himself up a bit straighter. However, it was the second man that caught Dennis's eye. Even though almost fifty years had passed since the shot had been taken, there was no mistaking who it was.

It wasn't Spinner in the picture. It was Harding.

"Oh, *shit*..."

Chapter Fourteen

“What is it, mate?”

Dennis turned to face Bobo, but his eyes stayed fixed on the photograph in his hand. “I think we’re in trouble,” he said quietly, his words reaching his own ears as if from the back of a deep cave. Bobo tilted his head to look at the picture, gently pulling it from between Dennis’ fingertips.

“Who’s that, then?”

“It’s Sam,” Dennis answered, his voice barely audible. “Sam Harding.”

“What, your shrink buddy?”

Dennis nodded dumbly. “He *did* set me up. The whole thing was a goddamned *con!*” The rest of the pictures started slipping in his hand. He must have moved to set them down, because he found himself standing across the room, near the entrance to the kitchen. He was dimly aware that Bobo was watching him, and that Spinner was craning his neck to see over the back of his chair.

“Boss?” Bobo prompted. “Are you alright?”

“Don’t you get it?” Dennis snapped. “*Sam* was Eric Palin’s partner! He must have known that Elspeth was hiring paranormal investigators, and he sent me in here as one.”

Bobo shook his head with confusion. “Hang on. I thought the lady found your advert in the paper?”

That was what Elspeth had said, Dennis thought. “Yeah, but you said it yourself, almost nobody reads the paper anymore. If he knew that Elspeth did, then it was only a matter of time before she saw my ad.”

“Patient bloke, is he?”

“Well, he *has* waited fifty years!” Dennis stormed back to Bobo’s side and glared down at Spinner. “And he hired *this* psychopath to stalk me!”

“Hey, wait a second!” protested Spinner. “I told you to leave Elspeth alone, remember? I was trying to keep you away from her.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you were just looking out for your precious niece,” Dennis sneered.

“I don’t have a niece!” The look on Spinner’s face was both pleading and enraged. “Elspeth is my friend! I live up the street from here!” The chair shuddered as he shook beneath his restraints. “We play Backgammon on Sundays!”

“She’s bloody brutal, ain’t she?” Bobo asked. Dennis shoved through the conversation.

“What were you doing at Sam’s office then, huh?” He took an angry step forward. “Why did you ask Luke about me?”

“Who the *fuck* is *Luke*?”

“Yeah, September,” added Bobo. “Who’s Luke?”

Dennis made an exasperated noise. “He’s a friend of mine. A bartender at Thoreau’s Tavern in the city.” A hidden detail clicked into place. “Sam was going to give him some money to cover a gambling debt. He must have hired Spinner to watch him, too.”

“*That* guy? The blonde kid?” Spinner scowled. “I don’t give two shits about him. That bar is one of Harding’s hangouts. I went there looking for him. Seeing your picture was an added bonus.”

“Aha!” exclaimed Dennis. “You were looking for Sam, huh? So you *are* working for him?”

"No, you idiot, you are!"

"I am not!" Dennis hesitated. That technically wasn't true. "Not like that, anyway," he amended.

"Let me go!" bellowed Spinner. He thrashed a moment longer before relaxing, and his fury seemed to dissipate. "Samuel Harding is not a nice man, kid. He's been trying to get in this house since Elspeth's parents died."

"Yeah, and you're helping him."

"No," Spinner insisted. "No, I've been trying to stop him."

"By doing what?" Dennis waved a hand through the air. "Showing up at his office and threatening him with a toy?"

Spinner deflated visibly. "I can't carry a gun anymore," he sulked. "They dismissed me from the force after a perpetrator shot me. Nerve damage."

"You look okay from where I'm standing," said Bobo, a tad too cheerfully for Dennis' taste.

"It's fine motor control that's the issue," Spinner continued. "Without it, you can't carry a gun, and that's enough to disqualify you. I've been a private investigator ever since." He looked up at Dennis. "See? That's how I met Elspeth. She hired me to talk to her sister, and I found out that someone was trying to buy her house. It didn't take much for me to work it back to Harding."

Dennis folded his arms. "Yeah, whatever. Why follow me, then?"

"Your friend already said it. Elspeth saw an ad in the paper, and I dug around to find out who had posted it. By the time I got back from talking to Harding, she'd already called you."

"Sam didn't give me up, then." That was something, at least, and it was a point in Harding's favor.

"No." Spinner's expression fell back into a scowl. "He paid cash in person. It would have been a dead end if I hadn't seen you at the office."

"That was it?" Dennis didn't believe it. "I could have been there for therapy."

"He is pretty jumpy," Bobo noted with a nod.

"Nobody ever visits during Harding's lunch breaks," Spinner answered, ignoring Bobo's comment. "You had to be a friend of his."

"But... but Evy remembers you." Dennis immediately realized that the point didn't make much sense, and his resolve began to slip.

Spinner shuddered. "That's great. I don't want anything to do with her."

As if on cue, the ghost chose that moment to reappear. "Oh, well that's nice," she pouted. "Really, Malcolm, why must you be so cruel?"

"Goes with the job, I expect," Bobo grinned. Evy turned her attention his way.

"Bobo, it's nice to see you, as well, dear."

Dennis' head was spinning. "Just what the hell is going on here?" he demanded. Evy cocked an eyebrow at him.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, mister...?"

"He's a doctor, actually," corrected Bobo. "Doctor September."

"I see." Evy pressed her lips together. "Well, Doctor, I must say that I don't approve of your treatment methods." She nodded at Spinner for emphasis.

"What is this?" Dennis looked from the ghost to Spinner and then finally to Bobo. "She remembers both of you guys, but not me?"

Bobo lifted his shoulders and made a face that suggested his contentment with being clueless. "Maybe it's our skin?"

"That's stupid." Spinner kept his eyes firmly averted from the ghost.

Bobo shrugged again. "Well, I mean, what else could it be?"

"It does so remind me of Dante," Evy sighed wistfully.

Bobo blinked. "Who?"

"The servant boy," Dennis realized. He rubbed his forehead. "God, I'm stupid. Elspeth mentioned him, remember?"

"Yeah, she said Evy weren't too nice to him."

"It must have been an act, or maybe Elspeth just didn't recognize flirtation when she saw it. She was pretty young, after all." He looked at Evy. "That was it, wasn't it? You and the servant – Dante – were lovers." The ghost said nothing, but the look of humble embarrassment on her face was answer enough. "Actually," Dennis continued, turning back to Spinner, "Elspeth mentioned that someone else had visited Evy, back when she first appeared. She said that he had dark skin. So, that fits with what you were saying, too."

"I'm so pleased." The detective still wouldn't look at Evy. He looked sick, Dennis thought. With a sigh, he held out his hand to Bobo.

"Give me the knife."

"Here, September, the bloke's on our side!"

"I know," Dennis replied. "That's why I'm cutting him loose."

"Oh. Well, you had it last."

It took a moment of searching, but Dennis finally found the blade near where he had cut the tablecloth into strips. He took care in freeing Spinner's limbs, worried that the man might lash out as soon as the bonds were gone. He watched Dennis closely, but only moved to gently massage the places where he had been tied.

"You're still in deep shit, kid," the detective muttered.

"Don't I know it," Dennis said with a sigh. "I told Sam that I'd be there with the key. He's going to get pretty suspicious when I don't show up."

Spinner's brow furrowed, and he looked around the room for something. Before Dennis could say anything else, the detective pulled his shoes from underneath the chair. "What key?" he asked.

This constant repetition was becoming tedious. "Sam and Eric had a safety deposit box where they stored the money from their last job. Eric had the key to it, but he gave it to his daughter."

"It must have been a lot, if it was worth waiting this long for. Why trust... you know, her... with access?"

Dennis glanced at the chair, empty again, and wondered if the ghost could still hear them. "I'm not sure about that yet. She said she was waiting for them to get back from somewhere, but that's it. I think she was working with them."

"You think?" Spinner scoffed. "Damn it, kid, you'd better be sure about it before you talk to Harding."

"Whoa, wait a minute!" said Dennis hurriedly. "I'm not going anywhere near him."

"But now we can *get* him!" Spinner clapped his hands together greedily. "We can finally make him leave Elspeth alone."

A heated discussion followed, with Dennis adopting the stance that they were better off leaving the situation behind, and Spinner insisting that they take action. Neither of them was willing to shift, and Bobo offered his own brand of input by jumping in with what were probably supposed to be amusing witticisms.

"Let's at least find the stupid thing, okay?" Spinner finally relented. "I'll even let you hang onto it. Just make sure that it's out of the house in case Harding shows up."

"Funny, he said the same thing about you," muttered Dennis. "I'm kidding. Why would he show up now, anyway?"

"The same reason he hired you, boss." Both Spinner and Dennis turned to look at Bobo. "What? Just me? Okay, well, the shrink was afraid that Elspeth would recognize him, yeah? But she's not here now, and he knows it."

"There you go, kid," said Spinner. It was a reasonable explanation, despite being almost identical to the one that Harding had offered. If it hadn't been for the picture that proved the psychiatrist's deceit, Dennis might still have sided with him. He supposed that was what made the man such a successful con artist.

"I don't suppose you know what a safety deposit box key looks like?" Dennis asked.

"Yeah, I do." Spinner drew a shape in the air with his finger. "Back then, they usually had a clover-shaped head. If that doesn't do it, something else will."

"Alright. Bobo, show him the drawer."

The three of them crowded through the door to the kitchen, with Bobo leading the way. The drawer was still open, and Dennis got his first real look at the assortment of items it held. In addition to a section dedicated entirely to keys, there was a neat stack of pens, a few loose safety pins and rubber bands, and a half-empty tube of glue. Spinner ignored the other items and started pawing through the keys, raising a few of them to his eye for inspection. One of them, apparently no different in appearance from the others, seemed to satisfy him.

"Here we go." He held the key out for Dennis. "There's teeth on both sides, see?" Dennis took it gingerly and turned it over in his hand. Well, he supposed he'd trust Spinner's judgment.

"What's the big deal with this, anyway?" Bobo asked. "Couldn't the shrink just say he lost it?"

The detective shook his head. "The bank doesn't keep a copy, and they'd need Eric's signature to drill open the box. Since he's dead, they'd need the signature of a family member."

"Wouldn't the shrink need a signature, too?"

"Not necessarily. He wouldn't be able to drill it, but he could still get in with the key."

"Wait, this doesn't make sense." Both men turned to Dennis. "If the Palins were here illegally, how could Eric have gotten an account in the first place?"

Spinner sighed. "It's a bank, kid, not the port authority. Back then you just signed the paper and paid the fee."

"Oh. Right."

"Now," the detective said, "can we please go and get the bastard that wants to hurt Ellie?" His words were harsh, but his tone was subdued, and there was enough sensitive emotion in the man's eyes that Dennis felt uncomfortable meeting them. Bobo looked away as well, contemplating a spot on the wall.

"I'm still not sure about that," Dennis answered gently. "At the very least, we should talk to her first. Elspeth really should have some say in this."

"You're right." Spinner's quiet agreement caught Dennis by surprise, but the somber nod of his head was unquestionably sincere. "Yeah, you're right, this is her deal, too." He sighed, mirroring Dennis' feelings, if perhaps not their source. "Come on, I'll give you guys a ride to the hospital."

They left the house in pensive silence, the echoes of their footsteps barely covering the sound of a ghost shedding invisible tears.



After a round of borderline-suspicious questions and a firm admonition to keep things quiet, the group was admitted to Elspeth's room in the hospital. Her dainty form, which had always been very petite, looked even more frail and delicate beneath the thin bedsheets. At first, Dennis thought that she was asleep, but her eyes opened as the group drew near.

The first word through her lips was a name, somewhere between a question and a whisper of recognition. "Malcolm?" she asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Just... just here to check on you, Ellie," Spinner replied. He sniffed once and blinked, obviously struggling to maintain his composure. "How're you feeling?"

"Well enough." Elspeth lifted herself up slightly. "I see you've met Dennis and Barnaby," she said, nodding to each of them.

"Yeah, we're old friends by now," said Bobo. "Are they treating you alright, ma'am? I could see to getting you an extra biscuit or two." He winked, and a smile warmed Elspeth's sallow face.

"I'll be quite alright, dear, thank you." She rolled her head against her pillow. "And you, Dennis? Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I think so." Dennis pulled the key out and held it out for her to see. "We went back to your house for it... I hope you don't mind."

"I do hope you tidied up after yourself," Elspeth murmured. Dennis winced as he thought of the state in which they'd left the living room. "You haven't shown it to her yet, I take it?"

"Not yet, no. There's something else we need to ask you first."

Elspeth's face contorted as if to cough, but nothing further happened. "Let's have it, then," she said, relaxing.

Dennis didn't see a need to concern the woman with the full details of his encounter with Spinner. "We looked through those pictures that you found," he said. "One of them showed your father –"

"Here, I've got it," Bobo interjected. He pulled the photograph from his pocket. "Is that bloke your father's mate, then?"

"That's him," Elspeth confirmed. "Uncle Sam, I called him." She smiled weakly. "It took me years before I understood the joke."

Dennis' teeth dug into his lower lip. "And you really haven't had any contact with him since before Evy died?" Too many things were hinging on Elspeth's answer, and Dennis waited impatiently as she considered.

"No," she answered finally. "None at all. As I said, I'm not even certain that he's still alive."

"Oh, he is," growled Spinner. "He's that shady psychiatrist I keep telling you about."

"Malcolm, really, we've been over this. Samuel is hardly an uncommon name."

"Be that as it may," Dennis motioned towards the photograph, "that's him with your father."

"Oh." Elspeth sank into her pillow. "That is peculiar." She turned to Dennis and Bobo. "Boys, would you give the two of us a moment alone?"

"We'll be right outside, ma'am," said Bobo.

There was a bench in the hallway, but it was hardly large enough to accommodate the both of them. Anyway, Dennis didn't feel like sitting down. He paced along the length of the corridor, still fighting his disbelief over how thoroughly Harding had tricked him. If he had done even one thing differently, he wouldn't be in this mess.

"Dennis?"

A voice from one of the other rooms interrupted his thoughts. Dennis turned to see Alena standing behind him, looking as surprised as he felt. "Hey," he greeted her. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm visiting Antonio," she replied. "I left you a voicemail about it." She looked at Dennis quizzically. "You look nice."

He had forgotten that he was still in his clothes from the date, minus the discarded blazer. "It's a long story," Dennis said. "Anyway, how is he?"

Alena breathed a long sigh of relief. "He's awake. Sleeping now, but the doctors say that he'll be fine."

"Up and dancing again any day now, huh?"

"After he finishes the movie." Alena's expression grew concerned. "Why are you here, Dennis? Is everything alright?"

"No." Dennis' shoulders sagged. "No, everything is decidedly not alright."

"What happened? Are you hurt?"

Dennis shook his head. "I'm fine."

"What is it, then?"

He didn't have the energy left to even think about what he said. "Remember that lady with the haunted chair? She's not doing so well. I don't know how bad it is. That detective is in there with her now. It turns out that they're friends." He spilled out his words with reckless abandon, not even looking at his wife. "And Sam was using me all along, and now I'm stuck as a surrogate guardian in the middle of a decades-old feud over a fortune in ill-gotten gains."

To her credit, Alena remained remarkably calm. She didn't say anything immediately, and when the tension was finally broken, it was by a subtle gesture over Dennis' shoulder.

"There's a man watching us," Alena said.

"That's just Bobo. He's been helping me out."

"He looks nice."

Dennis nodded. "He is nice. A bit weird, maybe."

"You're one to talk."

"Yeah..." Dennis stepped forward and took Alena's hands. "I know you don't believe me, but please, just try to accept that there are some seriously bizarre things going on. I could really use your support, Alena."

Alena stiffened, but she didn't pull away. Her gaze met his after a few seconds, and Dennis saw a glimmer of hope for himself in those brilliant hazel eyes. "The haunted chair lady is here?"

"In the room behind Bobo, yeah."

"Would you mind introducing me?"

Dennis' face broke into a hesitant smile. "No, not at all. Come on." They walked past Bobo, who watched curiously, and into Elspeth's room. Both she and Spinner looked up, and the detective drew away from holding Elspeth's hand.

"Who's this?" he asked suspiciously.

"This is my wife, Alena," answered Dennis. "Alena, this is Malcolm Spinner and Elspeth Palin."

"What a pretty girl," Elspeth said approvingly. "You didn't tell me you were married, Dennis. I might have suggested a different approach with Evy."

Alena arched an eyebrow. "Evy?"

"The girl in the chair," Dennis clarified.

"Ah." Alena's face was expressionless. "Well, it's nice to meet both of you."

Elspeth chuckled quietly. "The girl's a skeptic, Dennis. I presume you told her about Evy's... condition?"

"He did," replied Alena, "but I'm sure you'll forgive me if I don't believe it."

"Of course, dear. I wouldn't believe it myself, were I in your position." She looked at Spinner, who made an uncomfortable noise. "Of course, you could be like Malcolm and be horribly afraid."

"Not afraid," Spinner mumbled. "Just don't *like* her."

Alena looked around the room, her face still unreadable. "Well," she said, "Dennis and I will give you some space. I'll have him back to you in a minute." She took Dennis' hand and led him from the room. Again, Bobo watched them pass, flashing a surreptitious thumbs-up sign when Alena wasn't looking. She kept walking until she came to another door, through which Dennis saw the prone figure of her friend Antonio. The young man's usually expressive face was a mess of dark bruises, but he appeared to be sleeping soundly.

"Dennis," Alena began, "I'm really not sure what to think. I haven't believed in ghosts since I was a kid, but it looks like I'm the only one here who doesn't."

"It's just the one ghost, actually," said Dennis. "Let's not make assumptions."

"God, Dennis, it would just kill you to be serious, wouldn't it?" Her laughter did more for Dennis' spirits than anything else in recent memory.

"If you think that I'm bad, you should try talking to Bobo." He shuffled his feet. "Honestly, though... Are we okay?"

Alena looked up at him with just a hint of a smile on her face. Her eyes moved back and forth a few times, shifting focus between each of Dennis' own. "Yeah," she said. It was a warm wash of soothing relief. "Yeah, we're okay." She put a hand on Dennis' chest. "Wait here for a minute, I have something for you." With that, she was gone, into the room where Antonio slept. She returned a minute later, digging through a blue suede purse. "Here." She held out her hand and let a band of silver metal fall into Dennis' palm.

"My ring?" he asked. He hadn't realized that he wasn't wearing it.

"You must have taken it off when you went to see Elspeth for the first time. I found it by the bathroom sink." She helped Dennis slide the ring onto his finger, and then stood

on her toes to give him a quick kiss. "Go help your friends. You can tell me everything when you get home." She started to pull away, but then fell forward into a tight embrace. "Be careful, Dennis."

"I will," he promised.



Bobo was still staring as Dennis walked back towards Elspeth's room. He stood up and flashed an approving grin. "Blimey, mate, you didn't tell me your wife was *hot*."

Dennis smiled proudly. "Yeah, she's really something."

"No more hotel rooms, I take it?"

"No more," replied Dennis. "And no more sleeping over with witchdoctors, either."

"Ace. Maybe tonight I can actually get some shut-eye."

Dennis heard the sound of someone – probably Spinner – loudly clearing their throat, and he peered through the doorway. "Hello?" he called. Elspeth beckoned them in. She looked healthier, Dennis thought, for all the difference a few minutes could have made. She was sitting up, at least.

"I owe you an apology, Dennis."

"It's fine, really," Dennis replied. "I did agree to the date, after all."

Elspeth shook her head. "Not that, dear. I was talking about Doctor Harding."

"Oh." Dennis glanced at Spinner, who nodded almost imperceptibly. "I'm not sure I understand."

"It seems we've gotten you into a bit of trouble. Rest assured, though, it's not as bad as it sounds." Elspeth smiled up at Spinner. "Malcolm here has an idea, as well." The detective stepped forward eagerly.

"Here's what we're going to do," he started. "We're going to wait for him to leave his office, and then we'll go in with –" the explanation was cut off by the sound of Dennis' phone buzzing. He pulled it out and shook his head at the display.

"Speak of the devil," Dennis said. "It's Sam. What should I do?"

"Answer it?" replied Bobo.

"No, wait!" Spinner protested, but it was already too late. Dennis motioned for quiet and pressed the phone to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Dennis, thank god," came Harding's voice. "It was getting late, and I started to worry. Is everything okay?"

"In a manner of speaking," Dennis said warily. "I'm here with Elspeth and Spinner." The detective put a hand over his eyes and groaned.

"What's going on, Dennis? What have they told you?" More than you did, Dennis thought. "Furthermore, what have you told them? Are you safe?"

"I'm fine, Sam." He examined his fingernails casually, as though the gesture might somehow translate through the airwaves. "We've been discussing old history."

"Listen to me," Harding pressed. "I don't know what lies they've told you, but you need to get out of there, and fast. Spinner is a very dangerous man, and it sounds like he's pulled Elspeth into his scheme."

Dennis growled into the phone. "Stuff it, Sam. She remembers everything."

"The woman is delusional, Dennis! She'd say anything if it fit with her fantasy!"

"I wasn't talking about Elspeth." He could picture the wheels turning in Harding's head.

"What, do you mean Evy? She's dead, Dennis. What do they have you believing? That she faked her own death to hide from someone? From me?" His voice grew lower, more insistent. "Whatever it is, it's a lie. Just a way to trick you into giving Spinner the key." He paused for a moment. "You do have it, don't you?"

"Oh yeah, it's right here." Dennis held the object up into the light, where everyone in the room turned to stare at it. If their thoughts were at all along the same lines as his, they were thinking about how ridiculous it was that such an insignificant item could cause this much trouble.

Harding all but whispered his next words, which Dennis had to strain to make out. "Don't tell *anybody* you have it, Dennis. I don't know what might be in the box that it opens, but if you're right about it being the profits from a confidence scheme, then I don't doubt that Spinner would do anything to get his hands on it."

The psychiatrist was unquestionably persuasive. Thankfully, Dennis had been inoculated against it. "Are you sure you're not talking about yourself, Sam? I mean, it must sting to get done over by your partner." He chewed through the words, not even attempting to hide his malice.

"Dennis, I told you, I never even met Eric Palin. Whoever told you that is lying."

"I've never heard a picture tell a lie."

"What picture?" Harding asked with surprise in his voice.

"An old one of you and Eric shaking hands. Pretty convincing, if you ask me."

The psychiatrist was quiet for a moment. "It must have been doctored. That's the only explanation. Spinner must have gone to great lengths to set this up. I wouldn't be surprised if he even tried to seduce Elspeth."

Dennis looked over at where Spinner and Elspeth were holding hands. Their eyes were already on him, wide and expectant, almost childlike in a way. The thought gave him a new idea. "How old are you, Malcolm?"

"Dennis?" uttered Harding, his tone rising. "What are you doing?"

"None of your business!" Spinner declared.

"Here, that's how old my dad is!" laughed Bobo.

Dennis made angry shushing noises with his free hand. "Really, Malcolm, tell me. How old are you?"

"He's fifty-eight," Elspeth answered. Spinner looked hurt. "Fifty-nine in March."

"So, you would have been, what, twelve years old when Evy died? Thirteen?" Dennis made sure that his lips were in line with the phone's receiver. "Kind of young to be a con artist, if you ask me."

The seconds ticked by, and Harding said nothing. When he spoke again, it was with an pleading tone. "Listen, Dennis, maybe Spinner wasn't Eric Palin's partner, but I'm sure he's up to something. He must have found out about the safety deposit box somehow, and that's why he befriended Elspeth."

Dennis thought about it. "Why go through all the trouble of faking an old picture, then? Why involve you at all?" Harding sighed loudly, sending a burst of static through the line.

"I tried to buy the house a few years back. Emma wanted it sold –

"Except that she died first, Sam," Dennis cut in.

"Be that as it may, she was worried that her daughter wouldn't part with it because of her delusions. She was right, and Spinner has had a vendetta against me ever since. He was probably afraid that I would get to the key before he could, and find out what it was."

Spinner made a motion. "What's happening?" he mouthed. Dennis gazed at him quizzically.

"How did you two meet?" he asked. "Elspeth?"

"There was an anonymous offer put in for my house after my parents died," the woman answered. "I hired Malcolm to find out who had placed it."

"Did you hear that, Sam?" Dennis said into the phone.

"I heard it, but Dennis, it's remarkably easy to manipulate someone into making first contact."

"Like convincing them to put an ad in the newspaper?" His mind was made up. "There's one problem with your story, Sam. You're basing all of these details on the assumption that Elspeth is mentally unstable. I know, much more intimately than I would like, that she isn't." He realized that his hand had balled into a tight fist, and that the key was cutting into his fingers. "Not only that, but her 'delusions' didn't start until after her parents were both dead, so I'm inclined to believe her over you. Even if I didn't, though, and even if I believed that Emma really did come to see you," he took a deep breath, "none of it explains why you said that Elspeth was Spinner's niece."

"Checkmate!" Bobo whispered. Dennis rolled his eyes. At least he hadn't said "Backgammon." Harding, meanwhile, was completely silent, and Dennis mentally bowed to a chorus of thunderous imaginary applause.

"I see..." Harding spoke at last, his voice measured and even. "Very well, Dennis. Perhaps I haven't been entirely honest. It's true, Emma was not a patient of mine." His tone went sour with false friendliness. "Let's talk about you, though, shall we?"

"Save it," Dennis countered, anticipating the psychiatrist's next move. "You and I both know that I never did anything illegal while I was working for you."

"Oh, no, certainly not," acknowledged Harding. "You were an excellent volunteer. Only, I'm afraid I must have misjudged you, since I do seem to be missing a fair amount of money. Something on the order of five hundred dollars, it seems."

"What? What are you talking about?"

Harding sighed with insincere disappointment. "I'm afraid that petty theft is still theft. I believe it carries a sentence of six months of imprisonment for your first offense, and you've stolen from me no less than nine times. Once for every patient you brought in." Dennis swallowed through a dry mouth, trying to ignore the concerned faces of the other people in the room. "I can only imagine how the investigation would go, assuming one even took place. Unlawful or not, I'm sure your particular hobbies would raise a few eyebrows." Harding chuckled darkly. "I'm also quite certain that some of your past clients would be only too eager to press charges of their own, whether they were based in reality or not."

"You'd never do it," Dennis stammered. "You wouldn't go to the cops. They'd know you were involved, and you'd lose your practice."

"Oh, I hardly think so, Dennis, seeing as it's the word of a respected psychiatrist over a grifter. And even if I did," he clicked his tongue a few times, "I'm an old man, well past my retirement age. It would be a welcome change."

"My friends would testify for me."

“Ah, yes, your friends,” replied Harding. “Friends with illicit gambling debts, perhaps?” A tapping sound came over the phone. “You know, I have this money here for Luke, but I’m afraid I’m legally bound to report if someone has committed or intends to commit a crime. Although, I suppose I could just withhold the money, and he would have much worse things to worry about.”

The room’s temperature seemed to plummet. “What do you want?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

Dennis searched the faces of his companions. Even Bobo looked worried. “The key?”

“The key.” Harding’s chair creaked over the phone, and Dennis could picture the psychiatrist leaning back with a look of triumph. “I’ll give you an hour to bring it to me. If you’re not here by then, well...” He let the implied threat go unfinished. “I trust you’ll make the right decision.” The man’s voice started to pull away, but came back for a final thought. “Oh, and Dennis?”

“Yeah?”

“Come alone.”

Dennis hung up the phone. The look on his face must have said enough, because nobody spoke. That was fine... He didn’t trust himself to say anything without choking. He tried to rationalize his feelings. Where was the harm in giving Harding the key? The money was just as much his as it was Elspeth’s. More so, even. For all Dennis knew, Eric Palin had tried to make off with an uneven share. Anyone who could say for sure was dead, and in most cases gone. Even if Evy had any more information, there was no way Dennis could question her and still make it to Harding’s office in an hour. That left only one alternative, the key to which was quite literally sitting in the palm of Dennis’ hand.

“Elspeth,” he said, “I need to ask you something.”

Chapter Fifteen

The sun was hanging low in the sky, casting harsh glares on everyone in the car. Spinner drove in angry silence, while Bobo sat in the back seat with his long legs splayed out as far as the space would allow.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay in there, September?” Dennis had lost track of the number of times that he had been asked the question. He stared out the window at the passing city.

“It’s not like I have much choice.”

Spinner growled. “I’m still not okay with this. It’s wrong.”

Dennis wasn’t sure that he agreed, but wasn’t going to directly contest the statement. “Remember what Elspeth said,” he tried.

“Leave her out of it.”

Dennis slouched sedately. The conversation hadn’t been much better throughout the course of the ride, or even back at the hospital. Spinner’s grudge had kept him from wanting to do anything that might let Harding follow through with his plans, while Dennis had been resolutely certain that their chosen course was the best one. Elspeth had finally settled the matter, in her own matriarchal way, asserting that the key should be turned over to the psychiatrist.

Spinner’s eyes stared straight ahead, his face locked in an obstinate glower. “I could have helped you out, kid. I still have some friends on the force. I’d have gone to bat for you.” It was a touching proclamation, considering what Dennis had subjected him to. Even so, Dennis wasn’t willing to gamble against Harding’s ability to manipulate the situation, especially not when there were other people at stake besides himself.

“How’s that thing feel, then, September?”

“It itches,” Dennis replied to Bobo. His shakes had been so bad back at the hospital that a kindly nurse had insisted on giving him a plain leather jacket from the Lost and Found box. It was a surprisingly good fit, and a decent replacement for the one he had lost, even if the worn material made a somewhat ridiculous match with the rest of his attire. At least he had been able to remove his tie.

The mutters continued from Spinner’s side of the car. “Eight years I spent chasing the bastard. Eight fucking years. Now we’re just going to let him get away.”

“Could be worse,” said Bobo.

“How?”

“Could have been ten years.”

Dennis tapped on the window. “There’s the office,” he said. The car slowed as they pulled into the parking lot at the building’s rear. Dennis stared up at the evenly-spaced windows, wondering if Harding was watching from one of them.

“Okay, kid, listen.” Spinner pulled the car’s parking brake and turned to face Dennis with a serious expression, his sullen behavior gone. “Have you ever fired a gun before?”

Dennis felt himself pale. “A few times. Why?” Spinner reached beneath his seat and pulled out a small black box. He thumbed a series of dials into a preset combination, and the latch clicked open. Dennis’ eyes went wide when he saw what was inside. “I thought you couldn’t own a gun?”

“I can’t *carry* a gun,” Spinner said. “Strictly speaking, neither can you, but I’m not going to send you in there without protection.” He pulled the stocky revolver from the

case. "This is a Smith and Wesson 617. Twenty-two caliber, with a ten-round shot capacity. It's double action, so you don't need to cock the hammer." He held it out to Dennis. "Show me how you hold it."

Dennis kept steady as he took the weapon. He glanced out the windows to make certain that nobody was watching, and then held the gun in a two-handed grip. "Like this?"

Spinner nodded. "If you have to shoot, aim for the torso. Don't try anything fancy." He held out his hand. "I'll load it for you." Dennis passed the weapon back, handle first, and watched as Spinner popped open the cylinder.

"Here, this one's loaded!" Bobo laughed. He dug out the water pistol and thrust it forward. Dennis eyed both men, wondering how they could be so calm.

"I'm really not sure about this. It's been some time since I've fired a gun."

There was a metallic click as Spinner snapped the gun's cylinder back into place. "Take it anyway. If you need to, you can intimidate him." Dennis slid the revolver into his jacket, thankful for the moderately deep pockets. Then, more as a pretense than anything else, he checked his watch.

"I'm going to head up."

"Remember what we talked about," Spinner said. "That goes for the gun, too."

Bobo reached forward and cuffed Dennis' shoulder. "Good luck, mate!"

Dennis nodded to both of them, and then climbed from the car. If the outside air was any indication, it was going to be a cold night.



It was a bad idea to waste time getting lost, especially with a gun in his pocket, but Dennis enacted a rushed version of the same meandering routine he went through every time he was in the building. Thankfully, a number of the offices seemed to have cleared out early, and he didn't encounter anyone on his path to Harding's practice. A lucky turn brought a familiar gold plaque into view.

Dennis squared his shoulders. This was it. He tried the door handle, found it unlocked, and stepped inside. The receptionist's desk was empty, but that was hardly surprising. The door to the inner office was open, and the sounds of rustling papers came from within. Dennis approached cautiously, catching sight of Harding at his desk just as the psychiatrist looked up.

"Ah, Dennis. Lock the door, please." Harding continued to shuffle through the documents on his desk, arranging them into piles which he then slid into folders. Dennis obliged the request, but he didn't turn his back. "Thank you," Harding said after the deadbolt had slid into place. "I trust you have what I asked for?"

"Maybe," replied Dennis. Harding looked mildly annoyed.

"Really, Dennis, there's no need for games. Do you have the key or don't you?"

Dennis glanced at the desk. "Where's Luke's money?" As an answer, Harding pulled open a drawer and tossed a sealed envelope into view. "Let me see it." Dennis nodded at the parcel. "I'm familiar with the bait-and-switch."

"This is growing tiresome," Harding said, but he opened the envelope to display a neat stack of bills. "Now, if you're satisfied, suppose you hand over my property."

Dennis pulled out the key, but stayed standing where he was. "Explain to me why I should give it to you." Harding's face reddened.

“Need I remind you that your well-being is at stake? And that of your friends?”

“That’s not what I’m asking about.” Dennis gestured with the key, keeping a tight grip on it. “If you and Eric were working together, why should you get to keep all of the money?”

“I do not need to explain myself to you.”

Dennis continued to speak, pretending he hadn’t heard anything. “See, I know the two of you had an argument, and I know that Evy died during it. What I can’t figure out is why you didn’t try to make amends afterward. It would have been easier than waiting forty-six years. I figure that Eric had a reason to hate you.”

Harding slammed his hand onto the desk. “That man would have had nothing if it hadn’t been for me! He was a fugitive from England, and I helped him when he had nobody else to turn to! Then he spent all of his money on that damned house, and repaid me with a stab in the back!” He rose from his chair, shaking with fury. “I have waited too long and sacrificed too much to see this all go to waste!” He snatched a keychain from the desk and fumbled to open a locked drawer.

Dennis guessed at the man’s motive and pulled Spinner’s revolver from his pocket. “Hold it!” Harding froze, his eyes trained on the weapon. “I came here to give you what you wanted, Sam, but I deserve an explanation first. You were using me from the beginning, and I want to know why.” He motioned with the barrel of the gun. “Throw the keys over there.”

Harding glared icily, but threw the keychain away. It clattered against the wall and fell out of sight behind the psychiatrist’s couch. “There, are you happy?”

Dennis used his upper-handed moment to repeat the question that had been bothering him. “Why me, Sam? Why did you set me up for this?”

Harding sneered. “You’re a lousy con artist, Dennis. You’re too honest, and you get personally involved.” A loathsome smirk replaced the glower. “Does your wife know that your relationship started off as a scam?”

Damn Luke’s big mouth, Dennis thought. He was the only one who could have told Harding about that. The accusation was true, at least in part: Alena *had* been an unwitting player in a minor confidence scheme, but only because Dennis had wanted an excuse to see her. He had confessed to everything later on, but he was still unhappy that Harding knew about it.

“She knows,” Dennis said. His arm was getting tired from holding the gun outstretched, and he let it fall to rest beside his hip. “So, what was it? You figured that Elspeth and I would become friends, is that it? I know you placed the ad with her in mind.” Harding folded his arms. “Then what? I convince her to come to you, she sells you the house, and you spend your retirement looking for this?” He waved the key again.

Harding smiled, still standoffish. “I can see you have it all figured out.”

“Not quite,” Dennis said. “What happened to Evy?”

“Honestly, Dennis, why do you care so much about a dead tart?” Dennis cocked the hammer on the revolver. “It was Eric’s own fault!” Harding yelled. “If he’d cared less about the money than he did about his daughter, none of it would have happened!”

Dennis’ eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“The girl was diabetic.” Dennis knew that much already, but he kept listening. “I was providing her with insulin. Eric wouldn’t do it, being too afraid of getting caught and

deported. Our last job went well, incredibly well, and I saw it as a chance for him to pay me back.”

“For what? For helping his daughter?”

“For everything!” Harding seethed at some internal memory. “The man was a terrible partner, and he always took more than he deserved.” He was shaking visibly. “We were arguing over it, yes, but he promised to meet me. To discuss things. I told him that if he wanted my continued help, he’d give me what I was rightfully owed!”

Dennis couldn’t believe his ears. “You black mailed him with Evy’s life?”

“The choice was his!” spat Harding.

“And he chose his daughter!” Dennis shouted back. “He didn’t *have* the key, Sam! He gave it to Evy!”

Harding clenched his jaw so hard that his eyes watered. “I am through discussing this.”

Dennis whipped the gun back up to eye level. “She was waiting for her father to come home! Eric would have brought you the key himself, but he didn’t know where it was! And instead of listening to him, instead of talking to Evy, you kept him out of the house and away from his dying daughter.” He felt almost as sick as he did enraged. “My god, Sam, you *murdered* her!”

Harding stared at the revolver, his bravado gone. “Dennis, there’s just over a million dollars in that safety deposit box. Some of it can be yours.”

He’s begging, Dennis thought, disgusted.

Harding continued quietly. “Maybe I was mistaken, all those years ago. Maybe I really was responsible for the girl’s death, but there’s nothing I can do about it now.” He folded his hands imploringly. “Dennis, please, think. Malcolm Spinner is emotionally unstable, and Elspeth Palin is close to death. Other than the two of them, nobody but us knows anything.” He parted his hands again, forcing a smile. “Things don’t need to be this way, Dennis. I’ll gladly share the money with you. Just give me the key.”

“You know what?” Dennis said. “Here.” He threw the key at Harding, hitting him in the chest. “It won’t do you any good anyway.”

While Harding stooped to retrieve the key, Dennis walked forward and snatched Luke’s envelope. “I’m taking this,” he said. “Just so we’re clear.” He started to head towards the door, but Harding’s voice stopped him.

“What did you mean by that, Dennis?” Harding stood, the key clutched in his hand. “That it wouldn’t do me any good?” Dennis slid the envelope into his jacket’s inside pocket.

“I mean the box is empty, Sam.” He turned back to face the man. “There’s nothing in it but some jewelry.”

Harding snorted, but he looked uneasy. “You don’t know that. You don’t even know which bank it’s in. Anyone who does is dead.”

“Eric could have told someone.”

“I think not.” The psychiatrist smirked. “His family thought he was a sculptor. He wouldn’t risk losing them by confessing to the truth.”

Dennis nodded, his eyes falling towards the floor. Well, so much for sane explanations. “Evy knew.”

“She’s *dead*, Dennis,” Harding sighed.

“I’m aware. It didn’t stop her from talking.”

“That’s not –”

“How did you think that Elspeth has been living?” interrupted Dennis, looking back up. “The house might be hers, but she still needs to pay for food and gardening supplies.” And investigators, he added silently. “She found the key eight years ago. Evy told her what it opened.” He suddenly felt very tired. And cranky. “I don’t care what you think. You can check for yourself. The money’s all gone. Spent.”

Harding stared in disbelief, his eyes going from Dennis to the key in his hand. “You’re telling the truth, aren’t you?”

“It might seem like a novel concept, but yes.” He stepped back towards the center of the room, bringing the gun up again. “I think it’s time for you to retire, Sam. I hear Florida’s popular.”

Harding looked deflated. “And what,” he asked, “is to stop me from reporting you for theft, Dennis? Well in excess of three thousand dollars now, I might add.”

Dennis unbuttoned a section of his shirt, revealing the tiny microphone taped to his chest. “Spinner still has a few friends on the force,” he said. “Also, a lot of really neat equipment in the trunk of his car.”

“I see.” The psychiatrist breathed out, his last bastion conquered. “Florida, you say?”

“I don’t care where you go, as long as I never see you again.” He walked forward, pointing the revolver directly between Harding’s eyes. “And if I do...” He pulled the trigger. The hammer snapped down on an empty chamber. “I’ll keep the bullets in next time.”

Chapter Sixteen

The first thing Dennis did when he got back to the car was empty his pockets. Spinner looked irritated as ten bullet cartridges were placed in his hand, but he didn't comment. Instead, he waited as Dennis pulled open his shirt and then helped him remove the microphone.

"Did we get it?"

Spinner nodded, tapping the receiver in his lap. "Loud and clear. You'd make a good private investigator, kid."

"Thanks, but I think I'm going to stick to writing from now on." Dennis sighed and sank back, relieved that the ordeal was finally at an end.

"You're a writer?" Spinner asked.

"Some detective you are." He turned to address Bobo, but saw that he was quietly snoring in the back seat. Spinner shrugged at the look on Dennis' face.

"You took your time getting out. Once things were over, he dozed off." He smiled sheepishly. "I guess you guys had a long night, huh?"

"It's kind of hard to relax when you're being followed." Dennis stretched in his seat, feeling his own fatigue catching up with him. "Would you mind if we stopped by the bar? I have to drop something off." He looked over at Spinner, who was unmoving and silent. "Is there a problem?"

"Seat belt."



Luke was uncommonly excited to have Dennis in the bar, and even more so at the sight of the cash-filled envelope. He insisted on free drinks for all of them, and a still-groggy Bobo complained that his beer tasted like mud. It was the start of an immediate friendship, with he and Luke trading good-natured insults until Spinner finally remarked that he had developed a headache.

"I tell you mate, it's the beer!" Bobo chided.

"It's your voice that's doing it," came Luke's reply.

Spinner groaned, and Dennis smiled behind his drink. He'd get used to it eventually.



Elspeth came home from the hospital a day later, under firm orders to relax and stay away from cigarettes. "Bugger that," she had said, much to everyone's amusement. Her first act upon being discharged had been to issue a proclamation that everyone would be staying for dinner, and that Dennis was to invite Alena to come along as well. It was definitely fortunate that he and Bobo had visited the house earlier in the day, and with Spinner's reluctant help, had cleaned up the mess that they had made. If Elspeth had noticed that her good tablecloth was missing, she had remained tactfully silent about it.

The meal had been excellent, and the ride home was, for once, a lighthearted one. Alena was in the driver's seat, with one hand on the wheel and the other holding Dennis'.

"Ghosts, huh?" she asked.

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" Dennis looked out the window. "It really makes you wonder what else is out there."

Alena nodded her agreement. "Elspeth explained most of it, but I'm still not clear on what actually happened."

"With Evy, you mean?" He yawned widely. "It's pretty simple. She hid the key, and Eric couldn't find it after she died. I don't think he really looked, though, since he felt partially responsible. It stayed hidden until Evy showed up, eight years ago."

"Where was it?"

Dennis laughed as he answered. "In the chair, of all places. Elspeth found it in one of the cushions. I guess Evy thought it would be safe there."

"Looks like she was right," answered Alena. "So, Sam closed his practice. I saw some movers loading that couch of his this morning."

"I hope they burned his wife's paintings," replied Dennis. Alena thumped her hand on the steering wheel.

"Damn it! I forgot!" She gestured towards the rear of the car. "I wanted to give that to Elspeth." Dennis turned to see a foot-long abstract sculpture lying on the backseat. He lifted it up, examining the graceful green curves.

"What is it?"

"Jade."

"I can see that," Dennis replied patiently. Sometimes his wife's humor was as bad as his own. "I meant what *is* it?"

"I don't know what it's supposed to be. Look at the etching, though."

"Where?"

"On the bottom, Dennis."

He turned the sculpture over, and squinted in the dim light. "What does it say?" he asked. Alena quoted a date from memory, some twenty years back, followed by a name.

"E. Palin," she said.

"Wow." Dennis looked at the sculpture with new interest. "Elspeth made this?"

"No, silly, her father did. I found it in that antique store where you got your hat. I was looking for a get-well present for Antonio, and there it was."

"Huh." He gingerly replaced it in the back seat. "Well, I'll give it to her for you when I see her tomorrow."

"Are you going over with Bobo?"

"Yeah," Dennis said. "We just have to take care of some... unfinished business."

Epilogue

The man called September stood with his hands on his hips, staring at a clockwork contraption of monolithic proportions. It came up past his head, although some of that height was provided by the table upon which it rested. Supposedly, the object was going to be sold as a means of predicting the future, but when he turned the dials as directed, the mechanical display came back with gibberish. He was told that he was using it wrong.

A few customers entered the store, and were hurriedly greeted by a dreadlocked man with a thick, booming, and entirely made-up accent. They were going to hold a séance, they explained, and wondered if the shop carried Ouija boards. Dennis smiled to himself. It was amazing, really, how often people missed what was right in front of them. He waited for the group to leave, obviously ecstatic about their purchase, and then tried the machine again. This time, a gear popped loose.

Bobo muttered that it was a work in progress.

They conversed for awhile, mostly about a new film they had seen, until a friendly knock on the window signified that Alena was finished with her shopping. The pair shook hands, and Dennis promised to stop by and see the clockwork monstrosity again when it was finished. He walked slowly towards the exit, taking in the smell of incense and navigating his way past the trinkets, crystals, and baubles that were precariously arranged on every available surface. The chimes above the door jangled as he opened it, and Dennis turned back briefly, raising one hand with a departing smile.

Anyone watching would have thought that he was waving to the shop's exuberant owner and not, as it was, to the brown cushioned armchair, clearly marked as not for sale.

About the Author



Since he first learned to speak, Max Patrick Schlienger has been telling stories. Unfortunately, despite having been given ample opportunity and encouragement, he has yet to master the art of shutting the hell up. In an effort to avoid being completely shunned by his friends and family, Max finally took to writing his stories down. He intends to continue in the glamorous profession of making stuff up until such time as the position of Superman becomes available.

When he's not wasting time on the Internet or pretending to understand elements of theoretical physics, Max can often be found making short films, singing acappella music, and participating in ill-conceived culinary experimentation. He lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area, where a video game company pays him to break things and then brag about it.

There is no currently-existing evidence to refute Max's claims of his own immortality, insofar as he is not yet dead.

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